

Interlude in the parlor...

Justin walked over to Carrie and lightly kissed her. "Aren't you going to welcome me home after a hard day at work?"

She sighed. "Must you persist in keeping this marriage going?"

His eyes widened. "You're the one who's going to change this room. I took that as an indicator that you planned to stay."

"Only for the month I'm required to be here."

"You'll spend the rest of your life here," he replied.

The fact that he seemed so sure of himself made her that much more determined to prove him wrong. She crossed her arms and glared at him.

He ignored her open rebellion. He gently took her by the elbow to lead her to the couch. "Will you have a seat?"

"No." She didn't budge.

To her surprise, he picked her up in his arms and sat down. He held her close to him and sat her on his lap. She was too shocked to react in time to stop him from kissing her neck.

She pushed aside the delightful sensations his kissing produced and quickly stood back up.

He had amazing reflexes for he grabbed her hand and said, "If you don't sit by me, I'll pull you back onto my lap. Or we could go upstairs and make sure you don't leave at the end of the month."

She loudly sighed so he would understand how much this pained her and plopped next to him on the couch.

He chuckled. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

She refused to look at him. She wouldn't let him get to her. She wouldn't fall in love with someone she was forced into marrying.

The Cold Wife

The Revised Version

Ruth Ann Nordin

Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described herein are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.

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Dedicated to Aunt Helen. What a joy it is to have gotten the chance to know you!

Thank you, Danielle Watson and April Mitchell, for your help in making this revised edition. Your input is invaluable to me!

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Chapter One



August 1894

Carrie Allen took a deep breath and sat down on the couch in the parlor next to Brad, her twin brother. She knew their father was about to give them bad news. She glanced at Brad who shook his head. He appeared just as shocked as she was that their father had called them into the room. Their father sat in the chair across from them with a serious look on his face. She didn't want to hear what he would say next but knew she didn't have a choice. She was aware of the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner of the room as she waited for him to speak.

"Brad, Carrie, this isn't easy to say." Their father paused. "I'm bankrupt."

"What?" She couldn't believe her ears.

"My business crumbled," he explained. "I have no more money, and my investments weren't enough to cover my losses."

She had a hard time understanding how his tax consulting business went bankrupt when he had just experienced a huge profit earlier that year.

He looked at Brad. "At least you still have your job at the college, and your investments are continuing to do well."

Carrie knew that Brad found little consolation in that fact. Brad didn't want to see their father's business fail anymore than she did.

"I can help you get back on your feet," Brad said. "We can find a way to get your business up and running again."

He shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, son, but my reputation has been destroyed in this town. I don't know why or how, but it has. No one will want to do business with me." He turned to her. "Carrie, I have to make sure your future is going to be secure so I have arranged a marriage between you and Justin Monroe. He is wealthy and will provide a good future for you."

She panicked. "Why would you do that? I just accepted an offer to let Harrison court me."

"I'm sorry, Carrie. I know you were looking forward to getting to know Harrison but his father doesn't want him to marry you unless I provide his son with a sizable dowry on your behalf, and I can't do that. I had to find you someone as soon as possible. I'll be losing the house next week, so I don't have time to wait. I discussed the matter with Justin Monroe's uncle and it's been arranged. You will marry Justin on Saturday."

"But...but that's three days from now." She struggled to make sense of everything her father was telling her.

"I know it's a shock." He sighed. "I wish there was something else I could do, but I have to make sure that you will be able to enjoy the same standard of living you are accustomed to."

"No, you don't have to do that." Her mind desperately sought out another solution. "I can manage without the wealth we have had. I can find a job. There are women in our town who work."

"Even if we did that, there is no way Harrison will court you. His father is determined that he will marry a wealthy young

The Cold Wife

lady. Besides, if you worked, then word would get out that you have no money, and there aren't many men who will be willing to marry a twenty-four-year-old woman without money."

"Let me work," she insisted. "I'll pull my own weight. I've had sufficient schooling to do a decent job. Surely, just because I'm a woman, it shouldn't mean I can't find suitable employment. I don't care if people find out what happened." It certainly beat marriage to a man she hardly knew.

"You will not be happy as a spinster."

"I should be the one to decide that."

He sighed. "I hadn't considered you would be opposed to this marriage. I've already made arrangements with Justin's uncle. Justin is looking for a wife who has a good reputation. The news of my bankruptcy will be well hidden so no one knows the truth. Neither Mr. Monroe nor I wish for anyone to know the reason for the sudden marriage. The official word is that his uncle and I agreed to this arrangement because in order for Justin to receive his trust fund when he turns twenty-five, he must marry. Justin is aware of the arrangement and will stick to the story."

She glanced at Brad who looked as overwhelmed as she felt, but at least he wasn't being forced into a marriage with someone she thought was more boring than watching grass grow.

Brad finally spoke. "You know that Justin and I are friends. I think a marriage between you two will be a good thing."

"Justin's a good man," their father added. "He will make you happy."

"Why would he agree to marry me?" she wondered. "We don't even know each other."

"Apparently, he's quite taken with you."

"I find that hard to believe."

She could barely recall the times when she did see him. She knew he attended many dinner parties. She had occasionally said hello to him but that was the extent of her conversations with him. She had overheard him talking with her brother and his

topics of interest didn't seem to stray from his investments. She wasn't even sure he knew how to talk about anything else. She couldn't imagine that they had anything in common. She and Harrison were much better suited for one another.

Her father looked sympathetic. "I do not wish the spinster's life for you. It is a lonely and miserable one. I have made an excellent choice for you."

Brad turned to her. "Justin is fun. You have to give him a chance. He actually has a good sense of humor."

"Only to someone who understands the lame investment jokes he tells," she replied. "He also gives the most ridiculous analogies I've ever heard. He actually compared a big dog to a horse."

"It's true that he's not the smooth talker that Harrison is, but he is a good friend. He can talk about other things."

"When?"

"Lots of times. You just never paid him any attention."

"The only reason he accepted this marriage is because you two get along."

Their father interrupted them. "Justin is actually better than Harrison. Harrison may seem fascinating but he's selfish. He will ultimately concern himself with what he wants, and though he might want you today, who can tell what he will want in the future? Marriage is a commitment. It is a choice you make."

She groaned. "But there should be love too."

"Love is a decision a person makes. Justin understands that. He is determined to be the kind of husband that will bless you."

"You're confining me to a life of boredom."

"I'll have to arrange something so you two can have a chance to talk. Perhaps you will find that he isn't as dull as you fear."

The knot in her stomach tensed. Her entire world was crumbling down around her and she couldn't seem to stop it. She

The Cold Wife

fought the tears that welled in her eyes. “May I please be excused?”

“Yes, you may,” her father permitted.

She walked to her bedroom and shut the door behind her so no one would see her crying. Of all things for her father to tell her, this was the last thing she expected to hear. She looked at her many elegant dresses, skirts and shirts hanging in her large closet. Her large bed had a beautiful lacy purple canopy above it, and her jewelry sat neatly in her jewelry box. She loved all her possessions. She enjoyed the things that money could buy. But she didn’t love them enough to marry Mr. Monroe. What good were things if she was going to be miserable? She couldn’t imagine that he would have anything of interest to say to her.

She sat on her bed and ran her hands over the soft purple comforter. She used to take comfort in her bedroom, but as she slowly absorbed everything that was about to happen, she couldn’t find peace in her heart. She hated the fact that she couldn’t make her own decisions. Why did she have to be at the mercy of her father’s wishes? She wiped the tears from her eyes.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror over her large oak dresser. She knew she wasn’t the most attractive woman to look at, which was why she hadn’t received more than one offer at courtship. Her dark brown hair fell in soft curls to her shoulders. She had deep brown eyes and was of average height and build. Nothing—absolutely nothing—about her stuck out. She was just ordinary. No wonder her father felt he had to arrange a marriage for her.

After she cried for a good hour, she was exhausted and fell asleep. She refused to go to breakfast or lunch the next day. She stayed in her bedroom. It was Thursday. In two days she would be Mrs. Justin Monroe. She gagged at the thought.

A light tapping on her door brought her out of her misery.

“Carrie, may I talk to you?” Brad asked her.

She sighed and decided to open the door. She was relieved to see that her brother was alone. She definitely didn't feel like seeing her father who arranged the horrible marriage for her.

Brad closed the door behind him and sat in the chair across from the bed where she sat. "Why does the thought of marrying Justin displease you so greatly?"

"You know why," she said. "I can't stand the thought of even talking to him. How can I be expected to marry him? You enjoy those boring investment conversations, so naturally you're thrilled that he's marrying me."

"He doesn't just talk about investments. He has other interests as well. He enjoys the theater, dinner parties, animals, and the beach. You share the same faith and financial background."

"Money would certainly do me some good right now. If Father still had some, I wouldn't be forced to marry him. You may think he's fun but I don't. Harrison is a lot more entertaining."

"You've only talked to Harrison twice. You haven't even officially courted."

"True but I did have fun talking to him."

"Give Justin a chance. Maybe in a month, you'll have as much fun talking to Justin as you do talking to Harrison."

"Obviously, we don't agree on this issue."

"I assure you that he's going to treat you better than Harrison would."

"It's easy for you to say that since you don't have to marry him."

"I'm your brother. I want you to be happy."

She knew he meant well but he couldn't fully appreciate her situation since he wasn't in it. He didn't have to marry someone. He was granted the ability to work, and since he was a man, he was free to marry whoever he wanted when he chose to

The Cold Wife

marry. Women were not granted the same privilege. Sometimes she resented the fact that she was born a woman. If she had been a man, then she would have freedom.

"I got a chance to speak with Justin today," her brother began, "and he's actually looking forward to marrying you."

She didn't hide her disgust. "Why? He doesn't even know me."

"No but he knows me. He is aware of your reputation in town, and face it, you are a very nice person. You do a lot of good for others. He figures that you will make a good wife and mother. And he is a very influential man with a good reputation that is just as impressive as yours. You will make a good match, both publicly and privately."

"That is a matter of opinion."

"It's a fact." He stood up. "There is something I must warn you about before I leave."

She frowned. She already didn't like the sound of this.

"Justin's uncle has arranged a dinner party for you and Justin to announce your engagement before our family and friends," he informed her. "It is tonight at seven."

"What?" she shrieked.

"Justin's uncle and Father decided on this earlier today. We will be going to Justin's house."

"And if I don't feel like going?"

"Please don't do this, Carrie. Justin doesn't deserve to be made a fool of in front of everyone."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Is that why he's getting married to me? He hopes I will impress his friends?"

"No. But you will humiliate him if you don't show up tonight."

She gritted her teeth in aggravation. No choice. Not one single person was giving her a choice in any of this! And she hated it. Somehow, someday, she had to find a way out of this marriage.

Chapter Two



Later that afternoon, she reluctantly bathed and got dressed for the dinner party since her father made it clear that she didn't have a choice in the matter. She combed her hair and pulled it back with a popular hair clip that matched the black dress she had picked to wear for the evening. She intentionally wore it because she felt as if she was attending the wake before her funeral, which she considered her marriage to be.

Her father wasn't amused with her dress. "Carrie, you are acting inappropriately. This is a festive occasion."

"For you perhaps, but it is a morbid one for me."

Her brother looked like he wanted to comment so she glared at him. He immediately shut his mouth. He knew when it was time to be quiet.

"Go change," her father ordered. "Put on something with a lot of color."

The doorbell chimed. It was one of Justin's servants who would drive them to his house in his stagecoach.

He groaned. "You timed this so you couldn't change."

The Cold Wife

She crossed her arms and nodded. "I'm not stupid, though this whole arrangement is."

"I can only hope the Lord will show you the folly in your thinking." He sighed. "Very well. Let's go."

She slowly followed the two men out of the house and to the stagecoach.

"Good evening," the driver told them. "My name is Franklin Jones." Turning to her, he said, "After the wedding, I will be your personal driver."

She simply nodded and entered the stagecoach with her family.

"You see, Carrie," her father said. "Justin is already treating you very well."

In two days, my entire life is going to fall apart. Who cared about personal drivers when she was denied the basic freedom to choose her own spouse? She closed her eyes, determined that she wouldn't burst into tears.

After the driver started the stagecoach, her father continued, "I want you to be on your best behavior tonight. Do not disgrace me and your brother by acting defiant in public. It's one thing for you to act this way at home, but I will not tolerate such behavior in front of others."

"What will you do if I am defiant? Marry me off to someone I can't stand?" she snapped.

"You don't even know him. How can you detest him so?"

"The very fact that I don't know him is exactly why I shouldn't marry him."

"If you were to marry Harrison, you would end up miserable before the first year is up. You don't have as much in common with him as you think you do. I know you think he would make you happy but you're wrong. Marriage is more than attraction and excitement."

"Both of which Justin sorely lacks," she bitterly added.

Her father closed his eyes. She knew he was praying because his mouth was moving though she couldn't hear what he was saying.

"Is Mr. Monroe really an intelligent and good man?" she suddenly asked as an idea formed in her mind.

Her father and brother seemed shocked at her question.

"Yes," her father said.

"Am I going to get a chance to speak with him tonight?" she further inquired.

"Of course. It's only right that the engaged couple speak to one another."

She nodded. Then she would do just that. Perhaps she would be able to reason with Justin. Surely, he would understand why it was a bad idea for them to marry each other. Seeing as how he had as much to lose as she did in the marriage, it made sense that he would listen to her. She felt much better now that this course of action was set. Once she spoke with him, he would tell her father and his uncle that this marriage wasn't going to happen, and she'd be free to get a job and marry someone she loved.

"What are you planning?" Brad frowned at her.

"I'm going to talk to him," she replied.

He didn't look convinced.

"Now Brad, don't assume that she's up to something," their father admonished.

"How am I going to get to know him if I don't talk to him?" she asked Brad.

"What are you going to talk to him about?" Brad wondered.

"I believe that will be between me and my future husband." There was no way she was going to reveal that information to him.

The Cold Wife

“Brad, some things are private,” their father remarked. “I think it’s a good sign that she’s willing to talk to him without being forced to.”

Though her brother kept quiet, she could tell that he didn’t trust her. She didn’t like the fact that her brother knew her so well. She decided she would find a way to avoid him during the evening, which wasn’t so hard to do considering he usually took center stage while she hovered in the background and watched others around her. Except, tonight she would be of particular interest to the people there since she was the fiancée of the host.

When they arrived at his two-story home, she groaned. A lot of people were there. Everyone would know of the engagement after tonight. The hot Virginia August air seemed to push down on her, making it hard for her to breathe. She suddenly felt like a caged animal. She could only hope Justin was as reasonable as her father and brother claimed.

She had never seen his house before. It was in a neighborhood with similar two-story houses, and it was just as immaculate and beautiful as the rest of them. It was light blue and there was a light blue picket fence to match it. A sidewalk led to the front door. The lawn was a beautiful shade of medium green, and two large oak trees decorated the front yard. Obviously, someone in Justin’s position had to maintain an impressive home. *And I just happen to be another addition to his impressive house*, she bitterly thought.

“You’ll enjoy living here,” her father assured her. “This is one of the nicest homes in Virginia. It has six bedrooms, three bathrooms, two parlors, an entertainment room, a large kitchen and dining room, a basement, and a large veranda out back that overlooks a good sized lawn that has flowers, a fountain, and a gazebo. He has a butler, two cooks, a maid, and a stagecoach driver. He plans to hire another stagecoach driver so Franklin can

be at your beck and call. He is generous and will provide you with everything you wish.”

She hoped that included a way out of the marriage.

She followed her father and brother out of the stagecoach and into the house. If his house had looked impressive on the outside, it was not nearly as gorgeous as the inside. The front door led to a large hallway that was the size of her father’s dining room. There were three benches in the hallway. Two benches were on the left and one was on the right. Some guests were seated on the benches. The entertainment room was to the immediate left, and she could see the large circular room where half the guests danced to the music that the live orchestra was playing. There was a staircase on her right that led to the top floor where the bedrooms and two bathrooms were. The hallway on the main floor led to a parlor on the left and the right. The hallway ended at a door that led to a large dining room. She suspected that the door on the right led to the kitchen. She wondered where the staircase was that led to the basement. The dining room had a french door that led to the veranda where some people stood around and spoke to each other. There were several round tables and chairs on the veranda too.

Justin Monroe stood by the french doors talking to one of the chefs. He motioned to the dining table. He wasn’t a bad looking man. He was clean shaven with medium wavy brown hair and green eyes. He was 5'8" and slender. He maintained himself with an air of confidence that made him appealing. He seemed very secure with himself. He didn’t need a wife to make him look good. Surely, he would see that this marriage wasn’t necessary.

She took a deep breath as she scanned the people around her. She recognized most of them. She noticed that Harrison wasn’t there. She wasn’t surprised.

“Julie Muse and Mary Duff are here,” Brad whispered to her.

The Cold Wife

She looked to where he motioned and saw her two closest friends in the corner of the entertainment room. They sat on one of the sofas. She and her friends usually sat to the side at these dinner parties and kept mostly to themselves. It was Brad and his friends who dominated the room.

“Good evening,” Justin’s butler greeted them. “My name is Geoffrey Crow. I look forward to serving you in the future, Miss Allen. Mr. Monroe is eager to speak with you.”

I hope you won’t have to serve me after tonight. She smiled, said thank you, and followed her father and brother further into the house.

“Will you follow me?” Geoffrey asked.

She sighed. Did she have a choice? From the look on her father’s and brother’s faces, she knew that the answer to that question was a resounding no. She reluctantly let the butler lead her to Justin who was still talking with the chef. She noted that he wore a dark blue suit. *If he wore black, we would match.*

As the butler left, she glanced back at her father who nodded encouragingly to her. Her brother was already talking to some of his friends in the entertainment room.

“Jim put salt instead of sugar into the pies,” the chef complained to Justin. “So the dessert is ruined.”

“Is there anything else in the kitchen we can use for dessert?” Justin wondered.

“We might have enough ingredients for ice cream.”

“Go ahead and make that then.”

“Sir, I don’t wish to be disrespectful, but is it wise to keep Jim on the payroll?”

Justin took a moment before answering the head chef. “Louis, I understand your frustrations but Jim hasn’t even been here for three days. He has no experience and is a bit clumsy but he does have a lot of motivation and hasn’t repeated one of his mistakes.”

"The wedding will be a disaster if you let him prepare anything."

"Perhaps we should have him set out the dishes."

"He has a tendency to break them."

"Then have him set out napkins and utensils."

Louis grumbled but nodded and returned to the kitchen.

Carrie noticed that the backyard was lit up with torches, and there were tables and chairs set up for the guests who wished to eat outside. The dining room table was meant to seat twenty people, and there were more than twenty people at the house. It only made sense that allowances were made for the extra people.

Justin turned his attention to her and smiled. "Miss Allen, it's a pleasure to see you," he warmly greeted. "You look lovely this evening."

They didn't even know each other well enough to be on a first name basis. What was her father thinking in arranging this marriage? She could only hope that Justin would listen to reason.

"Mr. Monroe," she began, "there is an important matter that we must discuss."

He seemed concerned by her words. "What is it?"

"Sir," a maid called out as she ran up to him. "Forgive me for interrupting, ma'am," she quickly told Carrie. Turning back to Justin, she continued, "Mr. Hunter and Mr. Leroy are arguing. They are disrupting some of the guests."

He frowned. "I'll be right there."

The maid nodded and ran off to take care of another matter.

"I'm sorry, Miss Allen. Mr. Hunter and Mr. Leroy don't get along but I had to invite both of them. Can we discuss whatever is on your mind after dinner?" he asked.

"Yes," she reluctantly agreed.

"Thank you."

She rolled her eyes as he ran to one of the parlors where the two men were shouting. She noticed that several guests had

stopped talking to stare at the argument. She passed by the parlor, aware that Justin was calmly talking to the two men, and walked into the entertainment room where she saw her friends still sitting on the couch.

“Good evening, Julie and Mary,” she greeted as she sat in the chair across from them.

“Good evening, Carrie.” Mary smiled at her. “We had no idea you were entertaining romantic thoughts for Mr. Monroe.”

“I’m not. My father and his uncle arranged this marriage.”

“Really? Why?” Julie asked.

“You promise not to tell anyone?” Carrie looked at them. She knew she could trust them to keep her secret.

They nodded.

She quickly made sure no one was listening to them before she said, “Father went bankrupt and is determined that I should marry Mr. Monroe since he’s rich.”

Mary’s eyes grew wide. “All we heard was that your father and his uncle arranged the match. No one knows exactly why. We assumed it was because your father and his uncle get along very well.”

“Yes. They are friends.”

“I’m sorry to hear about the engagement then,” Mary replied.

“What a dreadful fate,” Julie agreed. “Mr. Monroe is so dull.”

“I’m hoping he’ll let me out of the engagement,” Carrie confessed. “It looks like I won’t be able to talk to him until after dinner.”

“That would be a blessing if he agreed that this marriage is wrong,” Mary responded. “We shouldn’t be forced to marry someone against our will. It’s 1894 for goodness’ sakes.”

“How is Harrison taking the news?” Julie asked Carrie.

“I don’t know. I haven’t had a chance to talk to him. All I know is that his father isn’t willing to let us marry since he

wishes for him to marry a woman who comes with a dowry. Since my father is going bankrupt, I have become unsuitable.”

“I wonder if he feels the same way,” Mary considered. “Perhaps, he would be interested in courting you anyway. After all, he did just ask to court you.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know if I can even get out of this engagement. Though I hope I can, I’m not sure what Mr. Monroe will do. My father surely isn’t going to let me out of it since he adores the man.”

“What father would wish to confine his daughter to a man that she doesn’t want?”

“One who wants his daughter to be rich,” Julie replied.

“What if you and Harrison eloped? Wouldn’t that be romantic?” Mary mused.

“It would be foolish,” Julie argued. “He would be disowned by his father and Carrie would be as poor as she is now.”

“But at least she could be with someone she wants to be with.”

Carrie thought over the idea. What if Harrison did want to marry her? Maybe he would be willing to leave his wealth behind and be with her. It would certainly be much nicer to be with him than Mr. Monroe. She decided that she would visit Harrison the next day and discuss the possibility with him if Mr. Monroe still insisted on the marriage.

Chapter Three



Justin had wished to speak with Carrie but he knew the situation between Nathan Hunter and George Leroy could get serious if left uninterrupted. He found the two men in a heated argument.

“May I ask what the problem is?” Justin quickly intervened before Nathan threw the first punch.

Justin ignored the onlookers who had crowded the parlor. He was well aware that fifteen guests watched them.

“I’m sorry, Justin,” Nathan apologized as he cooled down. “I let my emotions get the best of me. I didn’t intend to cause a scene.”

“You really should be more careful when you’re inviting people to your dinner parties,” George remarked.

Justin turned to George. One look at George’s date notified him of the problem. George had brought Linda Hunter despite Justin’s request for him not to. Linda had married Nathan three years ago but was recently discovered in an adulterous relationship with George. Upon discovering his wife’s infidelity, Nathan divorced her, and there had been tension between him and George ever since.

"May I speak with you gentlemen in private?" *As private as possible considering the many guests.* Justin led them out of the parlor and onto the veranda where there was a secluded spot. The three men stood silently for a moment as Justin thought of how to begin. Finally, he said, "I can appreciate the sensitivity of this issue." He turned to George. "Mr. Leroy, I specifically asked you not to bring Linda here tonight."

"I know you did, Mr. Monroe," the twenty-three-year-old man replied. "She assumed I was with another woman, and in order to reassure her that I wasn't, I had to bring her. She's insecure. I can understand her feelings."

"What would either one of you know about insecurity?" Nathan spat. "She was my wife and both of you dismissed the marital vows."

"If you had treated her better, she wouldn't have sought comfort in my arms," George argued.

"I treated her just fine!"

"You constantly put work first. A woman needs to be appreciated."

"Please, gentlemen," Justin intervened, aware that their emotions were running high. "Mr. Hunter, you are having dinner in the dining room with me. Mr. Leroy, please eat out here with your date. In the meantime, please find separate rooms to be in. I am sorry but this is the best I can do given the circumstances."

George turned to Nathan. "Will you be dancing tonight?"

"No. You know very well that I came alone," Nathan pointedly responded.

"I will be in the entertainment room," George told Justin before he left to go back into the house.

Justin breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry, Nathan. I did tell Mr. Leroy to come alone or bring someone else. I had to invite him because he's Conrad's son and my uncle does business with Conrad on a regular basis."

"I don't fault you for this," Nathan assured him.

The Cold Wife

Geoffrey announced that it was time to eat. Justin was relieved that the emergencies from earlier had finally been resolved.

“Which seat would you like at the table?” he asked Nathan as they went into the house.

He wasn’t sure if Nathan felt like sitting close to him and Carrie since engagement parties and weddings were most likely upsetting to him with his own heartache still fresh.

“Since I’m the best man, I suppose I should sit across from Carrie. You’ll be at the head of the table and she’ll sit at your right, correct?” Nathan asked.

“Yes. That’s the plan. Do you feel up to being my best man?”

“As long as George isn’t at the altar on Saturday, I’ll be fine.”

“There’s no danger of that. George is sitting in the back of the church.”

“I hope that Carrie is good to you.”

“I don’t see why she won’t be.”

“Well, good luck.”

Only the immediate family and friends of the bride and groom were seated at the dining table. The rest of the guests were outside. Justin had to hire additional servers for the event but he wanted to make everyone comfortable so it was worth the expense. The wedding and reception on Saturday would be even more elaborate. His uncle was paying the bill for that event since Mr. Allen went bankrupt. Since no one knew of his bankruptcy but a select few, Carrie was spared the humiliation of people knowing her father couldn’t pay for the wedding.

Justin supposed that most men in his economic class would be dismayed to marry a woman who came into the marriage without a cent to her name, but he had secretly entertained romantic notions for Carrie since her family moved to town when he was fourteen. Though he knew Brad very well, he

never got up the nerve to have more than a two sentence conversation with his sister. Usually, he managed to tell her hello and asked her how she was doing or what she thought of the weather. He was too nervous to figure out what else to say.

She was beautiful. He often stole glances her way when they attended the same dinner parties. They usually sat on opposites sides of the room. It seemed that the more he saw her, the more beautiful she got. He supposed other men didn't find her as attractive as he did, but they weren't in love with her either. She was shy, so it was no wonder that more men hadn't taken notice of her.

Before the dinner, he stood up and gave the official engagement announcement. Then he sat down as the guests started eating. He couldn't help but notice that Carrie wore a black dress. It was the same dress she wore at her mother's funeral. He wondered why she chose that particular dress to wear when he had seen her in more festive colors in the past. He dismissed his questions and tried to think of something she might find interesting to discuss.

Currently, she was quietly eating her meal. Her father sat next to her on her right. Her brother, who was the groomsman, sat next to Nathan on the opposite side of the table. They talked about automobiles. Justin had recently acquired an interest in motorized transportation, so he had to fight the urge to join the conversation.

Instead, he turned to Carrie. He cleared his throat before he began to speak. "Do you wish to discuss the issue that was on your mind earlier?"

She seemed to be surprised he spoke to her. She glanced at her father who looked over at her. "Perhaps later," she replied, barely looking at him.

He cut another piece of his steak as he tried to think of another topic. "I heard you enjoy going to the beach."

"Yes," she responded.

"I was wondering if you would like to spend a week there for our honeymoon. My uncle owns a house on the beach and he has offered to let us stay there if we wish, but I thought I would ask you first. I won't be able to take time off work for another two weeks. Being that this engagement happened so suddenly, I didn't have time to make arrangements for a vacation until today."

She looked startled. "A honeymoon?"

His cheeks grew hot. Perhaps such a discussion wasn't appropriate in a room full of people. "We can talk about this later if you prefer."

"That would be best."

He nodded. He took a couple of awkward bites of his meal before turning back to her. "So, what are some of your interests?"

She hesitated to respond.

He figured that she had to think over his question. He patiently waited for her to speak.

To his shock, she said, "We don't have anything in common."

Her father nudged her in the side and looked sternly at her.

She took a deep breath and explained, "I'm sorry. It's just that we don't know anything about each other."

"I know," Justin acknowledged. "It'll be fun to learn about each other. I think of it as an adventure."

She sighed before turning back to her plate.

He noticed that she hadn't eaten much. "Do you wish for something other than the steak and potato plate? I can have the chef make something else."

She looked back at him. "Oh, this is good. I just don't have much of an appetite."

"I'm nervous too," he softly admitted.

"Justin," Nathan spoke up.

He turned his attention to his friend. "Yes?"

“Do you think that automobiles are a good investment?” he asked.

“Actually, I do. I think that we’re moving away from horses. Trains are just the beginning in horseless transportation.”

“Are you going to invest in them?”

“I already have.”

“But aren’t horses more practical?” Brad inserted.

“At this point in time, they are. I suspect that improvements will be made to automobiles and before long, they will become more practical. I’ve seen a couple models of the automobiles and they aren’t very useful now but there is talk about ways to make them more beneficial. Currently, they lack room for storage, but that is a simple modification. I like to think of them as miniature trains that don’t need railroad tracks.”

Carrie softly chuckled.

He glanced at her. Was she laughing at him?

“I have heard great things about automobiles as well,” her father quickly said. “I suppose I should look into those particular stocks.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Justin agreed. He would like to see her father restore his former wealth. “I can show you my investment portfolio if you wish.”

“I would very much appreciate it,” her father agreed. “Carrie is in good hands with you.”

He was pleased by the man’s kind words. “Thank you, sir.”

The ice cream treats for dessert turned out well. Louis looked greatly relieved to have the earlier catastrophe resolved. Justin hoped that the new chef would work out. Jim seemed unsure of his ability to succeed at his job, though he showed a great desire for cooking when Justin interviewed him. He wanted to see Jim realize his dream to eventually open his own restaurant, and being his chef would give him much needed experience for that.

He decided to try to engage Carrie in conversation again. "Do you like to dance?"

She looked up from the ice cream which she had been absentmindedly stirring with her spoon.

He wondered when he would be able to get a moment to talk to her without others listening in. Whatever was on her mind, it was serious. It had been distracting her all evening.

"I'm not good at it," she finally stated.

"She hasn't had much practice," her father inserted. "I'm sure that given time, she could master it."

She closed her eyes and slowly opened them. She continued to stare at the bowl.

He assumed that she was embarrassed by her poor dancing skills. He leaned closer to her so that no one else could overhear him. "I'm not very good at it either. Maybe if we dance together in between dinner parties, we'll get better at it."

She sat straight up and her face grew bright red.

He didn't think his comment was unsuitable before they got married. "Am I being too forward?"

"Please, Mr. Monroe, I don't feel very well."

He immediately grew concerned. "Do you need to lie down for awhile?"

"Yes, actually I do."

He stood up and found Constance Miller, his maid, and asked her to escort Carrie to a guest bedroom so she could lie down until she felt better. He knew it wouldn't be appropriate to show her to the room himself until after they were married. He was just as inexperienced as she was in regards to intimacy, but he didn't understand why talk of where to spend the honeymoon or dancing should upset her.

"Come back down here when you're ready to talk to me," he told her before she headed upstairs with Constance.

She nodded and followed the maid.

It was half an hour after dinner when his uncle came up to him. "There's an emergency meeting regarding the Burgess Account. We have to go to Richmond right away."

"But Uncle Jonathan, I can't just leave in the middle of my engagement party," he protested. "Besides, Carrie said she has something important to discuss with me. I need to be here so she can do that."

"Justin, your father and I didn't earn our wealth by dismissing important business meetings. Whatever she wants, it can wait."

"I don't feel right about that. Can't you go without me?"

"Harrison Grant Sr. and Jr. will be at this meeting. If you're not careful, they'll take over our firm just like they took over Mr. Allen's firm. Come along. The train arrives in half an hour."

"Why do I have to be there?"

"Because you need to watch how I am going to deal with the Grants. You'll be going head to head with them in the future. This experience will give you the edge. They are after the Burgess Account, and that is a very profitable account for us."

"Can I at least tell Carrie good-bye before I go?"

He sighed. "Make it quick. Remember, you can talk to her all you want to after the wedding."

Could he? It seemed as if he was dragged from one business meeting to another ever since he turned eighteen. He hadn't had time to court a woman because of that. "After I get married, am I still going to have to run off to emergency meetings?"

"Not as often as you do now. I understand you'll have responsibilities to your wife and children."

"Alright. I'll see her and then join you at the front door."

He hated to leave but knew it would be pointless to argue with his uncle. He found Constance and asked her to take him to

see Carrie. He wanted to make sure the maid was with them so no one would misunderstand the situation.

Carrie was on her way down the stairs when he and the maid reached the bottom of the staircase. He was struck by how wonderful she looked. But she looked overwhelmed too. Since people were mingling around them, he allowed Constance to leave.

He waited for her to reach him before he spoke. "My uncle has informed me that I have to attend an urgent business meeting in Richmond, and the matter can't wait until tomorrow so I have to leave now. I'm sorry to do this to you, Carrie. Did you want to tell me what's been bothering you? I can spare a couple of minutes."

She looked upset by his announcement. "This isn't something that we can discuss in a few minutes, Mr. Monroe."

"Then I suppose it'll have to wait until after the wedding."

"What? Why can't we discuss it tomorrow?"

"I still have business appointments that I need to attend. I also have to get ready for the wedding. There's a lot of details involved with the whole thing. You'll spend the day getting ready as well. I know we don't really know each other. I can understand this isn't easy for you. I do want you to know that I'm looking forward to marrying you."

"Don't you see that the fact that we don't know each other is a big problem?"

"Well, I admit it's not ideal. I haven't had the proper time to court you. I'll try to make up for that."

"How?"

"We'll have a full week to ourselves during our honeymoon."

"One week?"

"It's a start. Of course, there's the time we'll get to be alone after we're married too, but we'll still have servants around.

At least on our honeymoon, we'll really be alone. I think that will be a good time for us to get to know each other."

"Justin, it's time to go," his uncle called out.

He sighed. "I'll see you on Saturday."

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, realizing she wished to continue talking to him. "I don't wish to upset you but I don't have a choice. Being in my line of work, others pretty much dictate my life for me."

She didn't respond.

He knew that she wasn't happy but as his uncle called out for him again, he knew he had to leave. He wished her a good evening and followed his uncle out the door.

Chapter Four



The next morning, Carrie dressed in her favorite pink dress and pulled her hair back with a pink ribbon. She wanted to look as nice as possible when she saw Harrison. She went out for a walk to Harrison's house after she got her measurements done for her wedding dress. She could only hope she wouldn't need to wear it. She was on her way to the florist to select the flowers for the ceremony. She wondered why Justin felt it necessary to give her so many tasks. She also had to choose the colors, the decorations and the music. She was so exhausted from all the running around she was doing that she barely had time to think of how much she was dreading the marriage.

One look at the wedding gowns surrounding her in Mrs. Parker's shop reminded her that time was quickly running out and if she wished to get out of this marriage, she had to talk to Harrison. When she arrived at Harrison's house, her pulse was racing. Harrison did seem to care for her. They weren't close but she had spent more time with him than she had with Justin.

His butler answered the door. "Good afternoon, Miss Allen. How may I help you?"

“Good afternoon,” she greeted, aware that her voice slightly shook, betraying her anxiety. “I would like to speak with Mr. Grant.”

“I will see if he is available. Would you like to come in and wait in the parlor?”

She shook her head. “No thank you. I will wait here.”

“As you wish.” The butler left the door slightly open while he went to get Harrison.

She turned around and examined her surroundings. She was used to living in the wealthy section of town. She didn’t understand how her life would change if she were to live without the comforts of wealth. Certainly, it would be preferable to go without riches than to live with Mr. Monroe.

The butler returned to the door. “He will be with you shortly.”

She thanked him and sat on the chair on the porch. It was early afternoon. A couple of women walked down the street but no one paid her any mind. She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. She was still upset that Justin didn’t take the time to listen to her the night before. A business meeting took precedence over her? She suddenly realized that Justin’s opinion of her was poor. She was no more than a means to an end. Married men often fared better in the business world since they were viewed as more stable and loyal than the single men. Justin was merely out to make himself more appealing as a businessman. He had no personal interest in her.

She couldn’t believe he had the nerve to bring up their honeymoon or dancing. As if she had any desire to touch a man who only valued her for what she could do for him! He had a lot of nerve. He never once approached her all the years that he and her brother talked at dinner parties. Then last night, he was acting as if he was happy to be with her. It made her sick to her stomach. He only acted interested in her because he was expected to. He was in front of their family and friends, so he had to put

on the mask of being a devoted fiancé. She was sure that he would put the same mask on in public after they married as well. She couldn't tolerate such a show. She refused to play into his game, which was why she had rested in his guest bedroom upstairs.

She was shocked to see that every guest bedroom had a theme to it. One bedroom looked like it came out of the European medieval time period. The second one looked like it belonged to the Roman Empire. The third one was reminiscent of Ancient Egypt. The fourth one was decorated with artifacts from a Chinese Dynasty. The fifth one looked like it belonged to the Viking time period. She wondered what his bedroom's theme was. His bedroom door had been shut. She sighed. She didn't care. She prayed that she would never find out.

The maid had led her to the Roman bedroom. She didn't bother to lie down. Instead, she paced back and forth and practiced her speech. "Mr. Monroe," she would begin, "this marriage cannot happen. Surely, you can understand that since we don't know each other, this arrangement won't work. I don't love you and you don't love me. I am perfectly content with finding employment to support myself. You are free to find a woman you will care for who will care for you in return. I thank you for your kindness. Good evening, sir, and have a nice life."

Except, she hadn't been able to give her speech because he had to magically run off to business as soon as she appeared on the steps. The timing was downright suspicious. Was her father and his uncle purposely trying to separate them so that she didn't have the chance to voice her thoughts to him? When she ventured by his house that morning, he was at his office. Even there, he was engaged in an important meeting that couldn't be interrupted. "This afternoon, he will be getting his tuxedo fitted," the receptionist informed her at the firm. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but his schedule is booked." Despite her protests that she was

supposed to marry him, the receptionist remained firm in his decision to forbid her to see him.

This led her to her final plan, so she walked to Harrison's residence. She was relieved that he, at least, had the time to speak with her.

When he came to the front door, she stood up. She couldn't tell if he was happy to see her or not. He didn't greet her with his usual smile.

"Good afternoon, Harrison," she said. "Would you care to go for a walk?"

He hesitated but finally nodded. "I wasn't sure if you were going to come by and explain things or not." He closed the door behind him and walked with her down the street.

"I don't want to marry Mr. Monroe," she told him.

The sun shone brightly, but her hat provided adequate protection for her eyes. She was briefly aware that a couple of dogs were barking in the neighborhood.

"I know you don't," Harrison softly replied. "I heard that your father and his uncle arranged the marriage."

"Yes. I was not consulted before they did it." She took a deep breath to settle her nerves. "I know we haven't had time to actually go to any social functions together, but I was wondering if you would consider marrying me so I don't have to marry Mr. Monroe."

He stopped walking and turned to face her.

She immediately stopped so she could look at him.

"I didn't realize what your intention was when I left the house," he slowly admitted.

She shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "I don't wish to put you in an uncomfortable position, but considering my wedding is tomorrow, I don't have a choice."

"I understand what you're saying, Carrie. Your father did come to my father about a marriage between us, but my father

doesn't want me to marry someone who won't bring any money into the marriage."

Her heart pounded nervously in her chest. She wasn't sure if this conversation was going positively or not. "But if you are willing to marry me, then we can elope and live somewhere else. I'd be willing to leave everyone behind for you."

He looked sadly at her. "It's not meant to be."

Time stood still for a moment while she struggled to make sense of what he just told her.

"I like you," he began. "You're a great person, but I'm the only son and the only one who can take over my father's business when he retires. It would kill him if I left it to marry you. I can't have his sorrow on my conscience."

She sighed, trying not to let her despair show. She couldn't expect him to leave everything he knew behind just so he could run off with her and be her husband. "I understand," she finally replied. "Thank you for your time. I will not bother you anymore." She turned from him and walked away.

"I'm sorry," he called out.

She didn't bother to respond to him. She simply kept walking. Tears formed in her eyes but she quickly wiped them aside. The very next day was her wedding day and it didn't look like there was anything she could do to stop it. She was about to be forced into a life of misery with a man who was not only dull and didn't care anything about her but wanted to improve his clientele. *Is that all I'm good for? Helping a man make a good impression for the sake of his business? Am I not worth more than that?*

Chapter Five



Carrie mindlessly went to the church where Mrs. Parker helped her put on her wedding gown and made some last minute alterations. The white dress had long sleeves, a heart-shaped neckline and a pearl flower design in the front. The pearls on the dress matched her pearl necklace and earrings. Carrie thought it was pointless to be so particular about a wedding gown. *Why spend so much time fussing over a dress that is only worn once?*

Mary, her maid of honor, smiled. "You look splendid."

"I have yet to see an ugly bride," Mrs. Parker added. "Though I confess you are more attractive than some women I have worked with."

Carrie decided not to respond. Instead, she waited until Mrs. Parker was done before turning her attention to her best friend. Julie was her bridesmaid, but she hadn't shown up yet. There was still another hour before the ceremony, so Carrie wasn't concerned.

Once Mrs. Parker left, Carrie finally got a chance to talk to Mary alone. She quickly sat at the small table in the bridal chamber and wrote Justin a note, asking him to call off the

wedding since she didn't wish to marry him. She turned to her best friend. "Will you send this to Mr. Monroe?"

Mary frowned. "I don't know if calling off the wedding is a good idea, Carrie. I've thought about it and I think he'll be a good husband to you."

She groaned. "Not you too!"

She shrugged. "I can't explain it but I don't think he's as boring as you fear. I had time to watch him at the engagement party and I saw the way he looked at you. He loves you, and he's willing to marry you even though you're poor. I believe you will be very happy with him, though it won't seem so at first."

"What is wrong with everyone? Am I the only one who sees how wrong we are for each other?"

"Apparently."

She shook her head. "Obviously, the insanity is spreading."

Mary laughed. "Is that what it is? If insanity is wanting my friend to be happily married to a man who'll adore her, then I confess that I am insane."

Carrie ignored her as she stood up and left the room with the note.

Her friend ran after her. "You don't know what you're doing." She reached for her arm and stopped her. "Carrie, don't be rash. Seriously, he isn't that dull. He laughs a lot and has an enthusiasm for life. I didn't notice this until I watched him on Thursday evening. I misjudged him because he doesn't stand out in a crowded room. And if you take the time to actually look at him, you'll find that he's attractive."

"Since you think so well of him, why don't you marry him? I'll be glad to let you take my place."

"No. He's not for me. He's for you."

"See? Even you wouldn't marry him."

"He cares for you in a way he doesn't care for me. I'm not the one he wants."

“So it’s all about what he wants? What I want doesn’t matter?”

“You are being unnecessarily stubborn. Do you honestly think Harrison would make a better match?”

“No. Harrison puts money before me. He would make a dreadful husband.”

“Then be grateful that you get to be with Justin instead.”

“Justin’s not any better. His big concern is looking good for his clients. The only thing I will be is a doll he can put on display.”

“You have no idea how wrong you are, and until you’re married to him, you won’t know the truth.”

Carrie decided that she had heard enough. She shook her friend’s hand off of her arm. She marched across the entryway, ignoring the startled looks from the guests, and went straight to the groom’s chamber. She loudly knocked on the door.

Her brother opened it. He looked shocked to see her. “Carrie, you shouldn’t be here. You know it’s bad luck for the bride to see the groom before the wedding.”

“This wedding is a big mistake and we both know it. I need to speak to Mr. Monroe at once,” she demanded.

“You can’t. He’s not here.”

“What?”

“He had to take care of some business with a client. He expects to be here five minutes before the ceremony. You won’t have time to talk to him before the wedding. You’ll have to give him a list of your grievances later.”

“How convenient it is for him to be unavailable so often,” she snapped. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was a ploy to make sure I’d have to go through with the marriage.” She crossed her arms and glared at him.

“Come on, Carrie. Don’t look at me like that.”

She stood still.

Mary ran over to them. "I'm sorry, Mr. Allen. I tried to stop her."

He smiled at her. "You can call me Brad. We've known each other long enough. There's no need to worry about my sister. Justin isn't here so she can't talk him out of marrying her."

"This was done on purpose, wasn't it?" Carrie fumed.

He shrugged. "There might have been some concern that you would resort to harassing him before the wedding."

"Harassing?"

"Certainly. You'll break his heart if you don't marry him."

She stomped her foot on the ground. "Doesn't anyone care about my feelings?"

"Of course, we do," Mary gently insisted. "That's why we want to see you with him."

"I refuse to go through with this!" She ran to the entrance.

They gasped and chased her.

Brad managed to jump in front of her as she reached the doorway but she quickly darted around him and left the church.

"You're getting the hem of the dress dirty!" Mrs. Parker protested when she saw her run down the steps.

Dirt was the least of her concerns, so she ran right past the seamstress.

Brad caught up to her and wrapped his arms around her so she couldn't run anymore. He picked her up and took her back to the bridal chamber. Turning to Mary, he said, "Lock the door from the outside so she can't get back out until it's time for the ceremony."

"You can't betray me like this," Carrie screamed to Mary as she fought to get out of her brother's arms. "You're supposed to be my best friend."

Her friend looked sympathetically at her. "It's because I'm your best friend that I'm going to do as your brother said. I honestly believe you'll be giving up a wonderful husband if you don't marry Justin."

“You’ll thank us someday,” Brad agreed.

He dropped her in a chair and kept her in place until Mary shut and locked the door. Mary stood outside the room so she could unlock it when it was time for the wedding.

Carrie had never felt more betrayed in her life. Her brother and best friend were active participants in the worst day of her life. “I’ll never forgive either of you for this,” she loudly stated so Mary could hear her from the other side of the door.

“Yes, you will,” he simply replied, not disturbed by her anger at him. “You’ve been mad at me for worse things.”

“I can’t think of what’s worse than this.”

She crossed her arms and turned away from him. Just because he was in the room, it didn’t mean she had to look at or speak to him. She considered her options. One, she could continue to try to talk sense into her brother and friend. That, however, didn’t seem to be working. In fact, the more she protested, the more they wanted to see her with Justin. So she thought over her other option. She could say no when the preacher asked if she would fulfill her marital vows. She was nervous enough about being in front of a church full of people, but it was an option worth considering. Sure, her family and friends would be upset. But they weren’t the ones being forced into this marriage. Naturally, they wouldn’t care if her heart was breaking over it. She finally decided that she would simply refuse to marry him during the ceremony.

She spent the rest of the hour in silence. Her brother tried to reason with her but she ignored him. She even refused to look at him.

Mary unlocked the door. “Everyone is ready for the bride.”

“Don’t you mean, ‘Justin Monroe is ready for the bride?’” Carrie sarcastically stated.

“Carrie, please don’t make a scene out there,” her brother pleaded with her. “Justin’s a good man who honestly cares for you. He doesn’t deserve to look like a fool on his wedding day.”

She didn’t respond. She stood up and stomped past Mary and Julie who had been waiting outside the door. She briefly noted that Mary looked upset, but she had a feeling that Mary wasn’t upset about the wedding, her or Justin. *Something else is bothering her. She has that same look she gets when she hears unpleasant news.* Julie was grinning from ear to ear, so obviously, whatever was bothering Mary, it had nothing to do with Julie.

Mrs. Parker handed her the white flowers. “You do look lovely. The dress really enhances your figure. Mr. Monroe will be pleased.”

She gritted her teeth so she wouldn’t roll her eyes. She waited as Julie and Brad walked down the aisle and separated so that Julie stood on her side and Brad went to Justin’s side. She couldn’t see the altar but knew that this was the procedure. Mary and Nathan followed. Then it was her turn. She didn’t bother to look at her father as she put her hand on his arm.

“Carrie, must you be cold on your wedding day?” he sadly whispered.

“Are you surprised? You know very well that I don’t want to be here,” she whispered back.

He sighed. “I had wished my last day here would be a joyous one.”

She glanced at him. “You’re leaving today?”

“After the reception.”

She forced back her tears. She didn’t want people whispering to each other and wondering why she was crying. She took a deep breath and looked ahead.

“I love you, honey,” he said. “I wouldn’t be giving you to Justin if I didn’t believe he was the right one for you.”

She couldn’t respond. If she started telling him that she loved him too, then she would cry.

He smiled at her and patted her hand. "I know."

He did know. He could tell how she felt just by looking at her. She took comfort in that. She followed his lead and allowed him to lead her down the aisle. Her face grew hot from the awareness that everyone was watching her. She hadn't been the center of attention before and found that it made her nervous. She could barely concentrate on walking. By the time she reached the altar, she could barely hear what the preacher was saying. It was hard to focus when she could feel everyone staring at her.

Her father took her hand and put it around Justin's arm. For the first time, she took a good look at Mr. Monroe. It suddenly occurred to her that he was a handsome man. It was odd that she hadn't noticed that he was so attractive before. He was smiling at her.

The preacher began talking and her heart beat faster and faster with each word he spoke. Soon it would be her chance to say that she wasn't going to marry Justin. *When the preacher expects me to say, "I do," I'll say, "I don't."*

She took a couple of deep breaths, hoping to calm down enough so she could concentrate on what was going on around her. *Just forget that a room full of people are listening and watching.* Unfortunately, telling herself that didn't make it that easy.

The preacher stopped talking and looked at her.

Startled, she blinked.

"Miss Allen?" he gently asked.

She cleared her throat. She hadn't realized that the ceremony had progressed so quickly. *Say no!* She glanced at Mary who looked as if she was silently pleading for her to say "I do." Julie didn't seem to be paying attention. Justin looked worried. Nathan looked concerned. Brad gave her a warning look.

Just say no! She tried to speak but the words wouldn't come out of her mouth. *Maybe I can talk to him after the reception, when no one is watching.* "I do," she finally said.

Mary, Justin, Nathan and Brad looked relieved.

The Cold Wife

After the ceremony was over and they had eaten their lunch, it was time for dessert. She hadn't touched Justin since the ceremony, and since Nathan and Brad sat at their table, he spent most of his time answering their investment questions. She, in turn, talked to Mary and Julie. She noticed that Julie was acting strange, though she didn't know exactly why or how. It seemed that Mary knew the reason but chose to act as if nothing was wrong. Carrie knew both of her friends well enough to understand that something wasn't right.

Fifteen minutes after dessert, it was time for the first dance and Justin and Carrie had to be the first ones on the floor. Her nerves had settled during the lunch since people were no longer watching her, but as she joined Justin on the dance floor, her anxiety returned.

"Forgive me if I step on your feet," he softly told her so that no one would overhear.

His words helped to ease her own fear of dancing in front of everyone. She accepted his hand. She was four inches shorter than him and she thought it was a pleasant difference. He wrapped an arm around her waist and gently held her hand in his. She didn't want to enjoy being so close to him. Embarrassed, she couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on," he told her.

She accidentally stepped on his foot. "I'm sorry," she immediately said.

He smiled. "I don't mind. I'm just glad I'm not the only one who's not very good at dancing."

She chuckled despite herself. "I always hope no one else notices."

"I'm the same way."

She looked at him. "You don't like to be in the spotlight?"

"No. I know my job requires it on occasion, so I have to force myself to talk in front of a group of people. To be honest,

I'd rather just sit back and watch someone else give the presentation."

"Do you do that a lot?"

"I have to muddle through it twice a month. Most of the time my uncle gives the speeches."

"What do you speak about?"

He accidentally stepped on her foot. He winced.

"I'm fine," she assured him.

He seemed relieved.

"I'm sure I'll step on your feet a couple more times before the dance is over," she warned him.

"I won't tell anyone if you don't tell them that I step on your feet too," he said.

"It's a deal." She was beginning to feel better about dancing. She noticed that other people had joined them as well. Realizing their focus was no longer on her and Justin, she could relax. "What do you have to talk about when you work?"

"Some of what I do is a sales pitch. I have to convince men that a certain stock or bond is worth buying, but most of the time, I have to show them how their investments are maturing and if they should keep or sell them. I sent some investment ideas to your father. I think they'll prove profitable for him."

She realized that he didn't get paid for doing that since her father could barely afford to pay for his train ticket and living allowances as he began his life in Oregon.

"Thank you for doing that," she replied.

"It wasn't a big deal. I just told him what I invest in."

She suddenly realized that he was humble. He probably did things for people without expecting anything in return. After a couple moments of silence, she said, "I wouldn't want your job. It was bad enough talking to the preacher."

"That's why you looked like you were ready to bolt for the door."

She glanced at him. He didn't realize that she wanted to bolt because she didn't want to marry him. She would have to wait until later to explain that to him. "I guess my father and brother were right. You are a good man." And it was going to make it that much harder to do what she needed to do.

"Well, from what I hear, you're an outstanding woman. I'm a lucky man to have you as my wife."

A momentary flicker of guilt raced through her. He wasn't going to think that after she asked for an annulment. The dance ended and she looked back at the table. She noticed that Mary and Julie seemed to be arguing. "Do you mind if I see what is troubling my friends?" she asked him.

He turned his attention to the two women who were obviously upset. "No, I don't mind." He led her back to the table. "I'll leave you alone with them." He pulled out her chair and waited for her to sit. Then he lightly kissed her on the cheek before leaving so he could speak with his uncle.

"Mary, Julie, what's wrong?" she asked.

Mary shook her head, her irritation apparent on her pretty round face. She brushed back her wavy shoulder-length blond hair from her face. She stared at Julie. "Tell her," she demanded.

Carrie had the overwhelming urge to flee but remained still in her chair.

Julie hesitated to say anything.

Mary narrowed her eyes at their friend. "She'll find out sooner or later. She might as well find out from you."

Carrie looked at Julie who shifted uneasily in her chair.

"I don't know what the problem is," the dark blond finally stated. "Carrie, you're married to Justin now. From what I hear, he's a wonderful man. You'll be fine."

"Tell her," Mary ordered through clenched teeth.

"Harrison asked me if he could court me and I said yes," Julie admitted. "But you're not even available so it's not an issue."

"Tell her the other thing," Mary pressed.

"I told her what she needs to know."

"No, you didn't." Mary turned to Carrie. "Harrison has been making his affections known to Julie for the past two months. I just found out when I saw Harrison drop her off at the church. I overheard them talking. Little do people realize that when windows are open, voices carry."

Carrie waited until the room stopped spinning around her before she spoke. "Julie, why didn't you tell me when he began to court you? You were with him for one month before he started to pay attention to me."

She shrugged. "He insisted we keep it a secret. I don't know why. He's so charming that he talked me into keeping quiet. Then yesterday afternoon, he told me that we can let everyone know we're courting. You're with Justin. Things have worked out."

Carrie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You don't understand, Julie. If I had known you were interested in him, I never would have entertained romantic notions about him. Surely, it must have bothered you when you saw him speaking with me."

"It did," she softly confessed. She stared at the purple napkin which matched the purple ribbons in the church. "But he assured me that he had no lasting interest in you."

This is getting worse and worse with each passing minute. "I don't know what to say." Or *what to feel*. Part of her couldn't believe what was happening. She felt as if she was in a dream that was going in slow motion. Everyone around her was laughing and having a good time, unaware of the realization that the one man she thought had showed a genuine interest in her as a person hadn't been interested in her after all. She could have handled that well enough, but knowing her childhood friend had let him do such a thing was too much to take.

Mary held her hand. "Carrie, Harrison is not a good man. You are much better off with Justin."

The Cold Wife

“Harrison is just fine,” Julie argued. “We’re going to marry in one week.”

Mary looked as shocked as Carrie felt.

“And how long have you been engaged?” Mary snapped.

“Since this morning,” she shot back. “Really, I don’t see what the problem is. Everything has worked out well for everyone.”

Mary shook her head in disgust.

Finally, Carrie whispered, “Why?”

Her two friends seemed as if they didn’t expect her to say anything else.

“Why what?” Julie wondered.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Harrison had no right to ask if he could court me? He did ask that, if you recall.” Carrie’s words got louder as she continued to speak.

“He said he had to take care of something. I don’t know what it was but it’s over now.”

“He sat in my parlor and asked me if he could court me, and the entire time, he was secretly seeing you and you didn’t say anything. Do you understand how much that hurts me?”

“He’s no good, Carrie,” Mary assured her. “Now you know that he wasn’t worth the effort.”

“He’s not the one who’s hurting me,” Carrie said, turning to Julie. “His betrayal is a little thing but yours...” She took a deep breath. “We’ve been friends since we were sixteen.” Her voice choked as tears fell from her eyes.

Mary grabbed a handkerchief and gave it to her so she could wipe her eyes so no one else noticed that she was crying.

“I didn’t betray you,” Julie insisted. “If I had thought for a moment that you and Harrison were going to marry, I would have said something.”

“But you knew he was lying to me and didn’t say anything,” Carrie replied.

Julie sighed. "I can't do anything about it now. As I said, it's all worked out."

"Why did he pretend to like me?"

"I don't know."

"Do you really want to marry someone like that?" Mary hissed at Julie. "What if he does this after you're married?"

"He loves me," Julie argued. "He won't pretend to like another woman after we wed."

Mary shook her head. "If he's doing this now, he will likely do it again. Not all men take the marriage vows seriously. What will you do if he decides to get a mistress? Will you be happy then?"

"I told you that he loves me. He doesn't want another woman."

"Are you sure?"

"If you knew him like I do, you would understand." She stood up, looking upset. "It's apparent that neither one of you will be happy for me. I thought our friendship could survive anything but it seems that I was wrong."

Mary stood up. "Don't you dare turn this on us!" Her voice was low enough so the guests wouldn't overhear. "If you had shown enough decency to apologize to Carrie, then we could work through this. But you act as if Carrie's feelings don't even matter. She did care for Harrison and had hoped to marry him. Thankfully, God made other arrangements for her, but what will you do if you marry him and end up miserable?"

Julie didn't speak. She grabbed her purse and left.

Carrie closed her eyes. In one moment, she lost her friend.

Mary hugged her. "Carrie, I'm sorry. I wasn't sure if you should know but the more I prayed about it, the more it seemed like you should find out."

She hugged her friend back. "I still don't understand why Julie didn't tell me."

“Perhaps she feared that Harrison would choose not to court her anymore.”

“Perhaps.”

Justin and Brad walked over to them.

“Carrie, are you feeling alright?” Justin asked.

“She and Julie had to work through something,” Mary answered for her.

“I’ll be fine,” Carrie replied. She was surprised that he seemed to be concerned about her feelings. “Did you want something?” She looked at Justin.

“Actually, I was going to ask if you wanted to dance, but if you’re upset, then we don’t have to.”

Dancing would be a good distraction from her conversation with Julie. “I’ll dance,” she decided.

Brad asked Mary to dance and she accepted.

Carrie hated to admit it but she did enjoy dancing with Justin. His touch was gentle but firm. *Don’t get attached to him. You were forced into this marriage. Once you explain the situation, he’ll understand and agree that an annulment is best for both of us.*

Chapter Six



Justin and Carrie had just arrived home when she asked to speak with him in private. He agreed and took her to one of the parlors and shut the door. Since she sat in a chair, he sat in another chair that was across from her. She sat for a couple of minutes and stared at her hands, as if trying to determine what to say. He shifted uneasily in his chair, knowing this wasn't going to be a good conversation.

"Do you remember the important matter I had wished to discuss with you on Thursday evening?" she finally asked.

"Yes," he replied. He patiently waited for her to continue.

"I never got the chance to tell you what was on my mind. I've been trying to tell you since then. Yesterday, I even went by your work but the receptionist wouldn't let me see you. He said you had important meetings half the day and had to prepare for the wedding. Then today, before the wedding, you were at another business meeting and I couldn't talk to you then either. Apparently, you are difficult to get a hold of."

"I'm sorry. No one told me you were trying to talk to me, and my uncle insisted that the business meetings I had to go to

were crucial. I made sure that he understood that he is not to intrude on our time together for the rest of this weekend. I have to go to work on Monday, but as I explained on Thursday, I won't be able to get a day off for another two weeks so we can go on our honeymoon."

She glanced at the door.

"Is it too soon?" he softly asked.

She looked back at him. "Too soon for what?"

"To consummate the marriage?" He hated to even ask the question since he had been wishing to make love to her ever since he learned of their engagement. He had thought of little else for the past two days.

"Well, that's just it. I don't want to consummate the marriage at all."

He could only stare at her in shock.

She continued. "We are wrong for each other. I tried to tell you. I told my father but he wouldn't listen. I asked him to let me out of the engagement so I could move to Oregon with him or stay in town and support myself. He wouldn't budge. And I wasn't able to talk to you so here we are. One small thing has turned into a huge mess, but before this becomes a disaster, I have to put a stop to it."

"I thought you wanted to marry me." He could barely speak the words. His heart felt like it was being ripped apart.

"No," she softly replied. "I don't know who gave you that idea but they were wrong. Don't you understand how we don't suit each other? I mean, we don't even know each other. We probably don't have anything in common."

"You're wrong."

She looked startled. "What?"

"We do have things in common. We have the same faith, similar backgrounds, poor dancing skills, and a love for the beach. I assume we have more similar interests too. It's true we don't

know each other well, but don't we know of each other well enough to start a marriage?"

She sighed and put her head in her hands. When she looked at him, he could tell that she felt guilty for revealing this to him. "I thought you felt the same way I did. I..."

The tension in the room was so strong he almost bolted out of the room. After a long moment, he finally asked, "Why did you say 'I do'?"

"I tried to say no but the words wouldn't come out and then I got nervous with everyone waiting for me to speak. It was a very awkward moment."

"Not as awkward as this."

She turned her attention back to her hands which were folded in her lap.

"What do you want now?" He felt hollow as he asked the question. He already knew her answer.

"An annulment."

"Do I have any say in this?"

"I assumed you would be in agreement with me."

"Well, I'm not."

"So it's true? You really do want to be with me?"

Why did she have to say it as if he was stupid for wanting that? "Of course. What man wouldn't?"

She rolled her eyes. "Plenty."

"How unfortunate for you that you ended up with the one who does." He stood up. "I don't make any rash decisions. I have to think about it."

She shook her head. "But this isn't your decision."

"And you think it's yours?"

"When one person doesn't want to be in a marriage, it's only gracious for the other one to allow her freedom."

He couldn't believe his ears. Freedom? Was being married to him the equivalent of being in prison? "I need to cool down," he stiffly responded. "I'll be back later."

He knew she was upset but he didn't care. He had to get out of there before he made a decision he'd regret. He left the house and went to his uncle's place. The butler led him to the parlor where his uncle was filling out paperwork at his desk.

As soon as his uncle saw him, he said, "I didn't expect to see you until Monday after all that fuss you made about not working this weekend. Don't tell me you changed your mind."

Justin looked at the older man. "Carrie didn't want to marry me. I was under the impression that she wished for the marriage as much as I did. Did you realize that she's opposed to it?"

The older man sighed and sat back in his chair. "Are you sure that she is that opposed to it?"

"She made it clear that she was. She said that she begged her father not to force her into it and she tried to talk to me about it at the engagement party, but since I ran off to attend that business meeting, she wasn't able to. Oh, there have also been other attempts she made to inform me of her desire to remain single."

"Had you been able to talk to her before the ceremony, you would have agreed to call off the wedding?"

"Of course. I don't want her to be a part of this if she doesn't want it."

"So it was imperative that you went to the business meetings when you did. All things work out when you notice the details."

Justin couldn't believe his ears. "I missed a big detail on Thursday. I didn't get it until I was walking over here. She wore her funeral dress that night because she thinks marrying me is equivalent to dying."

To his surprise, his uncle chuckled. "Oh, she's so cute."

He groaned. "How can you make light of this?" His heart was breaking because the woman he had hoped to spend the rest

of his life with just told him she didn't want to be with him, and his uncle was acting like it wasn't important.

His uncle stopped laughing and motioned for him to sit across from him.

Justin rolled his eyes but did as instructed.

Jonathan leaned forward, placing his elbows on the desk in front of him. "I saw the way you two danced at the reception. She wasn't exactly fighting you on the dance floor. I think she enjoyed herself."

"Then when I brought her home, she told me that she doesn't want to be with me."

He waved his hand as if to dismiss his nephew's words. "She has a classic case of denial."

"Denial?"

"Yes. She finds you interesting but doesn't want to admit it. I think she's upset because she wasn't given a choice in the marriage. Her father probably just told her that she was getting married and that was it. Since she's twenty-four, she's had time to gain some independence. As a result, she has discovered that she was able to make decisions for herself, and would have liked to decide who to marry. Naturally, this led to her negative attitude toward you."

"Why wasn't she given a choice?"

"Because her father was sure that she would be miserable if she never married. Let's face it. She may be pretty and sweet but she's terribly shy with men, so she wouldn't have ever found a husband without some help. I could tell that you've loved her for the longest time but never made a move. Frankly, this is the best thing her father and I did for both of you."

"I'm going to let her get the annulment she asked for."

His uncle shook his head. "That isn't necessary." He drummed his fingers on the desk. Suddenly, he smiled. "Kiss her."

Justin hadn't expected this. "What?"

“Take her in your arms and give her a long, passionate kiss. Some tongue action would help.”

“Uncle Jonathan!”

“Do you want to stay married to her or not?”

“You already know the answer to that,” he softly stated.

“Then you need to fight for your marriage. If you kiss her and you detect even the slightest bit of response from her, then you know that there’s a hint of interest she is harboring for you. If that’s the case, then you ask her for one month to be married to you. In that time, let her have her own bedroom and make it clear to the staff that you won’t consummate the marriage so you can protect her reputation in case she insists on the annulment once the month is up. Take that month to court her. Romance her and show her that you honestly care for her. Give her lots of hugs and kisses. Treat her as if she were the most important woman who ever lived. I believe she’ll come around.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Is it?” His uncle shrugged. “If you try it, then the worst that can happen is she’ll go through with the annulment. You’ll be in the same position you are in now. However, if you try it and she changes her mind, then you will have the woman you love. Isn’t it worth a month to find out either way?”

Justin considered his words. He was right, of course. Finally Justin nodded. “I’ll try it.”

Chapter Seven



When Justin returned home, he sighed when he saw that Carrie had instructed the maid and butler to leave her things by the front door. He was amazed at how she could take him to the heights of heaven at the wedding and drag him to the lowest depths of hell when he took her to the place he had planned to build their future together. He didn't know what it was about him that she found so repulsive that she would rather spend her life as a spinster than spend it with him.

He wasn't sure where she went so he had to ask the maid.

"She's at the gazebo in the backyard," Constance answered him.

He thanked her and went out to the veranda. He paused for a moment. He wasn't sure how he was going to approach her. His uncle seemed to think this was a simple matter that would easily be resolved, but Justin realized that his entire world would fall apart if she left. He saw her as she sat on the bench. The fact that she still wore her wedding dress seemed like one colossal joke, and he was the butt of it. He had stupidly assumed that she was happy to marry him. *How could I have been so wrong?* He

actually thought she had enjoyed dancing with him at the reception. He thought years of doing business with clients had prepared him to notice details, but he wasn't effective when it came to detecting her subtle cues.

He was tempted to make her spend the entire night sitting out there, wondering what he would decide, but he couldn't bring himself to treat her that way. What was the best approach? What would he do if he had a client who was determined not to invest with his uncle's firm? He thought back to a time when he had to work with several hesitant clients. He had to act casual about it. He couldn't allow them to see the fact that he stressed over their decision because as soon as he did that, he lost the account. He had to keep a cool head. He took a deep breath and got ready to approach her.

He was halfway across the lawn when she noticed him. She sat up straight and waited for him to reach her. He was struck by her beauty. It didn't matter that other men thought she was pretty but not worth pursuing. He thought she was the loveliest creature God ever made.

When he stood in front of her, he held his hand out to her. "Will you give me one kiss?"

She appeared startled. "I kissed you at the wedding."

And it was good enough that it left him wanting more. "I know but now there's no one to watch us. It won't seem so awkward." Perhaps that wasn't true. He couldn't stop his slight trembling but was determined not to let her discover it.

"There's no point in it." Though she protested, she took his hand and stood up.

"I need to find out something before I tell you what's on my mind."

"And you can find it out by a kiss?"

He nodded. At least, he hoped he could.

"Are you going to grant the annulment?" she asked.

"I'll tell you after the kiss."

Her hand was soft and warm in his. What would her hands feel like on his body? He forced the thought aside and slipped his arms around her. Since his wedding kiss had been his first kiss, it wasn't easy to figure out how to passionately kiss her as his uncle had suggested. He felt incredibly untrained for this type of thing, but he had to start somewhere. He didn't start out with good presentations at work. He had to practice until he was good at it. He would love to practice perfecting his kissing skills on her but wondered if this was going to be his only chance.

He pushed the depressing thought aside and softly kissed her. He didn't notice any response from her. She stood still and allowed him to deepen the kiss. As he continued kissing her, he began to overcome his shyness. She brought out yearnings that he hadn't been aware of. He longed to explore them but he had asked for one kiss and it was all she was prepared to give him. She leaned into him and finally returned his passion with her own. He was relieved. He was beginning to think that she really didn't have any interest in him. The realization that his uncle was right about her gave him a new confidence he hadn't had with her before.

If she wasn't so insistent on the annulment, he would have picked her up and taken her to their bedroom. But he knew that option wasn't available so he settled for the agreement he hoped he could talk her into. He reluctantly ended the kiss, which he had been enjoying far too much, and motioned for her to sit next to him. She took a moment before she sat next to him. He noticed that she looked flushed by their kiss. Was it possible that she enjoyed it, even a little bit?

He waited until his breathing returned to normal before speaking. He was acutely aware that she sat close to him, making it hard for him to concentrate on the matter at hand, but he was determined to act as if he had perfect control over the situation.

"I have a proposal for you," he finally began.

“What are you talking about?” She didn’t hide her confusion.

“I would like to give our marriage a try.” When he saw that she was ready to protest, he quickly explained, “Give me one month. We will not consummate the marriage. You will have your own bedroom and I will make it clear to the staff and everyone else what the arrangement is between us so no one will think you are compromising your virtue. I would like a chance to court you since I didn’t get that opportunity. If one month from now, you still want the annulment, I will consent to it without any questions.”

She frowned. “It isn’t what I expected, but I suppose it’s the best thing to do given the circumstances.”

He sighed with relief.

“I suppose I should unpack my things. Can I have the Egyptian bedroom?” she asked.

He grinned. “You noticed the themes?”

“I got a good look at every room but yours on Thursday. What is your theme?”

“Modern times. It’s a typical 19th century bedroom.”

She softly chuckled. “I should have known.”

He watched her. Her smile reached her eyes and made them sparkle, and her laughter was the sound of wind chimes blowing in the breeze. He sensed that she was a lot of fun to be around once she overcame her shyness.

“I will get to the task at hand,” she stated as she stood up. “Are you coming into the house?”

“Not yet.” He wanted to stay out there for a few moments so he could replay their kiss in his mind.

She nodded and left. He watched her as she walked past him in her gown. She was so beautiful that his body responded to her. He longed to take her in his arms and act on the many thoughts that raced through his mind. She was his wife but he had to keep his distance. He loved her and ached for her. He

almost felt like a starving man who was invited to a feast but not allowed to eat anything.

One month. One month from now I'll either be the happiest man in the world or... He couldn't bring himself to end the thought. When dealing with a client, failure was not an option. And it wasn't an option with her either. It wasn't a matter of if they consummated the marriage. It was a question of when.

Justin had no experience with courting women. Since his uncle introduced him to the investment business as soon as he turned eighteen, his life had been one business meeting after another. When he wasn't dealing with clients, he was researching current investment trends, talking with other investors around the nation, or preparing and maintaining the clients' portfolios. Many times he worked at least six days a week but even on his day off, which was Sunday, he would relax by doing more research. He attended and held dinner parties after normal business hours in order to learn about the clients and establish relationships with them.

When it came to his love life, he hadn't given it much thought. He didn't have much time to think of anything but the next business meeting. He just went from one day to another and did what needed to be done with little thought to the future. Occasionally, he would be envious when he saw other men with their wives. Sometimes, late at night, he would lie in bed and contemplate his life. Though he had a relationship with God, it didn't seem to be enough. Something was missing, and all the work in the world didn't satisfy his craving for more. *There has to be more to life than business meetings and clients. Lord, what is it that will make my life have meaning?* He prayed that often, and when the news came of the engagement, he understood what it was that God was showing him all along. He needed a wife, and there was no one he wanted more than Carrie Allen.

The Cold Wife

Once again, he was in bed, staring at the ceiling and alone. Of all nights, he was alone on his wedding night. He looked at the empty spot next to him in his bed and sighed. Images of what he wanted to do to his wife played themselves over and over again in his mind. How was a man to sleep under the strain of longing for something he couldn't have? The answer was simple: he didn't. He bathed, got dressed and went to the small den off to the side of the kitchen so he could do some work. It was three o'clock and everyone was asleep.

Despite the paperwork in front of him, his thoughts kept drifting to the woman who was sleeping upstairs. His uncle said that he should romance her. What exactly did that entail? Sure, he knew of her. He knew she visited the nursing home and helped with the church functions. But who was she really? What were her interests? It suddenly occurred to him that she had a point when she said they didn't know each other. He decided that the situation would have to change. He spent the rest of the early morning hours trying to come up with ways to do just that.

After Louis announced that breakfast was ready, Justin waited for Carrie to come down the stairs so they could go to the dining room together. He wondered if he would ever get over his initial pleasure of seeing her. Her curly brown hair was pulled back with a light purple barrette that matched her dress. Though her eyes were dry, he noticed that they were slightly red and swollen from crying. He wondered why she didn't get him if she needed someone to comfort her. Then it occurred to him that she might have been crying because of him. He took a deep breath and sighed. He hoped he wasn't the cause of her sorrow. He prayed it was her father's departure that did it.

"Good morning, Carrie," he greeted her with a warm smile.

She seemed to be surprised to see him waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. "Oh. Good morning," she slowly replied.

Justin. My name is Justin. He wondered why she didn't say it.

"You didn't have to wait for me before eating breakfast," she told him as soon as she reached the bottom step.

"You're my wife. I want to eat with you."

"You don't have to pretend you care."

"I'm not pretending."

She looked around the hallway. "The kitchen is this way, correct?"

Apparently, winning her over wasn't going to be easy. "Yes. May I escort you?" He extended his arm to her.

"No, that's alright. I can walk without assistance." Icicles seemed to hang from her words.

"I was being polite."

"There's no need. We're alone."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I know the reason you wanted to marry me is so I can help you look good to your clients. Well, they aren't here so there's no need to put on a show."

"Is that why you think I married you?" He couldn't believe his ears.

"Of course. A man in your position wants a wife who can make a good impression." She walked toward the kitchen.

He quickly followed her. "That's not why I married you, Carrie. I honestly do want to be with you."

"Seriously, you don't need to keep up the charade. I agreed to one month with you. I'm sure in that time, you will discover I'm not the kind of woman who's suitable for your lifestyle."

He gently reached for her hand to stop her. It worked. She was looking at him. "If you don't believe that I want to be with you when no one is looking, then join me in my bedroom," he softly stated. "I'll show you exactly how much you mean to me."

The Cold Wife

She stiffened. “You promised you wouldn’t ruin my purity.”

The way she said it made it sound like being intimate with him would soil her. He let go of her hand. It took him a moment before he could speak. “On second thought, I think I’ll eat somewhere else.” Without looking back at her, he grabbed his hat from the hat rack by the front door and left the house.

Chapter Eight



Carrie winced as she watched Justin slam the front door. She knew she came off as cold. If she didn't know better, she would swear he was sincere and that she honestly hurt him with her words. But she did know better.

She ate breakfast alone. She hadn't eaten a meal by herself before and found that the food didn't taste as good as it did when she was with her father, brother or one of her friends. She noticed the silence and it was deafening. The clock ticking in the corner of the room seem to echo off the walls. The table was long so it only emphasized how empty the room was.

The maid walked into the room. "Do you need anything, ma'am?"

She looked up at the kind, elderly woman.

"Actually, would you eat breakfast with me?" she requested.

The maid smiled. "I'm sorry but it is forbidden for the staff to eat with the owner."

"According to whose rules?"

"Society's, ma'am."

Carrie sighed. She was right. She couldn't remember a time when she ate with a maid. She finished her meal, wondering how Justin did this every day, and left to pick up Helen Ritter from the nursing home to walk her to church. When she got to the nursing home, she was surprised to see Mary walking with the elderly woman out of her room.

Helen and Mary looked shocked to see her.

"Carrie, why aren't you with that good looking husband of yours?" Helen asked. "If he belonged to me, I wouldn't let him out of my sight, let alone the bedroom."

"I don't know where he is," Carrie responded. "He walked out of the house this morning and didn't come back."

Mary frowned. "Did you say something to upset him?"

She rolled her eyes. "Do we need to discuss this before church?"

"What did you do, Carrie?"

"Nothing."

"Mary," Helen interrupted them, "perhaps, we should delay this conversation for a later time. We are running late for church."

Mary nodded.

Carrie was relieved. She didn't feel like hearing Mary argue with her about Justin. If Mary had to marry him, she would understand, but since she didn't, then how could she possibly know what Carrie was going through?

The two young women walked with Helen down the sidewalk that led to the church.

"Carrie, it is only right that you sit with that handsome man of yours," Helen remarked.

"He is not my man," Carrie insisted. "We'll be getting an annulment in a month."

Mary had to catch Helen from tripping on a crack in the sidewalk.

Helen stopped. "That's it, child," she told Carrie. "We've got to talk. Mary, help me back to my room."

"What? I thought we were going to church," Carrie protested.

"Not today, we're not. As much as I love the Lord, this is an emergency. He'll understand that saving a marriage is worth missing a church service. We can go to church next week. I mean, of course, Mary and I will go to church. You will be going with that sweet husband of yours."

"You know what? You're right. I'll go to church and find him." She knew that Helen didn't mince words. That woman was about to let her have it and she didn't feel like hearing it.

"Nothing doing. Mary, help me drag this poor, stupid girl back to my room."

Despite Carrie's protests, Mary and Helen practically lifted her up by her arms and carried her back to the nursing home. *When Helen says she's going to drag someone back to her room, she's not kidding!* Carrie knew it was pointless to fight them so she let them plop her on the chair next to Helen's rocking chair in front of the window. Helen sat in the rocking chair and Mary pulled up another chair so she could sit next to Carrie. They had her trapped so that she couldn't escape.

"For your own good, we're going to talk some sense into you," Helen said.

"I hope you can do it, Helen, because she won't listen to me, Brad or her father," Mary replied.

Carrie sat and waited for the old woman to give her a piece of her mind.

"Where do I begin?" the woman wondered. "I know. What are you being so thick-headed about?"

Carrie sighed, already knowing the woman wouldn't understand her plight. "Justin only wanted to marry me so he can impress his clients."

The woman scoffed.

"She truly believes that, Helen," Mary added. "She ran out of the church yesterday right before the wedding. Brad and I had to lock the room to keep her from escaping."

"Did that boy tell you he was only interested in you so you can make him look good to other people?" Helen asked her.

"Well, no," Carrie slowly admitted, staring out the window so she wouldn't have to see them shaking their heads. "But in his line of work, appearances are everything. I've been told time and time again by my brother not to embarrass him in front of other people."

"No man wants the woman he loves to make a fool of him."

Here it comes. She's rushing to defend him. It only served to make her want to get an annulment even more.

"I saw the way he treated you at the reception," Helen continued. "You're important to him."

"He doesn't even know me!" Carrie yelled in aggravation. "Honestly, love doesn't develop in a matter of days."

Mary spoke up. "Brad said that he's been interested in you since he was fourteen."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, it's not. You think women are the only ones who are shy? Men can feel that way too."

Carrie crossed her arms.

"Alright," Helen consented. "Let's say that all he does want is for you to make him look good. So what? The way I see it, he makes you look good too. He's got an honorable reputation, he's rich, and he's not bad to look at either. Why, if I were in your shoes, I'd give him a wedding night he'd never forget."

"Helen!" She was appalled at the woman's blunt statement.

"I may be old but I still got my memory. I remember how fun loving was. You should go to bed with him. The poor man

was denied his wedding night. You could enjoy it too if you allow yourself to."

Carrie's cheeks grew bright red. She put her hands over her face to hide her embarrassment.

"What Helen is saying," Mary began in a gentle voice, "is that there are worse men you could marry."

"That's the truth of it," the woman agreed. "You'd be surprised at the stories I hear in this place. People assume that old folk don't know what's going on around them, but I assure you, we remember what we hear. Sometimes it's like living in a gossip's heaven. Not all men make good husbands. Now I won't tell any names, but I will tell you what you could have ended up with. There's a man in town who keeps a mistress on the side. How would you like an unfaithful spouse? Another man hits his wife on a regular basis. How would you like to live in fear? Then there's a man who constantly criticizes his wife in public. How would you like to know your husband thinks you're disgusting? And those are just a few examples of things that are going on in this town. So you can see that marrying Mr. Monroe is not the worst thing that can happen to you."

"It's really the best thing," Mary added. "Not only does he love you but he'll give you and your children a good home for the rest of your life."

"I don't appreciate being used," Carrie mumbled, though she knew they wouldn't listen to her.

"He could use me all he wanted to if that's what being used is all about."

"Great! Then you can have him."

"We've already been through this. Carrie, don't you remember when we were younger and we'd talk about getting married and having kids? We even came up with the names we wanted. Isn't that something you still want?"

Carrie didn't answer because it was true and she didn't want to admit it.

"You're determined to shut out the truth," Helen realized. "Lord, help this misguided but wonderful child understand that she's making a big mistake if she pursues this annulment."

"Lord, help this senile but kind woman understand what Mr. Monroe is really like."

Helen grinned at Carrie's sarcasm. "I'll even say amen to that if you ask the Lord to also show you what that boy is like."

"Fine." Carrie did so.

"Amen." Helen smiled. "There. That's all settled. The annulment will not happen. The Lord will open your eyes and show you what a prize you got." Helen glanced at Mary. "You never discuss anyone you're interested in. Is there anyone who catches your fancy?"

Mary shrugged. "I haven't seriously sought anyone out."

"Perhaps you would like your father to arrange something for you?" Carrie pointedly asked. "I know! We'll find someone you find boring who makes stupid analogies and fix you two up."

"You didn't exactly look bored on the dance floor," Helen commented.

Carrie ignored her. Helen was right of course, but there was no way she'd let the woman know that. Carrie didn't find Justin boring anymore. After their kiss in the gazebo, he was anything but boring, but she wasn't going to let her attraction to him blind her to the fact that they weren't meant for each other.

A knock at the door interrupted them. They turned to see Mrs. Walker enter the room. Mrs. Walker owned the nursing home and library in town. The blond in her late thirties looked relieved when she saw them. "Thank goodness you're here," she said. "Helen, when I didn't see you in church, I feared the worst."

"I'm sorry I worried you, Kate," the old woman replied. "I had a personal matter to attend to with a couple of friends." Helen looked at her pregnant belly. "You mean to tell me you haven't given birth yet?"

Kate smiled. "No, not yet. This one knows he has three big brothers to contend with."

"You think it's going to be another boy?"

"Most likely. I don't think Chad knows how to make a girl," she joked.

"Kate, you enjoy being married, don't you?"

"Of course, I do."

"And you enjoy being a mother."

"Yes." She looked at the three women in curiosity. "Were you three talking about me?"

"No," Helen assured her. "However, you showed up at a good time. Mary and I are having a hard time convincing Carrie to open her heart to Mr. Monroe. Why, just look at how happy Mrs. Walker is," she told Carrie. "This could be you in as little as nine months if you get started on it."

Carrie groaned. Just how many people was Helen going to drag into this mess?

Kate looked at Carrie. "Your husband has been making it clear to everyone in town that you might get an annulment in a month. Since your marriage was arranged, you two have decided to see if going through with it is a good idea. That wasn't his decision, was it?"

"Please, Mrs. Walker, I don't wish to discuss this with everyone." Carrie was beginning to wish she hadn't left the house that morning. Being alone at breakfast was much better than this.

"I understand." She patted Carrie's shoulder. "If it's meant to be, it'll work out. I will quickly say that Justin Monroe is an excellent catch. Get to know him very well before you dismiss him. Not all people are what they initially seem." She sighed. "Well, I will return to the church. I'm glad you're doing alright," she told Helen. "I don't like being scared like that."

"Oh, don't worry about me." Helen waved her hand. "I'm still young. I've got plenty of years left before the Lord takes me home. But it's nice you cared."

“Alright. I’ll see you later. It’s good to see you, Mary.” She nodded to the other woman before she left.

“It’s nice that he didn’t mention the fact that you wanted the annulment and he didn’t,” Mary commented. “Harrison would never have done that.”

“I’m not interested in Harrison,” Carrie replied. “He’s only interested in money.”

“That’s probably true.”

“At least you aren’t harboring feelings for the Grant boy,” Helen thoughtfully stated. “We just need to get your focus on your husband and everything will work out.”

Suddenly, Brad stormed into the room. By the angry look on his face, Carrie knew that things were going to get worse for her. “How could you do it?” he demanded, staring at her.

“Does everyone know my personal business?” Carrie shot back. “Where does a woman have to go so she can get some privacy around here?”

“You’re acting like a spoiled brat.”

“I love you too, brother,” she sarcastically replied.

He glared at her.

“Mr. Allen, I assure you that Mary and I have been working through the situation,” Helen told him. “She’s stubborn but if we pray that God shows her the light, she just might come around.”

“There’s no talking to her. She won’t listen to any of the logic anyone’s presented to her.” Brad threw his hands up in the air. Turning to his sister, he said, “I’m ready to pick you up and take you back to your new home where I’ll tie you down to the chair so you can’t go anywhere.”

“Leave me alone!” she yelled. She had enough of people bullying her. She would show them all if it was the last thing she did. She would make sure the annulment was going to happen whether they liked it or not!

He shook his head in disbelief. "I love you, Carrie, but the way you're treating Justin is wrong. You're going to regret it someday if you persist in the road you've chosen." He took a deep breath to calm down. "Forgive me, Helen. Forgive me, Mary. Carrie, I will speak with you again once I've had time to settle down." He stomped out of the room.

"That's it," Carrie said as she stood up. "I'm going back to Mr. Monroe's house before someone else tracks me down."

"Good," Helen responded. "His bed will be a good hiding place."

She shot the old woman a dirty look before she left the room. She could deal with all the disgruntled people later. For now, she needed to hide from the torrent of animosity directed at her.

Chapter Nine



She didn't see Justin when she came home. He stayed out of sight. If he was in the house, she didn't know where he was. She was relieved. He was the last person she felt like talking to after all the grief she got earlier that day because of him. That afternoon, Mrs. Edwards and Mrs. Tobias stopped by to visit her. She led them to the parlor with the two couches and three chairs. It was more comfortable than the parlor with the large oval table. She sat on the light blue couch that was on the opposite side of the two white chairs.

"It's good to see you," Carrie greeted. The two older women were leaders of the Women's Christian Group at the church and since Carrie often attended their meetings and volunteered to help out at their functions, she thought of them as friends.

"We were wondering if you are feeling alright," Mrs. Edwards said. "We missed you at church today."

"Oh, that." She shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "I got detained. Mrs. Ritter and Miss Duff wished to speak with me about a personal matter that couldn't wait."

"Is someone sick?" Mrs. Tobias asked, immediately concerned.

"No. Everything is fine." She didn't wish to go into the conversation with her two friends. She hoped that the women sitting across from her wouldn't ask her anything else about it. To her relief, they didn't.

"Well, we wanted to ask you if you're up to cooking three dozen chocolate chip cookies. Tom and Ian just got adopted and we're going to throw a party to celebrate. We plan to go by the orphanage tomorrow but we don't cook as well as you do."

"They finally found someone to adopt the two brothers so they can stay together?" Carrie was happy to hear this.

"Mr. and Mrs. Evans," Mrs. Tobias replied. "The doctor confirmed that they won't be able to have any children, and after much prayer and consideration, they decided to adopt the two boys."

Mrs. Edwards added, "We think everyone will get along wonderfully once the initial period of getting to know each other is worked through. That process can be awkward for both the children and adults."

"We can't expect people thrown into a new situation with someone they hardly know to embrace it right away," Mrs. Tobias agreed. "If the people are willing to open their hearts to the other person, things usually work out. We have yet to see a case where the people feel the need to depart from each other."

Carrie suddenly wondered if they were talking about her and Justin. She cleared her throat and decided to ignore the hint. Instead, she said, "When do the cookies have to be ready?"

They looked startled by the question.

"I will make the cookies," Carrie clarified. So they hadn't really come over to ask her about cookies. They were trying to talk her into staying married. She didn't know that so many people were devoted to Mr. Monroe.

Mrs. Edwards quickly nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Carrie. We had feared that you would be too busy to help...but you're not, right?" She studied Carrie with intense interest.

"Right," Carrie responded, pretending she didn't notice their shock. "I have absolutely nothing to do. I spent most of this day by myself. In fact, I've seen very little of Mr. Monroe since the reception. He's always running off somewhere. I even had to eat breakfast and lunch by myself. Apparently, there's nothing to this whole marriage thing. It's a wonder that wives don't die of boredom." She stood up. "I do want to get started on those cookies. I do enjoy making them. I'm pleased you thought of me for this task."

They looked too stunned to speak as they stood up.

"What time should I deliver them to the orphanage?" Carrie asked.

Mrs. Tobias finally answered. "Tomorrow morning at eight," she stammered.

"Good! I'll deliver them since I'll have the whole morning to myself." Carrie showed them out the front door. "Thank you for coming by and telling me the great news!"

They nodded, said good-bye and left.

Carrie shut the door in satisfaction. She was tired of people feeling sorry for Justin. She figured that should take care of people sticking up for him since they would now be aware that he left his bride all to herself on the day after their wedding.

She changed into her cooking clothes before she went to the kitchen and examined the items in the cabinet.

"Mrs. Monroe, are you hungry?" Jim, the new chef, asked her. "I could make you a snack to tide you over until dinner."

She smiled at the twenty-four-year-old chef. "I'm fine. I came in here to cook. Mrs. Edwards and Mrs. Tobias just asked me to make three dozen chocolate chip cookies for tomorrow. Tom and Ian Conner just got adopted."

“That’s good news.” He smiled. “It certainly is a reason to celebrate. I haven’t made those kinds of cookies before. Do you mind if I help you so I can gain the experience?”

She returned his smile. “Some help would be greatly appreciated. I usually do these all by myself and get bored with no one to talk to.”

“Well, Louis is on a break until it’s near dinner time. Constance will most likely pop in here and there. She keeps busy.”

“I’ve noticed that.” She opened another cabinet. “I have to admit that there’s a lot of food in this kitchen.”

“Mr. Monroe entertains a lot. It’s actually good practice for me.”

She took out the container of flour, sugar and other ingredients they would need to make the cookies.

He wrote down what she was doing. “I have a horrible memory. I have to write everything down or I’ll forget it.”

“Do you use index cards to write the recipes down?”

He glanced at her. “No. Louis says that a good chef should be familiar enough with all of his recipes to do it by memory.”

She set the ingredients at the large rectangular counter in the middle of the kitchen. “Well, I wouldn’t make a good chef then.” She pulled out an index card from her apron and set it on the counter. “I have to refer to this or I’ll mess the recipe up.”

“Does that really work for you?”

She nodded. “If you pinned the card to the inside of the hat or inside your apron, you can sneak a peek in from time to time to make sure you’re getting things right, and Louis won’t catch on.”

He tapped his pencil on the counter. “Do you think that would work?”

“It did for me when I took cooking class.”

He grinned. "Why, Mrs. Monroe, you have a sneaky streak in you."

She chuckled. "After I nearly gave everyone in my class food poisoning, it was more for their own survival than trying to look like I knew what I was doing."

"How do you do now when you make things?"

"I actually manage to make some good meals. But I always have a card on hand."

"Maybe there's hope for me yet."

She showed him which ingredients to mix and in what order to mix them. "I tasted some of your food. You do very well when you know what to do."

"You are very kind to say that. Louis doesn't think so well of me."

"Well, we can't be perfect at something when we start out. You're new to this. Louis has been at it for a long time. How old is he? Sixty-five?"

"He's only fifty."

She looked at him to see if he was kidding but his serious expression assured her that he wasn't. "Really? Wow. He looks a lot older than he really is." She set out two cookie trays and they started rolling the dough into small balls. "Do you like cooking or is this the only job you could find?"

"I love cooking. Before this job, I worked at a factory. I didn't enjoy that at all. I'm fortunate that your husband hired me. No one else was willing to give me a chance. Most people don't want to hire a personal chef who has no experience, and the restaurants would have started me off as a dishwasher. This way, I not only get experience but I get paid well enough to save up for my own restaurant someday."

She stopped rolling her cookie ball and looked at him. "What do you plan to call your restaurant?"

He shrugged. "I hadn't thought of a name."

“Do you plan to make certain types of foods? Luigi’s is an Italian restaurant.”

“I’ve been thinking of making pizzas.”

“I don’t often eat those but enjoy them.”

“The reason I like pizzas is because it’s hard to mess them up. You can also put a wide variety of food on it.”

“Do you ever make pizza for Mr. Monroe?”

“No. Louis considers pizza to be beneath Mr. Monroe’s economic status.”

“Well, maybe we can work around that. I am Mr. Monroe’s wife. I should have some say in the meals made here.” She paused. She hadn’t meant to associate herself as Justin’s wife. The way she casually said it was unnerving. She forced aside the observation while she placed the balls of cookie dough on her cookie sheet.

Jim followed her actions.

They put the trays in the two ovens. Jim set the timer and put it on the counter.

“I have to admit that time does go faster when I have someone to talk to,” she stated.

“I don’t feel nearly as nervous cooking with you as I do with Louis. I always feel like such a klutz around him. Do you want something to drink?”

She nodded.

He handed her a cup of punch. “It’s something I made up. I wrote down what I did and hid it in my apartment so Louis won’t find out that I cheated.”

She took a sip and was surprised at how good it tasted. “You have a real talent for this kind of thing. Do you have new recipe ideas for pizzas too?”

“A couple.” He explained some of his creations.

“We’ll have to think of a way to get you to make one sometime. I’d be interested to know what one of those pizzas

taste like. If I can base my assumption on this punch, then I know I'm in for a treat."

"Mrs. Monroe, you do have a way with making people feel better about themselves. Mr. Monroe was right about you. You've got a good heart."

"Apparently, everyone thinks the world of him," she noted.

"I know the staff and I do. He's a generous and merciful man."

To her relief, the timer went off. They pulled their trays out of their ovens. She winked at him. "It looks like we're going to pull this off on the first try."

"It's easy cooking with you. I haven't knocked anything over."

"If you get nervous around Louis, maybe you should picture him wearing a funny outfit. Sometimes, when I feel anxiety, I try to think of something humorous. It relaxes me."

"I'll try that."

They returned to the rest of the cookie dough and continued to make more cookies.

Chapter Ten



As much as Justin tried to break out of his foul mood, he couldn't do it. The fact that his wife didn't care for him at all was depressing, and the fact that she was so repulsed by the thought of making love to him was infuriating. He really thought she had enjoyed the kiss they shared in the gazebo. *Perhaps I misunderstood her reaction to it.*

After he left the church service, which he noticed she didn't bother going to because he was there, he went to his office at work. Since he had a key to the building, he was able to go in. He hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch, and it was quickly coming up to the dinner hour. He didn't care. He had lost his appetite at her cold words to him that morning. He wondered if he would ever have the appetite to eat again.

He spent his time buried in his work and was finally able to lose track of the time...and the beating of his breaking heart. He accomplished more than he thought he would. He was surprised that misery could encourage such productivity. He figured he was well ahead of schedule, but what would he do with his free time? He glanced at the picture of his parents which sat

on his desk. He had hoped to put Carrie's picture next to it. He put his head on the desk. Why couldn't he forget her?

"If this is your idea of romance, you have a lot to learn."

He recognized his uncle's voice. He didn't bother to lift his head. He heard his uncle pull up a seat across from him and sit down.

"What did she say that sent you running to work on a Sunday?" Jonathan wondered. "I saw you moping in church and whining to everyone who'd listen that your marriage is doomed for an annulment in a month, though you did a good job of hiding the fact that it was her decision."

"It wasn't that bad. I maintained myself with the usual calm and cool expression that you taught me to use when facing difficult clients."

"Apparently, you're thinking of a different Justin because the one I saw had his heart on his sleeve."

"Only because you notice details."

"That must be it." His uncle was silent for a few moments. Finally, he continued, "There's nothing wrong with loving a woman, but if you hope to keep the woman you love, you'll have to put forth the effort. You can't hide out here and expect things to fall into place. Sometimes you have to pray to God and say amen with a hoe."

Justin was familiar with the expression since his uncle used it often enough. It meant that once he prayed for something, he had to do the work to make it happen. "I don't feel up to it."

"You mean to tell me that in the course of one day, she's defeated you?"

"Yes."

"Alright."

His uncle's response surprised him. He lifted his head off the desk so he could look at him.

The older man handed him some papers. "I figured you would give up easily, so I took the time to pick up the annulment

paperwork on my way over here.” He showed him the contents of the papers before he folded them and put them in Justin’s hands. “All you have to do is get her signature and you’re good to go. I must admit, I’m relieved.”

“Why?” Justin asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? You’re a free man. Now you won’t have to share your life with a woman. You know how women can be. They like to talk about thoughts and feelings. They want to take your time and attention away from your work so you can focus on them. As soon as they get married, they start thinking of how to decorate the house and when to have children. As soon as they’re pregnant, they want you to help them pick out names and buy baby furniture and clothes. It’s all such a nuisance. You will be very relieved you chose the bachelor lifestyle like I did. That’s right. You’re much better off.” His uncle went to the window and looked at the passing horse-drawn buggies and stagecoaches going down the street.

Justin stared at the papers in his hands.

His uncle kept talking. “Of course, it can get lonely, but there’s nothing like more work to take care of that. When you go on vacation, you can take some books to read or just sit in silence and wait until the time you can return to work again. You can do all kinds of fun activities by yourself. Everyone knows seeing a play and eating out is better without companionship. You don’t need a woman to spoil your fun. So what if women are beautiful and soft to touch? Sure, they fit into a dress very well but you have no need to look at an attractive body when you can look at investment reports instead. After a long day at work, it’s much nicer to sit alone in the parlor than it is to lay in bed with a woman in your arms. I haven’t had sex myself but have heard that it is one of life’s most pleasurable experiences, but there’s pleasure to be had in knowing you brought another client to the company. Surely, the love of a good woman can’t be better than hard work.”

The Cold Wife

Justin threw the papers on the desk, his jaw clenched. His uncle glanced back at him and smiled in amusement as he stormed out of his office. Justin threw his hat on his head and left the building. When he came home, Geoffrey informed him that Carrie was making cookies in the kitchen with Jim and Constance. He handed the butler his hat and went directly to the kitchen. Carrie and Constance were laughing at something Jim said. They turned to him, startled to see him.

He didn't say anything. He grabbed Carrie's hand and led her to the parlor. He knew she was too shocked to even contemplate fighting him. He closed the door so they could have some privacy before he turned his attention back to her.

"What do you think you're doing?" Carrie demanded as her shock wore off.

He couldn't tell if she was angry or simply overwhelmed. He didn't care. He stomped over to her, took her in his arms and kissed her. He kissed her until her ice melted enough for her to return his kiss. She ran her fingers through his hair and pulled him closer to her. When their kiss ended, he nodded in satisfaction. She had responded to him yesterday. He hadn't imagined it.

"You want me," he told her.

She blinked. "You took me by surprise," she weakly protested.

He grinned. "You just keep telling yourself that. I'll melt your icicles before the month is up. We won't be getting that annulment."

Her face grew bright red. "We'll see about that!"

He didn't give into her desire for a fight. Instead, he said, "You can protest all you want, but there's no denying your attraction for me. Now I have to go wash my hair. You got cookie dough in it."

She looked flustered as he left the room.

When she came down the steps the next morning, he waited for her again. This time she wore a light green dress.

“Good morning, Carrie,” he greeted.

“Uh...good morning.”

Justin. *My name is Justin.* Once again she didn’t say it, but he wouldn’t let that little fact distract him today. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he honestly stated.

She paused on one of the steps.

“Is something wrong?” he wondered.

“You don’t need to compliment me.”

“I know I don’t need to. I want to.”

By the look on her face, she obviously didn’t believe him.

“You’ll believe me in time,” he remarked. “Now come on down the rest of the steps so I can escort you to the dining room.”

She sighed but walked down the rest of the steps.

Again, he extended his arm to her. When she didn’t accept it, he gently took her hand and slid it around his elbow. “That didn’t hurt, did it?”

“You are taking this marriage thing too far.”

“If that was the case, we wouldn’t be virgins this morning.”

She rolled her eyes, but at least she didn’t make a snide comment about how sleeping with him would ruin her purity, so that was a good sign.

He led her to the dining room and pulled out her chair for her. “I asked Jim to make one of his own recipes this morning since he mentioned you seemed interested in his pizzas. I let Louis have the morning off.”

“How did you know I expressed an interest in Jim’s cooking?” She sat down.

He sat next to her. "I have plenty of chances to talk to people in my house."

"And you had Jim take charge of breakfast because I had an interest in tasting his cooking?"

"Of course. Is that a surprise?"

"Well, I'm not exactly surprised. I am pleased that you took note of something I wanted."

That was the first time she seemed to be happy with him. He smiled. "What you want is important to me." He thanked Constance who set their meals in front of them.

"What kind of pizza is this?" Carrie wondered.

"It's a bacon, ham and egg pizza," Jim answered as he came out of the kitchen. "It's a daring recipe. I don't believe anyone in town has attempted it, but I'll let you two be the judge of it."

They tasted it.

"This is good," Justin admitted. "It won't be long before you have your own restaurant. If your other pizzas are like this, you'll be able to keep a good supply of customers coming your way."

"Justin's right. You've found your calling," Carrie agreed.

Jim beamed from their words.

"Are you going to let the other staff try it?" Constance asked. "I want to know what all the fuss is about."

"I have more in the kitchen. Come on in." Jim waved her in.

Justin turned to Carrie and smiled. "You certainly have won my staff over." He paused. "I meant, our staff."

She didn't respond.

"So, what are you doing today?" he inquired.

"Well, I'm going to take the three dozen cookies Jim and Constance helped me make yesterday and take them to the orphanage. Did you hear that Tom and Ian Conner got adopted?"

"Yes. Mr. and Mrs. Evans are excited to have them for their sons. They're good people. I imagine that Tom and Ian will be happy with them as parents, though it won't be the same as when they had their father raising them. But it will be just as good in a different way."

"I don't really know Mr. and Mrs. Evans but I knew Tom and Ian's father. He was a nice man. He and my father were good friends."

"You must miss your father."

"Yes, I do. I wish he had taken me with him. I wouldn't have been in his way."

"That's not why he insisted on this marriage. You were never in his way. He loved having you nearby."

"Then he should have let me go with him."

"Would that really have made you happy?"

She shook her head at his question. "I can't believe you asked me such a thing. Of course, it would have made me happy."

"Don't you have a desire for a husband and children? I know the day came when I needed to be more than my uncle's nephew. I assume that you longed for something more than to be your father's daughter."

She sighed. "I know what you're trying to do and it won't work."

"What am I trying to do?"

"You're trying to convince me that I want to be married to you. Just because you kiss me and have Jim make breakfast, it doesn't mean that I'm willing to be with you to impress your clients."

"Are you still harping on that silly notion?"

"It's not a silly notion. I suppose the fact that I'm going to the orphanage today and baked cookies are things that make me charming."

The Cold Wife

“Yes, they are. I won’t lie. You do a lot of good for others without expecting anything in return.”

She gave him a ‘I knew it’ look.

He leaned forward. “I also know you have a tempting body and can kiss me to the point where I forget about everything but how much I want to make love to you.”

Her eyes grew wide and her cheeks flushed. “Really, Mr. Monroe. We are in the dining room.”

“So?”

She looked disturbed by his response. “Such conversation isn’t appropriate here.”

“Why not? If I let the staff off for a night, we could have fun on the table.” He gave her a suggestive smile.

Whether she was embarrassed or horrified at the thought, he couldn’t tell. But he knew he rattled her cage, and that alone was worth saying it. She quickly finished the rest of her pizza and drank the milk. “I’m late. I promised Mrs. Edwards and Mrs. Tobias I would be there a little before eight.”

Though he wasn’t done eating, he put his napkin on his plate and followed her to the front door. “I like the way you walk,” he told her. “Your hips sway gently from side to side.”

She gasped and spun around so she walked backwards.

“Of course, your breasts fill the top part of that dress nicely too,” he continued.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t appreciate feeling naked in my own home.”

“Ah ha!”

“‘Ah ha!’ what?”

“You just admitted that this is your house.”

Her face flushed and she backed up until she was against the wall.

He chuckled. “You really need to watch where you’re going. The staff will laugh at you if insist on bumping into things.”

She quickly ran to get her hat from the hat rack.

He reached up and took her hand before she could get her hat. Before she could protest, he kissed it.

"I am going to be late," she protested, though she didn't move away from him.

"No, you won't be late." He pulled her closer to him and kissed her cheek. "Franklin will take you wherever you need to go. And if you're so inclined to do any shopping while you're out, you'll find some spending money in your purse." He kissed her neck. Though she sighed in aggravation, he noted that her hands rested on his arms. He pulled away from her and gave her the hat and purse. Then his smile widened. "Didn't you forget your cookies?"

"Oh! The cookies!" She ran past him.

He watched in amusement as she raced to the kitchen. When she returned with the boxes of cookies, he opened the door for her.

"Where is Geoffrey?" she wondered.

"He's trying some of Jim's breakfast pizza. Here, let me carry those boxes for you."

"Oh, I get it. Now that we're out in public, you want to look devoted to me. I noticed you didn't get these for me. I had to get them myself." She refused to let him take any of the boxes.

He wouldn't let her words annoy him. "I let you get the cookies because parts of you jiggle when you run. It was nice to watch."

She glared at him before walking up to Franklin's stagecoach. "Is this what you plan to do for the next four weeks?"

"No. I fully intend to consummate the marriage. Ideally, it won't take the whole month to happen. But that's up to you."

"Then it will never happen."

The Cold Wife

“We’ll see.” He waited for her to get into the stagecoach before he tipped his hat to her. “Have a good day, Mrs. Justin Monroe.”

She grunted her reply.

He waved to her as Franklin drove her to the orphanage.

Chapter Eleven



When Justin arrived at work, his uncle looked upset. Jonathan motioned for him to come into his office. After he put his hat up, he joined his uncle and sat in the chair in front of his desk while the older man closed the door.

“What’s wrong?” Justin asked as his uncle sat in his chair.

“I just got word that Hugh Rivers’ accounting firm went bankrupt, and the funny thing is that the Grants just opened an accounting division in their company. So they are not only doing investments and loans, they are also doing accounting.”

“This is more than a coincidence.”

“It’s obvious to anyone what is going on but people are turning a blind eye to it. I originally thought we were dealing with rattlesnakes, but I was wrong. We are dealing with boa constrictors. They don’t kill automatically. They squeeze the money out of the businesses they are trying to run out of town. Their ultimate goal is to be a monopoly. Just how many businesses they plan to take over is anyone’s guess, but it’s apparent, we are on that list.” His uncle tapped the table with his fingers. “That’s why they went after Mr. Allen. Accounting and

tax preparation go hand in hand. Mr. Allen was the best tax preparer in this town and they knew it. It's too bad we can't prove they sabotaged his and Mr. Rivers' businesses."

"We know for sure what happened with Mr. Allen, but are you sure they are responsible for Mr. Rivers' bankruptcy?"

"No but I have a strong suspicion."

"So what is our game plan?"

"The Grants will be going to the Bi-Monthly Businessmen's Convention at the Edward's Hotel."

"We go there as well."

"Which won't make them suspicious when we show up. I need you to follow good old Jr. for me while I follow his father. We need to keep a safe distance but stay close enough to overhear parts of their conversations with the other men there to see if we can figure out who they're going to target on their way to obtaining their monopoly. If we can gather enough support from the other businesses that are in danger, we might succeed in exposing them for who they really are."

"That sounds easy enough. Is there anything else?"

"We have that meeting in fifteen minutes with Conrad Leroy at his bank. Then we'll take an early lunch so we can be at the convention. I don't want to worry about eating there this time."

Justin nodded and followed his uncle out of his office so they could go to the bank. Conrad wanted to offer his customers a place to invest money, and he was considering contracting that service out to the Monroes or Grants.

By the time they reached the convention, the Grants were already there.

"Time to get to work," Jonathan whispered before they separated and went to their respective Harrison.

Justin kept a comfortable distance from Harrison Jr. who was talking to Jefferson Maxwell, one of the wealthiest men in

town. Mr. Maxwell was also a prominent client at the Monroe Investing Firm.

"I heard that telephones are becoming more prominent," Harrison Jr. told Mr. Maxwell.

"Yes, I think they will become popular enough so that every household will have one by the end of the next century," Mr. Maxwell agreed.

Justin pretended to be interested in a pamphlet that was on the table in front of him. He was focused on the conversation so he didn't even know what the pamphlet was about.

Mr. Maxwell stood at the table next to him, and Harrison was smiling as he talked to the older man.

"My company offers an investment in a telephone utility stock that you might be interested in," Harrison stated.

"Mr. Monroe offers that type of stock as well," Mr. Maxwell replied. "I've had good returns on my investments with him."

"Perhaps you would be interested in combining the utilities. Telephones aren't the only utility available. There is also water and electricity. These are other conveniences that are quickly becoming more popular as more people use them. I offer a good percentage on your returns if you invest in the entire package."

"Mr. Monroe offers a similar package."

Harrison didn't look too happy, though his smile never wavered. "I'm sure he offers you a fine deal, and I hope your investments continue to make you lots of money. However, if you ever find an interest in checking out other options, I would like for you to take my business card and this pamphlet that will show you what I offer at Grant Financial Services. My father and I recently added accounting to the list of services we provide our clients. I think it's more convenient to take care of several services at the same place instead of having to run all over town."

"I'll think about it."

"Thank you for your time." Harrison shook his hand and walked across the room.

"Will you be taking a vacation to Maine?" the man in front of Justin asked. His name tag read 'Harvey.'

Justin looked up at the eighteen year old travel agent. "I haven't been there before," he slowly replied. He took a good look at the pamphlet in front of him. The blue paper highlighted the attractions in Maine.

"Maine is a beautiful state," Harvey eagerly nodded. "It's worth checking out at least once in your life, especially in the fall when the leaves change color. If you'd like, I could arrange for your transportation and lodging. If you pay for both, I can save you 10% off the total price."

Justin had no inclination to go to Maine so he politely declined.

"Well, you can keep the pamphlet in case you change your mind," Harvey offered.

Justin thanked him and casually walked around some tables before he came to another table that was next the one Mr. Walker was checking out. Mr. Walker owned the other accounting firm in town. Since Hugh Rivers' accounting firm went out of business, Mr. Walker was the Grants' remaining competitor in the accounting business.

Harrison Jr. was talking to Mr. Walker who was looking through a brochure for office furniture. "My father and I would be interested in merging our accounting firms together," Harrison said.

Mr. Walker finally closed the brochure, crossed his arms and looked Harrison in the eye. "Yes. I heard that Hugh Rivers went bankrupt. You wouldn't happen to know how that happened, would you?"

Harrison shrugged. "I suppose he didn't manage his money very well."

“Or someone manipulated the situation to make it look that way.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“I have more important things to do than to play cat and mouse with you. I know you have every intention of making me go out of business just like Mr. Rivers and Mr. Allen did. Your game won’t work with me. I am keeping a careful eye on all my transactions and records. I have a backup copy of everything, so you better not think you’ll be sabotaging my work. I don’t mind competition that’s honest but your father has a reputation, and looking at you, it appears he’s handing down that unethical reputation to the next generation.”

“You’re wrong about us. We are honorable men doing our jobs.”

Mr. Walker laughed. “You have no idea what I’ve gone through in my past. I can figure out the truth behind your smooth words. I’ve dealt with people like you before.”

“Then it seems you are opposed to a merger.”

“At least you said one thing that’s honest in our conversation today.” Mr. Walker walked away from Harrison who looked angry.

Harrison glanced over at Justin who pretended to be interested in office supplies. He went over to him. “Mr. Monroe, this is the second time you’ve been near me today,” he commented. “Are you eavesdropping on me?”

Justin shrugged. “Can I help it if you happen to be at the same place I’m at?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re following me.”

“I’m gathering information.”

“You’re spying.”

“I know what you and your father did to Mr. Allen. You arranged it so he had to go bankrupt. The only question is how did you get into his office?”

“You’re wrong. Mr. Allen went bankrupt on his own.”

Justin considered the fact that Harrison looked like he actually believed that. "You're a good liar."

"I'm not lying."

"And I'm not stupid."

"Alright. Then prove it. Show me that we forced Mr. Allen out of business."

"That's just it, isn't it? Proof. You managed to avoid detection so far, but if you keep up this behavior, sooner or later you'll get caught. You can't hide behind your charm forever. Mr. Walker has you figured out. I am assuming a couple of others are beginning to catch onto what's going on as well."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but it's obvious that you're paranoid. No one is running around trying to bankrupt other people's businesses. If Mr. Rivers and Mr. Allen weren't incompetent, they'd still be in business today."

"Supposing for a moment you're telling me the truth, which I seriously doubt, then you're not aware of what your father is doing."

Harrison's frown deepened. "I won't have you talking about my father as if he were a criminal. You are utterly pathetic. Now go find someone else to harass." Harrison shook his head and left.

Justin took a deep breath to settle his nerves. He wasn't sure what to make of Harrison, but he didn't care for him.

Nathan walked up to him. "Have an unpleasant conversation with Junior?"

Justin felt the tension in his shoulders relax. "Junior is a remarkable liar."

"His father reminds me of nails scraping across a chalkboard."

"I know I can't let him get to me if I am to keep my focus. I just can't get it out of my mind that he's laughing at me, and his laughter has nothing to do with business or money. It's personal."

"Whatever it is, you can't let him get to you."

“How do I do that?”

“I don’t know. But I suspect Mr. Mitchell over at that table can train you on that.” He motioned to the thirty-year-old man with dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He sat at the bank table. “His first name is Jake. His ex-fiancée recently moved back to town after her divorce with Devon Hammond. She’s living with her parents again. Anyway, she went by the bank and he had to do the paperwork to set up her account. He remained cool the entire time. You couldn’t tell that she broke his heart.”

“I heard about her wanting to only marry him for his money.”

Nathan grinned. “That’s why some of us call her ‘Johanna the leech Clark.’ Of course, she officially goes by Johanna Hammond these days.” He shrugged. “At least, he found out before it was too late. Anyway, he just got promoted from Mortgage Manager to Vice President.”

Justin frowned. “Aren’t you the vice president?”

“I was. As of tomorrow, he’ll be the vice president. Today, I’m training him. This place is a good place to find out what services that businessmen are interested in.”

“Why did you quit?”

“Because my boss’ son, George Leroy, just got a job at the bank.”

Justin didn’t answer. He understood that Nathan wouldn’t be able to face George day after day, knowing that George was sleeping with Linda. “Where will you work now?”

“I’m leaving town.”

He didn’t hide his shock.

Nathan sighed. “I need a fresh start. I’ll be heading out to Rhode Island. I already got a job there at another bank.”

“When do you leave?”

“This Saturday.”

“Would you like to come to my house for a farewell dinner party with a few close friends?”

“No. You need to spend time with your wife. You know, the divorce wasn’t completely Linda’s fault. I know she’s the one who committed adultery, but there were a lot of times when I put business before her. She spent a lot of time feeling lonely. George just happened to show up and give her someone to be with. If you love Carrie, then the best thing you can do is put her first. Business can always wait. No amount of money can take the place of someone important in your life.” He turned back to the Leroy Bank table. “Come on. I’ll introduce you to Jake.”

Jake stood by the table and talked with Harrison Sr. Justin’s eyes scanned the nearby tables and he saw his uncle within earshot of the elder Grant. To Justin, his uncle didn’t even seem to be listening in on the conversation since he was talking with someone else, but he knew that his uncle was able to hear everything that was being said between Jake and Harrison Sr. *How does Uncle Jonathan do it?*

Justin followed Nathan to the table.

“I certainly am interested in getting to speak with Mr. Leroy.” Harrison shook Jake’s hand. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Jake replied.

Justin noticed his uncle say good-bye to the person he spoke with so he could follow the elder Grant.

“Jake, this is Justin Monroe,” Nathan introduced. “Justin is Jonathan Monroe’s nephew. I already explained that you’ll be taking over as vice president at the Leroy Bank.”

Justin shook Jake’s hand. “Good afternoon.”

Jake smiled in return. “Good afternoon. I heard you and your uncle stopped by to talk to Mr. Leroy this morning. If he decides to contract out to your uncle’s investment firm, then I’ll be working with you on a regular basis.”

"I see that the Grants are competing for the same privilege," Nathan noted.

"Yes. They will meet with Mr. Leroy tomorrow. He doesn't like to make any decisions right away, so he'll most likely take a couple of days before making a decision."

"You should be careful when it comes to the Grants. They aren't who they seem."

"That can be said of many people."

Justin sensed he was talking about the ex-fiancée that Nathan had mentioned.

"The decision isn't mine to make," Jake continued. "It's Conrad's bank, so it'll be his choice. Fortunately, he shows good business sense."

"There are some men who are wary of the Grants."

"They should be."

Nathan turned to Justin. "I suspect that Harrison Grant desires to take over the bank and establish his own."

"My uncle has similar suspicions," Justin replied. "The Grants seem to be bankrupting their competitors, so he wonders if they're slowly building a monopoly in this town."

"I disagree," Jake argued. "He's not moving that slow. He's moving swiftly. But you know what the book of Proverbs says: when money is obtained quickly, it's quickly lost."

"Quite a bit of damage can occur between those two events," Nathan remarked.

"True." Jake glanced at Justin. "Let's just hope we're not among the damages."

Justin suddenly wondered how serious the Grant threat was to him and his uncle. His eyes scanned the room until he saw the younger Harrison who was talking and laughing with Mr. Lowe and Mr. Osmund. He had a funny feeling that he would be seeing a lot more of the questionable man in the future.

Chapter Twelve



Carrie couldn't get Justin out of her mind. She desperately tried to forget him but he haunted her thoughts. When she looked at the cookies that the orphans were eating, she recalled his comments regarding her figure. When she saw Mr. and Mrs. Evans talk to Tom and Ian, she recalled how he asked her if any part of her wanted a husband and children. The truth was that she did, but she wanted to be the one who chose her husband. She didn't want someone else to make that decision for her. What was wrong about wanting to make her own choices? Then she saw a male brunette who walked by the orphanage in a dark blue suit that looked like Justin from behind. For a moment, she wondered if he came by to see her, but when the man looked over his shoulder, it wasn't Justin after all. And she was shocked by her disappointment. She shook her head. She would not give that man, who insisted on being her husband, another thought. Unfortunately, others were not willing to let her forget him.

When she sat by Mary and Helen, Mary asked her how things were going with Justin.

"They are bearable," she reluctantly admitted.

“Bearable?” Helen examined her from across the table. “Your face got redder than a tomato when she said his name.”

“It’s hot. I’m burning up. You know how the August air affects me.”

Helen grinned. “I agree you’re burning up, but it’s not from the temperature.”

Carrie rolled her eyes and ignored the woman. She hopped out of her chair and helped a little girl wash her hands.

Things were a lot easier when she had it in her mind that he was boring and she dreaded the very thought of being near him. She didn’t want to recall how much she enjoyed his kisses or the way he touched her. Then he opted to have Jim make one of his pizzas because he heard that she was interested in trying the chef’s recipes, and to top it all off, he gave her spending money. The fact that he was taking note of her wishes and looking for ways to please her greatly annoyed her. How was she supposed to keep her focus on getting out of the marriage if he insisted on treating her so well?

When she returned to the table, Mrs. Edwards walked over to them. “I want to thank you for making the cookies,” she told Carrie. “You had a wonderful idea to add nuts to them. Chocolate chip nut cookies. Who would have thought of it?”

“Oh, I can’t take credit for that,” Carrie replied. “It was Jim’s idea. He recommended it while we were mixing the second batch of cookie dough.”

“Who’s Jim?” Helen asked.

“He’s one of Justin’s chefs. He just started working there, and he wants to open a pizza restaurant someday. He’s actually very good. I had a breakfast pizza this morning,” she answered.

“What is in a breakfast pizza?” Mrs. Edwards wondered.

“Eggs, bacon, and ham. It actually tasted good.”

“How intriguing. Will he make any of his pizzas at one of Mr. Monroe’s dinner parties?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Louis is the head chef.”

"Tell Jim that his idea was a big hit."

"He'll be pleased you said that."

Mrs. Edwards nodded and left.

"Wasn't Jim the chef would messed up the pies at your engagement party?" Mary wondered.

"Yes but he was nervous with Louis watching everything he was doing. When Louis isn't around, he doesn't goof up like he did last Thursday," Carrie said. "He's actually a fun person to be around."

"Where does Mr. Monroe fit into that?" Mary looked concerned.

"I know what you're asking. No, I do not have a romantic interest in Jim."

A thought flashed through Carrie's mind. Jim was a good man who would make a good husband. She studied her friend who was adjusting the lace on her sleeve. Mary would probably get along wonderfully with Jim.

"Mary," Carrie slowly began, "when are the costumes for the play going to be ready?"

Mary looked startled by the question. Even Helen raised an eyebrow.

"I want to see what you'll be wearing," Carrie quickly explained. It was a little white lie but she had a plan and didn't want Mary's or Jim's financial status to interfere with it.

"I think they'll be ready on Thursday," her friend said.

"Good! Can you come to my house this Thursday around two in the afternoon with one of those dresses on? I might be able to make the necessary alterations there." She knew that Jim planned to try another new recipe at two on that day, so he would be in the kitchen.

Carrie could do light alterations, but she couldn't sew a dress. Mary enjoyed acting in the theater. There wasn't a lot of money to be made in being an actress in the town theater, but she

had fun with it and her father had more than enough money so she didn't have to depend on her acting job to support herself.

Mrs. Elan, who owned the orphanage, walked over to their table. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Ritter, Miss Duff, and Mrs. Monroe."

Carrie still felt strange whenever people referred to her as Mrs. Monroe. She didn't exactly hate being called that. She just wasn't used to it. There was that initial moment when she thought the person was talking to someone else.

"Who is that sweet angel?" Helen asked, nodding to the sleeping boy in Mrs. Elan's arms. "I don't recall seeing him before."

"All I know about him is that his name is Ryan and he's one. Someone knocked on the door of the orphanage and left him on the doorstep with a note tied around his neck. He was asleep when I opened the door. I assume whoever dropped him off waited to see if I took him in. The doctor came to look at him and he's healthy. He certainly is a mystery."

"He's a cute little boy," the old woman acknowledged.

Ryan had light blond hair and a fair complexion. He was snuggled in Mrs. Elan's arms and had his blue blanket close to him.

"So you don't know anything else about him or his parents?" Carrie asked.

"No, I don't. He's been well cared for. Someone obviously loved him."

"I wonder why his guardian let him go," Helen sadly commented. "I bet the person didn't want to do it."

"Sometimes people are forced into giving up their children," Mrs. Elan admitted. "I'm just glad Ryan's parents chose to bring him here where he has a chance of being adopted. Ryan has been withdrawn and spends most of his time sucking his thumb with his favorite blanket. The staff and I give him lots of

affection. Children at this young age thrive better when held often.”

“I’d take him in a heartbeat if I didn’t live in a nursing home,” Helen said.

“I want to take in every child that shows up here, but I already have my hands full with twelve children. Sometimes it’s difficult to see these children without parents to care for them, but this orphanage is much better than the cases I’ve heard where some are abused or left to go hungry on the streets. At least here, they are taken care of.”

“When did he come here?” Carrie wondered.

“On Wednesday.”

“He must miss the person who left him here.”

“They all do for awhile. He is young enough that he will eventually forget that person.”

“Can I hold him for awhile?”

Mrs. Elan nodded and gently placed the child in Carrie’s lap. Ryan stirred but didn’t wake. He clutched his blanket to his chest. She put her arms around him and smiled. It felt good to hold him.

“Someday, you might hold your own little one,” Helen commented.

Carrie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Once again, she was reminded of Justin. Would he continue to plague her thoughts?

Later that day when she arrived at her new home, she was greeted with a bouquet of yellow tulips in a crystal vase. Attached to the bouquet was a card from Justin that told her the color yellow symbolized friendship, which was the foundation for their marriage.

"Mr. Monroe is taken with you," Jim commented when she brought them to the kitchen to put more water in the vase.

"Taken? He's in love," Constance remarked. "He never thought of flowers before. It's always been investments and clients."

"I knew that was all he talked about," Carrie said, satisfied that she had understood that much about him.

"It certainly isn't all he's talking about anymore," he stated. "The only time I think of something other than food is when I'm in love."

"I take it then that you aren't in love at the moment," Carrie asked, hopeful.

"No, Mrs. Monroe. I am not."

Perfect! Her plan to fix him up with Mary just might work. She examined the kitchen. It didn't seem to be the right place for the flowers. "I suppose I should put these in the parlor with the couches and chairs. That room is more comfortable than the one with the long oval table."

"Mr. Monroe uses the parlor with the table for his business dinner parties," the maid informed her. "The other parlor is intended for you when you wish to entertain. You may decorate it however you wish."

"What did it look like before?" she wondered.

"It had a desk and lots of books. The books he reads are business books. He's not a fiction reader."

And my brother and father wondered why I thought he was dull. She couldn't imagine enjoying a business book. She wondered if they did have anything in common, besides a mutual physical attraction for each other. She had given up on convincing herself that she wasn't attracted to him. He was too good looking for her not to enjoy looking at, and his kisses and touches made her light-headed. She shook her head. There had to be more to a marriage than physical attraction.

The Cold Wife

She set the flowers in her favored parlor. She hadn't realized that this was her special room. She already thought of several things she wanted to do to make the place look more appealing to her. It had clearly been a bachelor's room before. She fancied the image of scenic paintings. She loved the beach, so a couple of paintings of the ocean waves roaring along the sand would go very well with the blue furniture. A painting or two of mountains covered in snow would go well with the white furniture. She glanced at the crystal vase. It would be nice to start a collection of crystal figurines. She loved crystal. A display case for those figurines would look nice in the corner of the room. The heavy blue curtains had to go. She wanted white lacy curtains to give the room a more feminine feel and to let the sunlight in. She decided that the room did have many possibilities.

"I hope you find your parlor to your liking."

She recognized Justin's voice. She put the vase down on the small oak table in the center of the room and turned her attention to him. "I will once I get through redecorating it."

"It's all yours." He walked over to her and lightly kissed her. "Aren't you going to welcome me home after a hard day at work?"

She sighed. "Must you persist in keeping this marriage going?"

His eyes widened. "You're the one who's going to change this room. I took that as an indicator that you planned to stay."

"Only for the month I'm required to be here."

"You'll spend the rest of your life here."

The fact that he seemed so sure of himself made her that much more determined to prove him wrong. She crossed her arms and glared at him.

He ignored her open rebellion. He gently took her by the elbow to lead her to the couch. "Will you have a seat?"

"No." She didn't budge.

To her surprise, he picked her up in his arms and sat down. He held her close to him and sat her on his lap. She was too shocked to react in time to stop him from kissing her neck.

She pushed aside the delightful sensations his kissing produced and quickly stood back up.

He had amazing reflexes for he grabbed her hand and said, "If you don't sit by me, I'll pull you back onto my lap. Or we could go upstairs and make sure you don't leave at the end of the month."

She loudly sighed so he would understand how much this pained her and plopped next to him on the couch.

He chuckled. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

She refused to look at him. She wouldn't let him get to her. She wouldn't fall in love with someone she was forced into marrying.

"I see you got my flowers."

She kept quiet.

"I meant what I wrote. I fully intend to find out all there is to know about you and you can find out all there is to know about me. Since you don't want to talk, I'll begin. I was born on August 17, 1870 to Jeremiah and Catherine Monroe. When I was two, they died in a buggy accident and Uncle Jonathan adopted me and raised me as his own."

"You were an orphan?" she interrupted.

"Yes. Didn't you know that?"

She shook her head. Somehow finding out about that after holding Ryan earlier that day made her feel sympathy for him. She was grateful that her parents had lived to see her become an adult. She couldn't imagine anyone but them raising her.

"I don't remember my parents. I have pictures. My uncle tells me about them. Uncle Jonathan was my father's brother and they were close. The firm he owns was actually started by him and my father. That's how I came to work there."

“Can I see a picture of your parents?”

He nodded and led her to the other parlor. In the large desk that was to the side of the room, he pulled out a drawer that contained a photo album. He showed her the picture of the young man and woman.

“They look young,” she commented.

“My dad was twenty-one and my mother was eighteen when they married.”

The thought that she and Justin were already older than his parents had been when they died made her shiver. “They look so young. You look a lot like your father, though you have a hint of your mother in you. I can see where you got your good looks.” She quickly shut her mouth before she said anything else. The last thing she wanted to do was encourage him!

He smiled. “It’s nice to know you find me to your liking.”

She blushed.

He turned back to the album and said, “Apparently, my father was outgoing. I must get my shy nature from my mother.”

For some reason, he didn’t strike her as someone who was shy. He certainly had made enough advances at her for her to assume he was outgoing.

As if he could read her mind, he explained, “I do better with small groups, especially when I deal with just one or two people at a time. But in large groups, I tend to listen rather than talk. We have a dinner party to attend on Wednesday. You are free to invite a friend or two to come too so you have someone to talk to. I’m afraid I’ll have to spend the evening talking to some clients.”

She frowned. “You didn’t ask me if I wanted to go.”

“Don’t you like going to dinner parties? I’ve seen you at a lot of them. You looked like you enjoyed talking to Miss Muse and Miss Duff. Was I wrong in assuming that you would want to attend a dinner party at Mr. and Mrs. Walker’s residence?”

"I do like going to dinner parties as long as I have someone to talk to, and I do like Mr. and Mrs. Walker. I know Mrs. Walker fairly well since she owns the nursing home. I would like to go to it but I'm upset because you didn't even ask me if it was something I wanted to do."

"I'm sorry, Carrie. I will be sure to ask in the future. If it's something you don't want to go to, then we can do something else that night."

"You won't go to a dinner party if I don't want to go to it?"

"No. You're my wife and I want to be with you." He looked at her. "Should I put this back?" He motioned to the album.

"Yes. Thank you for showing it to me."

"Anytime. You know you're free to anything in this house so if you want to find out about my deep, dark nature, you should do a thorough examination of all the drawers in this place."

He smiled jokingly as he said it, so she knew that there were no deep, dark skeletons in his closet. To test her theory, she went to another drawer and opened it. She shook her head. It was full of investment reports and books. Pulling open another drawer, she saw more of the same. "Do you eat, breathe and sleep investment material?"

He chuckled. "I admit that I've had a one track mind in the past. My whole world has been tied up with my uncle's firm. You should know that after my parents died and I came to live here, my life has been pretty much the same as it is now, except I'm an adult living in my own house. I have the same friends I've had since school. Your brother is a good friend. He likes to joke around and have fun."

"He was always the center of attention no matter where we went."

"He's brought me out of my shell. I had no friends until your family moved to town. He found me reading a book in the

library during lunch and said I was crazy for reading about life when I could be living it. He talked me into getting out and participating in the school activities. We met Nathan Hunter from there and the three of us were close.” He sighed. “Nathan will be moving to Rhode Island. This town won’t be the same without him.” He looked at her. “It won’t be the same without your father either. I’m sorry about what happened to him. Mr. Rivers just went bankrupt too.”

She thought that was odd. What were the chances that two businesses would go bankrupt in a short amount of time? She absentmindedly touched his arm. “Is there a connection between my father’s bankruptcy and his?”

He nodded. “My uncle and I suspect there is. We are currently investigating the matter to find out for sure. That’s why Mr. Walker’s dinner party is important. Mr. Rivers owned an accounting firm. With him out of the way, Mr. Walker and Mr. Grant have the remaining accounting firms in town.”

“Do you think Mr. Walker and Mr. Grant drove him and my father out of business?” She couldn’t imagine Mr. Walker doing such a thing. Mrs. Walker seemed like an honest and good woman. She assumed that her husband would be the same way.

“We have reason to believe that Mr. Grant is going to go after Mr. Walker’s business to bankrupt him.”

“I don’t understand why Mr. Grant would do that.”

“The Grants are a territorial family. They don’t like to share. We think they are building a monopoly of various financial services in this town. Without competition, they can charge their customers whatever they want.”

“But how would Mr. Grant bankrupt my father?”

He shrugged. “We’re not sure. Your father wasn’t sure either. In fact, he didn’t even suspect Mr. Grant was behind it. He most likely still doesn’t since my uncle and I haven’t voiced our thoughts to anyone else.” He paused, as if realizing he had

revealed too much to her. "You do understand that it would be unwise to tell anyone about this."

"I won't tell anyone," she promised. If there was something she could do, it was keep a secret.

"Did Mr. Grant have access to your father's business files?"

She began to shake her head when it suddenly dawned on her that she was a pawn. Her hand dropped from his arm and she banged her fist on the desk. Her face flushed with anger. That was why Harrison suddenly took an interest in her! And her so-called friend Julie didn't stop him from pretending to like her.

"What is it?" Justin insisted.

"Harrison came to my home on two occasions to talk to me. I thought he was interested in me but apparently, he was interested in my father's documents which he kept in the parlor." She had never felt so used in her entire life!

"Is that why you didn't want to marry me? Because you were interested in Harrison Jr.?"

"No. It had nothing to do with Harrison. I admit that I entertained the notion that Harrison would be better suited for me since I thought he was fun to talk to but I don't miss him. I can't believe I even considered Harrison. Not only was he secretly seeing Julie the whole time but he only paid attention to me so he could get to my father's things. The one man I thought had a genuine interest in me turned out to use me so he could destroy my father. Is that all I'm good for?"

"Whoa," Justin tenderly interrupted as he turned her around so she was facing him. "I know where your thoughts are headed, and I'm putting a stop to them now. What Harrison did was wrong, but it has no reflection on you. You're a lovely, beautiful and kind woman, Carrie. I love you. I've loved you since I was fourteen."

"Mr. Monroe, you barely even know me."

"Justin," he whispered.

“What?”

“My name is Justin. If we are to begin as friends, then you must refer to me by my first name.”

His voice was so soft that it was if he was caressing her with it. She shook her head. She didn’t understand why he persisted in believing that he loved her. He couldn’t possibly love her. They didn’t have enough in common to sustain a marriage that would be a happy one. She had to put a stop to his madness before it was too late.

“I do not believe we are suitable for one another,” she finally stated.

He sighed. “Why do you persist in resisting me? Have I proven myself to be brutish in your presence?”

“Oh, I can hardly imagine you to be a brute. You are kind to everyone.”

“Then I will be even kinder to you.” He took her hand and led her back to the other parlor and sat close to her. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her even closer to him.

“There is plenty of room on the couch,” she reminded him. “We do not have to be this close.”

“No one is watching. We have the moment to ourselves.” Before she could protest, he continued, “Tell me about yourself. I know you were born on April 7, 1871 in Richmond. Your family moved here when you were fourteen. I know that you volunteer to help at the church, the orphanage, and nursing home. In your spare time, you try your hand at cooking, which I hear you’re actually decent at, and you make minor alterations to the costumes for the plays in the town theater.”

Her eyes grew wide in surprise. “How can you know so much about me?” *Especially when I know so little about you?*

“Brad filled me in on some of the details.”

She should have known. Her brother had been unusually joyous of her marriage to Justin, so naturally, he filled Justin in on her many virtues. An idea came to her. “There’s more.”

"I suspected as much."

"Yes. I am not a morning person by nature. In case you haven't noticed, I am cranky in the morning."

"So when I touch you in the morning, you really like it but are too cranky to properly enjoy it?"

She blinked. This wasn't quite the response she had hoped for. She cleared her throat. "I have been known to snore in my sleep. I only know this since my mother informed me that it is true."

"If you want a second opinion, then you can sleep with me tonight and I'll tell you if your mother was telling you the truth or not."

The way he smiled at her made her blush. She cleared her throat. "Mr. Monroe—"

"Justin."

She sighed. "Justin, it is not appropriate for us to converse like this."

"I wasn't talking about sex. We can be in the same bed and just sleep. It might even be fun."

"You actually expect me to believe that a man and a woman can share the same bed and not have sex?"

"I believe you'll still be my wife after the month is up, so yes, I believe that can happen too."

"I don't share those beliefs." There was no way she could be in the same bed with him and not respond to his closeness. She was already light-headed by sitting with him on the couch. Who knew what she'd do in his bed? Forcing her mind off the intriguing thoughts of his bedroom, she blurted out, "Sometimes I chew my fingernails. Look at how gross they are!" She shoved a hand in his face.

He laughed and took her hand in his. "I crack my knuckles," he confessed. He examined her hand. "I notice you file down the ones you chewed so they look presentable. You

have soft and delicate hands.” He brought her hand to his cheek. “You feel wonderful against me.”

His words and actions unnerved her. She was acutely aware of how masculine he felt for she could already detect the stubble that was quickly growing back on his face. She tried to bring her hand down but couldn’t. When he kissed her, she found that her hand betrayed her by pulling his face closer to her. She was thoroughly enjoying the kiss despite her best efforts not to.

Constance came into the room and announced that dinner was ready and quickly left when she realized that she had interrupted them.

Carrie put her hand down in her lap and pushed off the couch with her other hand. She stood up and took a deep breath to settle her nerves. Why did he have to feel so wonderful? It wasn’t fair. And he wasn’t playing fair by awakening desires in her that she hadn’t even been aware of before they married.

“I suppose we should eat,” she said once she trusted her voice not to show her distress over being caught by Constance. She figured that she shouldn’t be embarrassed for the woman to catch her and Justin kissing. After all, they were married. It was proper for them to show affection to each other in their own house.

“I’ll be there in a moment,” he replied.

The way he looked at her caused her heart to beat faster. She had to get away from him before she leapt back into his lap and kissed him again. She nodded and swiftly exited the parlor.

Chapter Thirteen



When she was ready to come down the steps the next morning, she noticed him. “Do you intend to greet me every morning this way?” she asked.

He took in the breathtaking sight of her in her pink shirt and black skirt. “I will greet you this way until I wake up in bed next to you. Then I shall kiss you to wish you a good morning and hold you in my arms.” He paused and smiled at her. “I don’t know how you do it, but you manage to look more and more beautiful every time I see you.”

She hesitated.

Why was she trying so hard to fight him? If her response to his kisses were true indicators of how she felt about him, he was assured that beneath her cool exterior, she was beginning to care for him as he cared for her. His ultimate goal, of course, was for her to love him. He wanted all of her. He wanted her friendship, her body and her love. It was his oversight that he hadn’t made an attempt to court her before they got engaged. Had he thought he had any chance that she would respond to him as she did, he would have had the courage to do so. He was

acutely aware that he had a little under four weeks to get her to agree to stay married to him. He wondered if that was enough time since she was surprisingly stubborn.

As she made her way down the stairs, he forced his thoughts back to her. "Good morning, Carrie."

"Good morning," she replied.

Justin. My name is Justin. He sighed. Would she never say his first name without him having to prompt her to? *Patience*, he told himself. *We were only married on Saturday. Give her time to adjust to the idea of being my wife.* Though his mind was willing to wait as long as necessary, his body wasn't. Each time he got near her to touch or kiss her only notified him that being patient wasn't very fun.

This time when he extended his arm to her, she took it. He was relieved. At least, they were making progress. Once again he led her to the dining room and pulled out her chair for her. After Constance brought their meals to them, he asked her what she planned to do that day.

She shrugged. "I haven't made any real plans. I thought I would visit with Mary and Helen and see if they wanted to take a walk in the park. Beyond that, I haven't anything in mind."

A thought came to him. "Would you like to have lunch with me?" Perhaps going out and doing something as a couple would ease her into the marriage. "You can pick the restaurant."

She seemed to consider it.

He inwardly sighed. Why was this such a difficult decision? "Did you want to eat lunch with Mary and Helen?"

"No," she slowly responded.

He waited for her to continue. By the worried expression on her face, he knew that she was trying to think of a way to tell him no as gently as possible. He had seen the look before when clients decided to close their accounts. Deciding to save her the struggle, he quickly made up a lie. "Oh, you know what? I just

forgot that I have a business lunch meeting with a client. I'm sorry, Carrie. Can we do lunch another time?"

She looked relieved. "That is fine. Another time will do."

He was annoyed but hid it under a smile. It took all of his effort to finish his breakfast. He stood up and adjusted his tie. "Well, I should get going."

"Have a good day," she responded.

He noted that she didn't stand up with him to walk him to the door. Many times, he had imagined what it would be like to have his wife stand by the front door, wish him a good day, and kiss him good-bye. This, apparently, was not going to be one of those times. He thanked her as graciously as he could, considering his bruised ego, and saw himself out the door. If he wasn't so deeply in love with her, he would hand her the annulment papers and be rid of this farce of a marriage. It was even more irritating that everyone knew it for what it was.

He went into the stagecoach that Curtis Thomas brought to the front of the house and rubbed his eyes. He knew he shouldn't let his frustrations weigh his heart down. He was probably even lucky that she agreed to talk with him the previous day. Then he recalled how he had to hold her hand and threaten to put her on his lap if she didn't stay. He rolled his eyes. What kind of willingness was that? The poor girl was forced to talk to him. He thought their conversation went well enough. The kiss had been encouraging. She had pulled him closer to her. He thought their talk after dinner before they went to bed had been a good sign that she was opening up to him.

He recalled their light-hearted conversation. She told him about her childhood in Richmond. Her family took two week vacations every year to travel somewhere new. Her favorite place was the beach, but she also recalled the mountains of Tennessee and the Vermont changing fall leaves with great affection. She told him all about the silly stunts Brad had pulled on her while growing up, his most notable achievement being the time he

fooled her into believing the United States' president decided to separate Virginia into a North and South Virginia. She was only eight at the time, so it was easy enough to understand why she would fall for his fib. Justin realized that she was very trusting of people. She was gullible in a lot of ways, and her innocence was very pleasant and even charming.

She also told him all about her friends. Her closest two had been Mary and Julie. Though she still liked Julie, she wondered how their friendship would be affected by the situation with Harrison. Then she talked of Mary and Helen and her mood brightened. When Carrie didn't resist him, she was warm and lively. Her eyes were full of enthusiasm and she smiled. She had forgotten her goal to resist him and had sat closer to him than necessary, without being prodded to, and she laughed and touched his arm. It occurred to him that she was a passionate and affectionate person. She would make a terrific wife. The more he learned about her, the more he loved her.

Then there was her coolly polite greeting that morning and her obvious disdain to even eat lunch with him. He wondered how she would act when they went to the dinner party at Mr. and Mrs. Walker's residence the next evening. Would she run off as soon as they arrived and not talk to him again until she was forced to go home with him?

When he arrived at work, his uncle noticed his sour mood. "Want to talk?" he asked as he followed his nephew into his office and sat in front of his desk. "You're obviously troubled."

Justin sighed and sat down. "You're right. I am." He considered his words before speaking. "Last night Carrie told me all about her childhood, her dreams, her friends, and her family." He stopped talking and stared off into space.

"Of course, this would be distressing because you were listening to her talk about her thoughts and feelings?" His uncle wryly grinned.

"No. I liked it. I want to learn about her."

"I'm having trouble understanding what the problem is."

"This morning I asked her to go to lunch with me and she didn't want to."

"And?"

"And what? She doesn't want to spend time with me unless I force her to. I had to threaten to hold her down on the couch if she didn't talk to me last night."

His eyes grew wide. "You tied her down?"

"No. It wasn't as bad as that. I told her I'd put her on my lap and hold her if she wouldn't stay in the parlor."

"Of course, she refused, ran out of the room and you dragged her back to the room, kicking and screaming. The staff was greatly alarmed but you threatened to fire them if they intervened."

Justin felt a smile tug at his lips. "Of course not. She sat next to me and we talked. After dinner, she willingly followed me to the room and sat next to me on the couch."

"So you didn't really force her. You simply encouraged her."

The acknowledgment did little to make him feel better.

"Have you kissed her yet?"

Justin felt his face grow warm as he admitted, "Yes, I did."

"You enjoyed it," he noted, amused. "Did she?"

"I think so. She didn't push me away."

"Did she respond?"

Suddenly, he felt uneasy. Should he be discussing these intimate details with his uncle? He knew his uncle could already tell the answer since he read people easily. "Yes."

"Then there's no problem at all."

Surprised by his uncle's analysis, he furrowed his eyebrows.

"You'll be fine," Jonathan assured him. "Just keep a sense of humor about things. You can't get bogged down by the possibility of losing her. You have a tendency to get too serious."

You have to pursue this as a challenge, and tell yourself that you're going to win. It's like I always tell myself before a business meeting: I'm going to make this work."

Justin nodded, feeling better. "Thanks, Uncle Jonathan."

The older man smiled. "Anytime." He sat up straight in the chair, which Justin recognized as an indication that he was about to discuss business. "Tomorrow evening is Mr. Walker's dinner party. Ever since you told me about his conversation with Harrison Jr., I've have time to consider what to do about that. Mr. Walker might be willing to explain his misgivings about the Grants tomorrow evening. We should arrange for a moment of his time." He paused. "Is Carrie aware that these dinner parties do involve you doing a lot of business?"

"Yes. I explained it to her. I told her she could invite a couple of friends to keep her company, and she agreed to go."

"That's another good sign. For the sake of business, it is important that you two show up to these events together. Some clients are particular about husbands bringing their wives wherever they go. It shows them that the husband values his wife, and if he values his wife, he will most likely value his clients as well. Appearances are very important in the business we're in."

"I think she understands that."

"Good. She's a sensible woman. I do believe she'll be a big help to you." He stood up. "I have a meeting with Mr. Maxwell. You have a meeting with Mr. Tanner. We better get prepared."

Justin felt much better as his uncle left his office.

Wednesday evening arrived and it seemed to Justin that Carrie was being friendlier to him. She seemed happy to see him when he came home from work and disclosed more information about herself while asking questions about him. He noticed that she had

already put up paintings of the beach and snowy mountains on the walls of her parlor. She said she had ordered a cabinet to display some crystal figurines she wanted to collect. He hadn't realized she liked crystal, so he decided he would buy her something that weekend so she could think of him when she looked at it. He wanted her to connect him with things she liked, but he also enjoyed the thought of buying her something she would like.

On their way to the Walker residence in the stagecoach, he asked, "Will your friends be there as well?"

"Mary will be attending," she replied.

She had chosen a pretty dark purple gown for the occasion and didn't roll her eyes this time when he told her that she was beautiful. He turned his attention from how much he wanted to kiss her so he could focus on the conversation. "So you're determined to forget Julie?"

"It's not that. The thing is that since she's engaged to Harrison, she would want to bring him along, and considering what he might have done to my father and Mr. Rivers and might do to Mr. Walker, it doesn't seem right to have him there."

"He most likely would not attend after the way Mr. Walker talked to him on Monday, so it's just as well you didn't invite her."

She sadly nodded and glanced at the houses they passed.

"I'm sorry, Carrie. I know a lot of things haven't turned out the way you hoped." He wasn't sure if he should include him to that list or not. He hoped not.

To his surprise, she got up from the seat across from him and sat next to him. "It's really not so bad being with you," she shyly whispered. "I am enjoying myself. I wish I had known that we do actually share common interests before we got married. Then I wouldn't have given my poor father so much grief over it."

She could have knocked him over with a feather. His heart leapt for joy at her words. He leaned forward to kiss her but the stagecoach stopped. They had arrived at Mr. Walker's house.

He settled for simply smiling at her as Franklin opened the door for them to get out.

"I hope you can have a good time with Mary," he said.

"I always do. She's a good friend."

He followed her out of the stagecoach and into the house where the butler took their hats for them.

"The women are enjoying the nice warm evening outside," the butler informed them. "The men are in the parlor."

"I'll see you later tonight," Justin told Carrie.

She glanced back and saw that Mary was walking to the door. "I'll wait here for her before going outside," she said. "Come and get me before you're ready to leave."

"Of course I will. I wouldn't leave without you."

He was tempted to kiss her on the cheek but wasn't sure if that would be appropriate in public. He hadn't paid enough attention to know if other husbands did that or not. He nodded a greeting to Mary before joining the men in the parlor. The room was filled with twenty men. Most of them were sitting and talking while a few stood around the room.

As soon as his uncle saw him, he said something to Conrad Leroy, stood up and walked over to greet him. "I take it things have improved since yesterday morning?" Since Jonathan had been out of town earlier that day, he hadn't seen Justin before that night.

"Yes. Things look very promising." He tried not to smile like an idiot, but he was too excited over what she said in the stagecoach to hide his joy.

Jonathan grinned and patted him on the back. "Keep doing what you're doing and she'll admit that she wants to be with you for life." He pulled Justin to the corner of the room. "I wanted to tell you about my meeting with Mr. Davidson before we eat. He's extravagantly wealthy but he's also extravagantly particular about having things done his way. He borders along the narcissistic personality type, except instead of being overly fond of

himself, he is obsessed with his hobbies, one of which is hunting deer. He wants you and Carrie to go to his residence next week so you can hunt with him while Carrie entertains his wife. He won't do business with us until he meets you and Carrie and sees what kind of people you are. His residence is not far from my beach house, so to make it worth both of your troubles, I am offering it to you to stay there for a week to enjoy your honeymoon. Ask Carrie what she thinks and let me know what you two decide. Alright?"

He nodded. He thought the trade off was worth spending the day hunting, which was something he dreaded doing. But it would be fun to be completely alone with Carrie. The possibilities of what might happen excited him.

"Dinner is ready," the butler announced at the doorway.

"We will be eating in the dining room," Mr. Walker began. "My wife wants to eat outside with the women because she says being so close to the hot kitchen makes it hard for her to eat this late in her pregnancy. So we'll be left to ourselves tonight, gentlemen."

"Does that mean we can display horrible table manners?" Mr. Wilcox grinned mischievously.

"Of course. And we can have as much dessert as we want. Feel free to only have dessert if you wish," he said.

During the course of the dinner, Brad sat next to Justin and asked him, "Has my sister come around yet?"

"Why didn't you tell me that she was opposed to the marriage?" Justin had to ask it. He wanted to know why his best friend failed to mention that important piece of information to him before the wedding.

"Because I thought you two would be a good match. You were certainly better than Harrison Grant Jr. I figured once she got a chance to know you, she'd realize that too. Besides, I had encouraged you often enough to approach her, but you were too shy to do it. This was the only way I could think of to force you

to spend actual time with her. Was I wrong for being somewhat devious in my role as matchmaker?"

"I'm not a big proponent for forcing women to do things that they don't want to."

"Which is why I didn't tell you that she was opposed to it. I got a chance to talk to her earlier today, and she didn't seem all that upset. She didn't exactly thank me for my part in the scheme, but she blushed an awful lot when I asked her how things were going between the two of you. I know my sister. She's falling in love with you. Besides, I notice you're keeping her around for a month. Aren't you technically going against her wishes for an immediate annulment?"

"Point taken," he conceded.

"Look, she's not complaining about being with you. She was running out of the church right before the wedding but today when I talked to her, she was talking about decorating the parlor. Apparently, she got over the wedding jitters pretty quick."

Justin closed his eyes. He had no idea she actually tried to run away from marrying him. It was depressing to think she was that eager to get away from him. Opening his eyes, he turned back to Brad and asked, "How many people know that she was so adamantly opposed to the union?"

"Very few. A lot of them are wondering what all the annulment talk is about. I just tell them that since you two didn't really know each other to begin with, you agreed to live together, platonically of course, for a month to see how well you suit each other. I overheard that you two were caught kissing in the parlor on Monday and yesterday."

Justin hid his annoyance. Why did people delight themselves in gossip? He was amazed that he could even sneeze without the whole town knowing about it. "I suppose if we do actually consummate the marriage, then everyone will be talking about that as well."

“Since we’re all waiting to see whether or not it’s going to last, you can bet on it. Face it. You two are every gossip’s dream come true.”

“And you’re on that list?”

He shrugged. “My interest is in my sister and best friend. I am personally invested in this situation.”

Justin had a hard time eating his meal. He felt as if everyone in the room and outside were whispering about the fact that he and Carrie showed up at the dinner party together. He could almost hear them talking amongst themselves: Did it mean that they were falling in love or was it merely an appearance?

He was relieved when dinner ended and his uncle waved him over to Mr. Walker and Mr. Leroy. He joined them in the den where they could have some privacy from the other men who had gone to the parlor to talk. Once he sat in a chair next to his uncle and across from the other two men, he allowed himself to relax. It was nice to be able to forget about the town gossip for awhile.

His uncle was the first to speak. “It has become apparent to me that the elder Harrison Grant is slowly building a monopoly.” He turned to Chad. “Since you have an accounting firm and you,” he looked at Conrad, “have the bank, I thought I would bring my suspicions to you and see what your thoughts are on this matter.”

“It’s no doubt he’s trying to eliminate his competitors,” Chad easily replied. “Poor Greg Allen and Hugh Rivers lost everything they had.”

“Are you telling me that Harrison managed to manipulate their files so that they went bankrupt?” Conrad asked Jonathan. “The paperwork looked legitimate when I verified their financial status at the bank.”

“I don’t exactly know how they did it,” Jonathan said. “A piece of the puzzle is that young Harrison took a sudden interest in Carrie right before her father went bankrupt. Justin and I

suspect he used her to gain access to the files he kept in his home.”

“He’s not going to be able to use that method again if Junior marries Julie Muse this Saturday.”

“Which means he most likely has something else in mind.”

“I interviewed Harrison Jr. today for the contractor position. I wasn’t overly impressed with him. I don’t understand how he can win clients his way.”

“The father has an easier way to charm people with his words than the son does,” Chad added. “His son is too desperate to please him, and my wife senses some hesitation on his part. He acts tough on the outside, but she wonders how hard his father is pushing him so he can mold him into his image.”

“Whatever the father-son relationship is like, we would be wise to keep our eyes and ears open for both of them,” Jonathan advised.

“I already do.”

“I suppose setting up a bank is something the father’s itching to do,” Conrad reflected. “Of course, he’ll want to bankrupt me once he establishes it. Could he be seeking to contract his services for investing to gain access to my bank records?”

“Most likely. On our end, he’s just trying to take as many clients from us as he possibly can. If he were to get enough of them, he could do considerable damage to our investing firm.” Jonathan glanced at Justin. “We do have to be careful.”

Conrad sat thoughtfully for a moment. “The best way for me to watch what the Grants are doing is to keep them close by. I wasn’t going to take their business for investing, but it would be wise to do so.”

Chad nodded. “At the very least, it will give him a false sense of security. Just have one of your employees keep an eye on him and his son.”

“I have the right employee in mind for this.”

Justin wondered if he would trust George for this task, but Conrad's next statement distinguished his fears for he knew that George could easily be bought if the price was right.

"I'll have Jake Mitchell work with the Grants and tell him our misgivings. Jake is good about keeping things to himself."

"Do you think they will suspect Jake is up to something?"

"No. Jake can hide his emotions with surprising ease."

Justin wished he was like that. It would come in handy when people insisted on gossiping about his sex life, or rather a lack thereof. Once again, he considered just allowing the annulment. Then the rumors would slowly die down and people would find something more exciting to discuss. *If I didn't love her, I'd sign the papers tonight.* He knew he shouldn't let what other people said bother him as much as it did, but he often felt as if his life was on careful display before the whole town and he had to be careful of what he did or how he said something. He didn't like drawing attention to himself.

"I'm glad we were able to talk," his uncle said as the men stood up.

Justin broke out of his thoughts and joined his uncle in shaking their hands.

"I'll keep you posted on what Jake or I discover," Conrad promised.

As Chad and Conrad left the room to join the other men in the parlor, Jonathan turned to him. "That was a fruitful meeting. I'm glad you could make it tonight. Now you can appreciate the threat the Grants really are. We need to be on our toes."

Chapter Fourteen



The next morning when Carrie appeared at the top of the steps, she said, “Let me do it for you. Good morning, Carrie. You look beautiful this morning. Why, thank you, Justin. Good morning to you too.” She walked down the steps. “Then you’ll extend your arm to me and ask to escort me to breakfast.” She reached him and wrapped her arm through his and waited.

He smiled. “You called me Justin this morning.”

She blinked. “Haven’t I been doing so?”

“No. Usually, I have to remind you to call me by my first name or you call me Mr. Monroe.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

He studied her for a moment. It suddenly occurred to him that she wasn’t aware of how she was gradually opening up to him. He decided to ask her the same question he had asked her the past two days during breakfast. “Will you have lunch with me today?”

To his shock, she agreed. When he didn’t comment, she wondered, “What’s wrong? Was I supposed to say no?”

“You have been saying no every time I asked.”

“You keep track of what I say with amazing accuracy.”

He shrugged. “It comes with years of dealing with clients.” He turned to her and pulled her close to him and kissed her. “I don’t think of you as a client, but a good memory sure does come in handy. I’m glad you’ll be having lunch with me today.” He let go of her and held her hand on the way to the dining room.

Unfortunately, his victory in getting her to agree to lunch was short-lived for a half hour before he was supposed to pick her up for lunch, his uncle notified him that Mr. Tyndall, one of the more notable clients at their company, had to meet with them in fifteen minutes.

“He’s considering going with the Grants,” his uncle concluded.

“But I promised Carrie I’d take her to lunch in half an hour,” Justin protested.

He sighed. “Mr. Tyndall is a difficult man but he also has a lot of connections in town, and where he does business sets a trend for others to follow. I’ll give him a call and see if he’ll agree to just meet with me.”

Justin nodded as his uncle left his office. A couple minutes passed before his uncle returned. By the look in the older man’s face, he already knew what he was going to say.

“He’s adamant that you must be there,” Jonathan solemnly informed him. “His son is your age and will be joining us. He wants you to talk to his son while I talk to him. I explained the fact that you are a newlywed, but he refuses to budge. He even threatened to meet with the Grants instead.”

Justin groaned and threw his pencil on the desk. “And if he goes with the Grants, then he’ll take a third of our clients with him.”

“If you want, I’ll call Carrie and explain how important this particular client is and that he told us to meet him for lunch at the last minute so you had no idea this was going to happen.”

The Cold Wife

“No. I’ll call her.”

His uncle nodded and left the office.

He called his house and Constance went to get her for him. He sighed again. He had met Mr. Tyndall’s son, and though the twenty-six year old was a decent enough man, he was nowhere near as exciting as Carrie. When Carrie greeted him, he explained the situation to her.

“Oh. I understand.” She sounded disappointed but he doubted that she was as disappointed as he was.

“I’m sorry. I was looking forward to having lunch with you today.”

“It’s alright. We’ll just do it some other time.”

“Thanks for understanding. I’ll see you tonight when I get home.”

Then they said good-bye and he hung up the phone. Mr. Tyndall didn’t care that he wanted to spend lunch with his wife, and Mr. Burgess had to meet with him even though it meant he had to leave his own engagement party. He hadn’t realized how much the clients were demanding of him before he found out he was getting married. In the span of one week, he had already put Carrie on hold twice. He had a sinking sensation that the clients’ demands weren’t going to get any easier to deal with.

Since Justin couldn’t meet her for lunch, Carrie decided to visit Helen. As soon as she entered the nursing home, she overheard several whispers about her.

“Is that *The Cold Wife*?” one elderly woman asked her friend.

“Yes. That light blue dress compliments her quite well. The color is just as cold as she is.”

“Mr. Monroe goes out of his way to please her but she doesn’t appreciate anything he does.”

If she didn't appreciate Justin, then she wouldn't have minded the rumors so much. But the truth was she did appreciate him. She was growing to like him and did enjoy his affections. Had they been there to see the way she responded to his touch and kisses, then they would understand that she wasn't quite so cold after all. In fact, he made her feel very hot. She had stopped talking about an annulment because it suddenly dawned on her Wednesday morning that she didn't want it anymore.

She was relieved when she reached Helen's room. Helen was a great source of comfort and stability. She sat next to the old woman by the window. Helen rocked back and forth in her wooden chair and looked expectantly at her.

"What?" she finally asked.

Helen chuckled. "Is the gossip rattling your cage?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't people have anything better to talk about?"

"Around this place? No. It gets boring around here and there's only so many books old people can read before they go crazy. Try not to let it disturb you. You can't help what people say. You can only help how you react to it. If you get defensive, it'll add more fuel to the fire. If you act as if it doesn't bother you, it'll die down faster."

She could only hope that was true. "Well, I wanted to know if you would like to go to lunch with me today?"

"Mary already invited to take me to lunch, but there's no reason why we can't all go together."

Since Mary was due to come over to her home at two that afternoon, Carrie figured it was just as well that they have lunch together too. She was surprised by how disappointed she felt that she wouldn't be going to lunch with Justin. A week ago, she didn't want to have anything to do with him and now she actually looked forward to seeing him. She had no idea her feelings could be so volatile.

"How are things really going between you and that good looking husband of yours?" Helen asked.

"They're fine."

She raised her eyebrows in interest. "You're blushing."

Carrie subconsciously touched her warm cheeks.

The woman grinned. "Next thing I'll know, you'll be telling me you're expecting your first child."

"Oh really, Helen. All we've done is kissed."

"You should be doing more than that since you're married."

Carrie had the sudden inclination to throw a blanket over herself so her friend couldn't see her cheeks go from light pink to bright red.

Mary tapped on the door. "Good afternoon, Helen."

Carrie breathed a sigh of relief as her other friend entered the room.

Helen didn't hide her surprise. "Why are you dressed so poorly?"

Mary smoothed the apron on her pretty but lower class rust colored dress. Carrie thought the color went wonderfully with her naturally pink cheeks. Her blond hair was under a white bonnet that matched her apron.

"She's the peasant lady in the upcoming play," Carrie explained. "I'm going to hem the dress for her later this afternoon. I didn't realize she'd wear it all day."

Mary shrugged. "I didn't have much of a choice. After I went to the costume designer's house, I helped Mrs. Edwards get the luncheon ready for the Mother Daughter banquet at the church. Then I had to come over here. Between going to lunch with Helen and going to your place, I won't have a chance to change. I'm afraid I will be sorely out of place at our usual restaurant."

"We can go somewhere else instead," Helen suggested. "It might be nice to try something new for a change. That old

restaurant on the corner of Jefferson and Adams isn't so particular about dress code. Let's go there."

The decision was made and, unlike the other restaurant, they were seated right away. Carrie felt oddly out of place in one of her best dresses. She had picked the dress because she thought Justin might like it since he mentioned that blue was his favorite color. It would have been suitable at the restaurant he had planned to take her to, but in this place, it was too high class. She wasn't the only one who noticed this minor detail. As she followed her friends, she overheard a couple women comment on her choice of dress. She ignored the whispers, but she wondered why they couldn't have waited until she was well out of hearing range before voicing their opinion.

She took off her hat and placed it next to Mary's bonnet and Helen's modest hat in the empty chair at their table that was meant to seat four people. She hadn't been in the restaurant before but already decided she didn't like it. The men from the other room who played at the billiard tables were loud and obnoxious.

"Today is a popular billiards day," Helen said. "I hear that every Thursday here they have two games for the price of one. It naturally draws more men here."

"Do women ever play?" Mary wondered.

"I haven't known one to. Do you play the game?"

"My father has a billiard table at home and I play some games with him."

"Really? I didn't know that." Carrie was amazed that even after all this time, she was still learning something new about her friend. She thought she knew everything there was to know about Mary.

"Are you any good?" Helen wondered.

"I don't know. I've never played against anyone but my father. He seems to think I'm a challenging player," Mary replied.

"I've never seen the game," Carrie said. "What does it involve?"

"The goal of the game is to get all your balls into the holes at the edges of the table before your opponent does. You hit the balls with a long wooden stick called a cue."

The game didn't sound particularly interesting to Carrie, but she noticed that Mary seemed to thoroughly enjoy it, if the way she passionately continued to discuss the game was any indication of her interest level in the activity. Mary continued to explain the rules of it after the three friends ordered their meals.

When she was done, Helen laughed. "You could write a book about it with the way you talk. I bet you play better than you let on."

A couple minutes later, their lunches came and they ate. While Helen asked questions about the play Mary was going to be in, Carrie happened to look at the billiard room to see Justin holding a cue that Mary had mentioned, and he was listening to the man who was talking next to him. She frowned. It didn't look like he was at a business lunch. It looked like he was playing a game during business hours.

She glanced back at her fish, surprised that she felt stung by the fact that he cancelled his plans with her to run off and play a game with one of his friends. *I shouldn't be startled that this happened. After all, we really don't know each other.* But besides feeling startled, she was also upset. Why did he even ask her to lunch if he would rather do something else?

"Carrie?" Mary waved her hand in front of her friend's face. "Carrie, are you feeling alright?"

Carrie blinked and focused on the blond sitting next to her. "Did you ask me something?"

"No. We just noticed you weren't paying attention to us. What's wrong?"

“Nothing.” Simply nothing. It was ridiculous that she would be jealous that someone else was taking her husband’s attention from her. She didn’t know him well enough to love him.

“If you want us to believe that, then you could at least do a better job of lying,” Helen remarked. As usual, Helen didn’t hold back. “Now, we were talking about billiards when you got this sad look on your face. So it must be something about the game. Did your father play it?”

“No.” She forced herself to gently lay her cloth napkin on the table next to her plate. She didn’t know how to explain the situation without giving away her true feelings about it. Who knew what the people around them would overhear and later gossip about?

As she tried to form the right words, Justin’s uncle happened to exit the billiard room and saw them. He immediately headed their way. When he reached their table, he smiled and greeted them. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

“This is Justin’s uncle,” Carrie introduced. She wasn’t sure if they knew who he was or not but decided to say something since she felt awkward. “His name is Mr. Monroe.”

He grinned. “You may call me Jonathan,” he told them.

“Well, I can see where your nephew gets his good looks,” Helen replied. “If I were younger, I’d chase you right down the aisle of the church to marry you if I had to.”

Carrie felt her face flush from embarrassment. Surely, he would find her friend to be too forward.

To her relief, he chuckled. “I would be honored had we met at an earlier time. After I turned forty, I settled on the fact that I would be a bachelor for the rest of my life.”

“How old are you now?”

“Forty-three.”

She waved her hand at him. “Why, you’re still a young pup. When you’re eighty, you can start thinking of being a

bachelor for the rest of your life. Go out there and find a good woman.”

“That is Helen Ritter,” Carrie pointed to the old woman before she could say anything else that might embarrass the man.

“I believe I briefly met you at the wedding.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I’m glad to see that getting older doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice your sense of humor. I hope to keep mine intact.” He turned to Mary.

Carrie took that as her cue to introduce him to her other friend. “This is Mary Duff. Mary is the leading actress in the next play at the theater,” she added. “I asked her to wear the dress so I can make some alterations later on.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too.” He also kissed her hand.

“Well, it seems that good manners run strong in your family,” Helen noted. “I suppose that makes Justin considerate enough to wait for Carrie to come to her senses about this whole annulment thing.”

“Helen!” Carrie snapped.

Jonathan easily smiled. “Oh, don’t worry about me,” he assured her. “I find Helen’s comments extremely refreshing. You’d be surprised by how many people are too timid to speak the truth as they see it.”

He glanced over his shoulder as someone called his name. He waved to the person before turning back to them. The fifty-year-old man walked over to him.

“Mr. Tyndall, I would like to introduce you to three wonderful women. Carrie Monroe is my nephew’s wife, Helen Ritter is this witty woman here, and Mary Duff is this beautiful young woman who will be starring in the upcoming play called *To Bid for a Bride*. I heard it’s going to be a comedy. Is that right?”

Mary nodded, blushing. “It is.”

“Good afternoon,” Mr. Tyndall curtly stated.

Carrie noted that he wasn’t a very friendly person.

“Will you be returning to the games?” the man asked Jonathan. “I have lost some money on the game and wish to make it back and more, if possible.”

“Yes, I will be right there.”

“Don’t take too long.” The man walked off.

“You’ll have to forgive him. He hasn’t dealt well with women ever since his wife passed away.”

“Oh, just come out and say he’s a difficult man to deal with, period,” Helen spoke up. “I’ve heard about him. He thinks just because he’s one of the top five richest men in town, he can call anyone to do his bidding.”

“I was merely being polite. In my line of work, I have to deal with certain types of clients on a regular basis. It’s not easy, especially for a woman who has to watch her husband cancel plans at the last minute because a client makes a phone call, demanding that he run off to meet him and his son for some games of billiards or else he’ll take his business somewhere else. When that client makes it clear that he doesn’t care that the husband has a wife he would rather keep his word to...Well, it can make for a sticky situation. Mr. Tyndall has a tremendous amount of influence and a third of my clients will go with him if I displease him today.”

Carrie understood what Justin’s uncle was telling her, without directly saying it. “So, Justin doesn’t want to be here?”

Helen glanced at her in interest.

“No, I assure you he doesn’t,” Jonathan replied. “His arm was twisted.”

Carrie felt much better knowing that he did prefer her after all.

“In fact, he hates billiards,” he continued. “He’s not very good at the game either.”

“Do you need someone who is good?” Mary asked.

He looked at her. "Do you know someone who can play the game well? It would certainly help if we could get Mr. Tyndall and his son someone who can win their money back."

"I can play. I'm not sure how good you and your nephew are but I do enjoy the game and play often with my father."

He smiled. "I would be honored if you would assist us in keeping Mr. Tyndall as a client."

Mary looked thrilled. She was obviously excited by the prospect of playing the game. "Will you come to watch?" she asked her friends.

Carrie shook her head. "I can't. I'm supposed to be back at the house at two." She hadn't told Mary her plan to cook something with Jim so he and Mary would have to meet. Now she wasn't sure what to do. "Shouldn't we work on the dress?"

"We can do that later. I never get a chance to play outside my home. This will be fun!"

"I'll come watch," Helen decided. "Mary will take me home, Carrie. There's no sense in you missing out on whatever it is you need to do. Hopefully, you'll be picking something out to wear in bed tonight for that good looking husband of yours."

Carrie gasped.

To her relief, Jonathan pretended not to hear the old woman's comment. Instead, he paid their bill for them and escorted the two women to the billiard room. Carrie bolted out the door, too embarrassed to face anyone after Helen's loud statement. Surely, half the restaurant heard her! If there was ever a time she wished for the earth to open up and swallow her, this was it. She gladly went home.

Chapter Fifteen



Around four that afternoon, Carrie was sorting through her new collection of crystal figurines to put in the display case that had arrived while she was at lunch. She had purchased a swan, a unicorn, a rose, a leaf, and a kitten. She thought they made a nice start. She decided she would add a new one to her collection every year. Just as she set the kitten next to the unicorn, Constance walked into the parlor.

“I thought you might like some of the flowers from the garden,” Constance said as she put them in the crystal vase which sat on the table in the middle of the room. “The blue carpet you ordered should be arriving tomorrow.”

“Wonderful!” Carrie clapped her hands and ran to the lilacs so she could smell them. Now that the lacy white curtains had replaced the drab and heavy blue ones, the entire room felt brighter and more comfortable. “Thank you, Constance. They’re beautiful.”

The maid examined the room and smiled. “I like what you’re doing to this place. It’s nice to have a woman’s touch.”

“I admit that it is fun to decorate the room.”

"I'm sure Mr. Monroe will let you decorate other rooms. He's so in love with you that he won't deny you anything."

She blushed, surprised that she was pleased at the thought.

Jim walked into the parlor. "Oh good. You're both here. I just made a cinnamon apple pizza that I hope will make a suitable dessert for my future restaurant. Will you try it and tell me what you think?"

"Of course," Carrie readily agreed. "I like to sample anything you make. You have a real talent for this line of work."

"If only all my future customers will be as kind as you," he replied.

"I agree with Mrs. Monroe," Constance began. "You do an excellent job. It's too bad Louis doesn't give you a chance to serve one of your pizzas at dinner. I never realized he is opposed to pizzas until we mentioned you making one."

Carrie was glad that Jim could at least make his recipes while Louis was resting before he came to prepare dinner.

As she and Constance sat at the breakfast bar in the kitchen, Jim sliced the freshly made dessert pizza.

"It smells great," Constance said. "How did you come up with the idea to make it an apple cinnamon pizza?"

"I piggybacked the idea when I helped make Louis' pie from last night," he admitted. "I thought that if an apple cinnamon pie could taste that good, then a pizza made from similar ingredients should be a treat too."

"I notice you aren't making as many mistakes while cooking when he's around," Carrie remarked.

"Those index cards are a big help. You were right about hiding them in my apron. It works like a charm. I just wish I didn't feel so clumsy around him. I almost broke the glass pie plate last night."

"Is that why Louis screamed something about his pie?"

He nodded, grimacing at the memory. "I still can't believe how red his face got."

“He needs to relax,” Constance commented. “I told him that he needs to lighten up. Life is too short to be serious all the time. Sometimes it’s just good to have a good laugh and go on with your day.”

“Well, here’s a slice for each of you.” He handed them their plates and a glass of wine. “I’ve also been studying up on which types of wine goes best with certain foods. If I’m going to serve pizza at dinner, I’ll have to add wine to the beverage list.”

Carrie took a bite. “I don’t know how you manage to get better at this but you do.”

Constance nodded her agreement. “We’re lucky,” she told Carrie. “Someday when he’s a famous chef, we’ll be able to say we were the first to try his pizzas.”

“That’s true.”

Geoffrey entered the kitchen. “Constance, the cleaning supplies just arrived and the delivery man wants to know where to put them.”

“I’ll be back.” Constance left the room.

“Another pizza?” Geoffrey wondered in interest.

“A dessert. Would you like a slice?” Jim offered.

“I’d love one.” He smiled as the man handed him a plate. “I hadn’t had any pizzas until you arrived. I must admit that they’re not as poor in quality as Louis makes them sound.”

The gardener knocked on the door and motioned for Geoffrey to come outside.

Geoffrey sighed. “Duty calls. I shall return.”

Carrie chuckled as he left. “I love the way he talks.”

“He’s from England. I often wonder if we sound strange to him.”

“Probably so,” she said. “Have you come up with any other dessert ideas?”

While Jim told her his ideas, she finished the rest of her slice and sipped her glass of wine. To her surprise, her brother entered the kitchen just as she accepted a second slice of pizza.

“What are you doing here again?” she asked him. “Didn’t you just come by earlier this week?”

“Is it a crime for me to see my sister?” Brad replied.

“No. It’s just that you never visited me two times in a week before.”

“I wanted to see how you’re adjusting to married life.”

“You’re checking to make sure I’m not packing a suitcase and trying to run off?” He didn’t comment, but she knew that was the real reason. “You’re amazingly loyal to Mr. Monroe.”

He rolled his eyes. “Aren’t you calling him by his first name yet?”

She was but she was having fun watching her brother squirm. It served him right for taking part in forcing her into this marriage. Ignoring his question, she asked, “Would you like a slice of Jim’s pizza? It’s really good. I’m having a second slice.”

“I would but I need to talk to you alone. I hope you don’t mind, Jim.”

Jim shook his head. “I’ll get some groceries. Will you tell Louis that I will be back in half an hour?”

“I will,” she assured him. After he left and they were alone, she turned to her brother. “What is the problem now?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone with Jim. People might get the wrong idea.” He paused. “They would be getting the wrong idea, wouldn’t they?”

She was tempted to give into her brother’s fears that she was falling in love with the cook, but she respected Jim too much to involve him in her desire to mess with her twin. “Yes, Brad. They would be getting the wrong idea.”

He was noticeably relieved.

“Maybe you should have married Mr. Monroe since you care so much about him.”

“Be serious.”

“Is this why you paid me a visit? You wanted to bother me?”

"I just wanted to see how things are going."

"They're the same as they were yesterday when you came over. What do you expect?" She ate more of the pizza. "You really should try this. It's excellent. I've been trying all of Jim's pizzas in the afternoon and I eat so much that I don't have much room for dinner. I hope Louis doesn't think I'm being rude. His meals are good too."

"Will you listen to yourself?"

"What?" She couldn't believe that Brad had a problem that she chose to compliment someone.

"I wish you would take the time to praise Justin like you praise the cook."

"Are we back to that? I told you that there's nothing going on between me and Jim."

"Is there something going on between you and Justin?"

"That's none of your business."

"Do you realize the whole town is calling you *The Cold Wife*?"

"There's nothing I can do to stop people from talking." She was quickly losing her appetite. She forced herself to finish her second slice of pizza before swallowing the rest of the wine. Her brother could drive anyone to drink with his insistent nagging.

"There is plenty you can do to stop them from calling you that."

"I can't believe we're having this discussion." She turned to face him and set one elbow on the table and one hand on her hip. "Do you want me to make love to him in the middle of town?"

"You don't have to be sarcastic."

"I wish you would give up on pestering me. Now, do you want to see what I did with the parlor so far?"

He sighed. "Do you care for Justin at all?"

The Cold Wife

"I'll answer that question when I'm ready to. I won't tell you anything just because you try to force it out of me."

He grumbled but reluctantly stood up to follow her to the parlor. She knew that her new curtains and display case with the cute figurines would bore him to tears, so she intentionally went into detail about all of them until he couldn't take it anymore and politely left the house. She smiled in satisfaction. *That will teach him to bother me.*

The next afternoon, she went to the orphanage with two of Jim's pizzas. She thought the children might like to try something different for lunch. She noticed that Ryan didn't eat his food though Mrs. Tobias tried to feed him.

"He's been this way ever since he came here," Mrs. Tobias informed her. "He barely eats or drinks anything. He spends most of his time sucking his thumb and sitting with his blanket. It's not easy to watch."

Something about Ryan tugged at Carrie's heart. When she looked at the blond haired, brown-eyed boy, she couldn't help but recall how Justin's parents died when he was two. Unlike Ryan, Justin had an uncle who was willing to take him into his home and raise him. She didn't know much about children, except the few times when she helped with Sunday school. She had only made treats for the children at the orphanage.

She smiled at the boy. "Hello, Ryan."

He looked up but didn't respond. His eyes were filled with sorrow.

Mrs. Tobias lifted the spoon full of applesauce to his mouth but he turned his head away. She sighed. "This is pointless. If he's not going to eat, he's not going to eat."

Carrie helped her clean the high chair. After Ryan was out, he began to cry. At the same moment he cried, Mrs.

Creighton came to talk to Mrs. Tobias about possibly adopting one of the little girls. Since the other adults were too busy to watch Ryan, Carrie volunteered to sit and play with him. Mrs. Tobias was relieved and went to talk to the other woman.

Carrie sat across from him on the floor in the playroom and offered him a stuffed animal and a toy train to play with, but he wasn't interested in them. He held tightly onto his blanket and sat in her lap. She didn't know what else to do but pick him up and take him to the rocking chair where he shortly fell asleep in her arms. Her heart swelled with warmth and joy in holding the small child. He seemed so fragile and lonely. She wondered who his parents were and why they left him. Then she considered it may have just been the mother or father who dropped him off. Even then, there was the possibility it was another relative or a friend of the parents. He seemed to have come out of nowhere. She couldn't begin to imagine what he was going through.

An hour later as she walked back home, she happened to see Julie. "Good afternoon," she greeted uncertainly. They hadn't talked since last Saturday, so Carrie wasn't sure what to expect from the encounter.

"Hello, Carrie," Julie stiffly replied.

Carrie refrained from frowning. She didn't understand why the other woman should be upset with her. She hadn't known that Harrison was secretly courting Julie when she entertained romantic thoughts of him. She glanced down the street where several people walked down the sidewalk. Two women entered a dress shop. Turning back to Julie, she asked, "How are the wedding plans coming along?"

"Fine. Does that upset you?"

"No. I don't harbor feelings for Harrison. Justin has turned out to be quite likeable."

"So you're no longer insisting on the annulment?"

She shrugged. "I hadn't given it further thought. I'm not sure what will happen."

“He’s not as bad as you feared then?”

“No, he’s not.”

Julie relaxed and smiled. “That’s actually a relief. I had worried that Harrison would come between us.”

As much as Carrie wanted to be happy for her friend, Harrison did hold her back, though not for the reason Julie assumed he did. “Julie, I have recently discovered some unpleasant things regarding Harrison. I had debated on whether or not to warn you about him.”

Her friend frowned.

“I have reason to believe that Harrison is using unethical means to gain clients for his business,” she finally said.

“I thought you didn’t care about Harrison anymore.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why are you trying to turn me against him?”

Carrie struggled to find the right words. “Well, if Justin were behaving unprofessionally, I’d want to know about it.”

“And of course, Justin is perfect.”

“No one is perfect. It’s just that he doesn’t financially destroy people.”

“And Harrison does?”

“I believe he is responsible for my father’s bankruptcy.”

Julie frowned. “I don’t like where you’re going with this. Carrie, your father should have been careful if he didn’t want to go bankrupt. I am sorry that it happened, but I don’t see how Harrison is to blame for it.”

“I think he used me to gain access to my father’s business records.”

“Do you have any proof to these allegations?”

Carrie’s cheeks flushed. “No but-”

“Then I don’t care to hear anything else. It’s obvious what’s going on here. You’re upset because Harrison wants to marry me instead of you. I know that you went to see him last week around this time to ask him to marry you and he said no. I

think you want to annul your marriage and break me and Harrison up so that you can have him for yourself.”

“That’s not true!” Carrie immediately paused, realizing that her sudden outburst had attracted some attention. *Great. More gossip for the people to dwell on!* In a lower voice, she continued, “You are my friend, Julie. I want what’s best for you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Last time you talked to me, you made it clear that I betrayed you, and since then, you and Mary have made it a point to ignore me.”

“Perhaps we have been hasty to shut you out.”

“Perhaps?” she snapped. “I won’t have my two closest friends with me on the biggest day of my life, and not only will you and Mary not be there, but it’s clear that if you two were, you would object to the marriage when the preacher asks if anyone has any reason that Harrison and I shouldn’t be married. I know Harrison well enough to assure you that deep down, he is a decent person. I believe in him, Carrie.”

“But you don’t have all the facts,” Carrie insisted, tears forming in her eyes despite her best effort to not break down in front of the onlookers.

“You said you have no proof.”

She didn’t respond. It was true. There was no proof. There were only speculations, and speculations weren’t enough to condemn him.

“I don’t need this before my wedding,” Julie stated. “I am trying to enjoy the process of planning my wedding and I won’t let you hinder that for another moment. Good day, Carrie.”

Carrie watched as Julie walked down the sidewalk and entered the flower shop. That couldn’t have gone any worse if she tried.

Chapter Sixteen



Justin didn't bother to glance up from the stock reports on his desk as Mr. Tyndall entered the building. He could see the man from where he sat in his office but knew the receptionist would take care of the situation. Whatever the older man wanted, his uncle could take care of it. Being around the man the previous day had been a test in patience and being quiet. The man spouted off his mouth about everything and it seemed that nothing made him happy. He was miserable and seemed to drag other people under his cloud of doom and gloom. If the sun was out, he complained that it was too bright. If it was raining, he complained that he got wet. If it was cloudy, he whined that it looked too dark for the daytime. With him, nothing was right. His son, Paul, had a better disposition and even ventured to look on the bright side of things, but his father quickly gave him reasons not to. Paul simply ignored him, which Justin had to admit was the best course of action.

Justin heard his uncle so he glanced back up from the stock report in his hand and saw Jonathan smile and shake the

client's hand. *How does Uncle do it? He honestly looks happy to see Tyndall.*

Mr. Tyndall was loud enough for everyone to hear. "I am having a dinner party tonight. You and your nephew need to bring Miss Duff by. I plan to play some friendly games against Stan Beaterman. I can't wait to see the look on his face when he loses. I wouldn't have thought it possible to look at her, but that young lady is one of the best billiard players I've ever seen. She may not be as attractive as other women, but I suppose her looks don't matter when it comes to making me money."

"Miss Duff is actually a beautiful young lady," Jonathan quickly interrupted.

Justin raised an eyebrow. Since when did his uncle notice a woman's looks?

"Really? I hadn't noticed—perhaps because of her disgraceful clothing," Mr. Tyndall replied.

"I already explained that the dress she was wearing is for the upcoming play," his uncle smoothly stated.

"Still, to wear it in public? People are apt to believe the Duff family is a pack of vagabonds."

"Mr. Tyndall, please refrain from talking about her that way. A woman is to be treated with respect."

"Are you telling me what to do?" The man clearly looked offended.

"I'm just saying that if you wish for her to help you win the game, then it's a good idea to be polite. You are welcome to your opinion, but I would rather not hear it when it concerns her."

"Yes, about the game. The dinner party is at six. I expect you all to be there."

"My nephew may have plans with his wife."

"Tell him to cancel them. I understand that the Duff woman likes to be with your nephew's wife at dinner parties. She will be happy to attend with Clare there."

"Carrie," Jonathan corrected him. "My nephew's wife is Carrie."

"Whatever. It doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, she's just a woman."

Justin decided it was time to get up and join them. "Good afternoon, Mr. Tyndall."

"Boy," the man greeted.

"My wife and I are hosting a dinner party tonight," Justin informed him. "We planned it earlier this week. She wanted to invite some close friends over." He took it as a good sign that she was warming up to him since she was willing to openly acknowledge him as her husband to the people she cared about the most.

"Well, there you have it." Jonathan clapped his hands together. "I'm sorry, Mr. Tyndall but tonight will not work."

Mr. Tyndall looked sourly at Justin. "Surely, you cannot let a woman dictate how you run your life."

"Don't you remember what it was like to be a newlywed?" Jonathan asked the man. "Justin already gave up his lunch date with his wife to join us and your son to a business lunch and for some friendly games of billiards afterwards. You received a sizable profit that day, thanks to Miss Duff. I suggest we let Justin and Carrie settle into their routine together before making any more demands on their time."

"I won't protest if your nephew and his wife don't attend, but I am very much interested in having Miss Duff there."

"Miss Duff is Carrie's closest friend," Justin informed him. "I can't have the dinner party without her there."

"Harrison Jr. stopped by today and assured me that he can get Miss Duff to my dinner party if I wish. His fiancée and Miss Duff are close friends as well."

Jonathan glanced at Justin.

“Carrie has already invited Miss Duff to our house tonight,” Justin argued, though he had the sinking feeling that it wasn’t going to make a difference to Mr. Tyndall.

He was right, for the man replied, “Apparently, her plans will change. Mr. Grant has assured me that Miss Duff will be available if I wish.”

“With all due respect, wouldn’t it be wise to ask Miss Duff if she wishes to attend your dinner party?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t see how a woman’s opinion matters in a situation like this.”

Justin raised an eyebrow at his uncle as he recalled Carrie’s feelings about marrying him. “That sounds oddly familiar,” he muttered so only his uncle would hear him.

Jonathan ignored the comment. “I disagree. A woman is a person, not an object. You will not be getting my assistance in this unless she agrees to it, and Justin and his wife will hold their dinner party for their friends.”

“I suppose I can take my business to Mr. Grant,” Mr. Tyndall warned.

“Then do so. I will not force a woman into something that’s not in her best interest.”

“I’m disappointed. Withdraw my accounts immediately.” The man sniffed and left the building.

“I smell a hypocrite in the room,” Justin remarked.

“Oh, you can’t compare this to what I did to get you and Carrie together. I only did what was best for the two of you. Besides, she was upset yesterday when I saw her at lunch. She really wanted to have lunch with you. Obviously, things are going well with her.”

“She was at the restaurant?”

“Yes. Once I explained the situation with Mr. Tyndall, she felt much better. I couldn’t let her be upset with you after seeing you talking to Paul Tyndall. I mean, she assumed you ditched her to have fun. I assured her that you weren’t having fun.”

“So how is this different from Miss Duff?”

“Mr. Tyndall wants to use her to further his own gain. Mr. Allen and I arranged for you and Carrie to marry for her benefit. You are a good man. She’s already happy with you and it’s only been six days. I suspect by this time next week, the annulment won’t be a possibility.”

“It’s amazing how you rationalize things.”

Jonathan didn’t comment on his nephew’s statement. Instead, he grabbed his hat.

“Where are you going?” Justin wondered.

“To explain the situation to Miss Duff and let her know that she has the freedom to say no. I’ll see you later.”

Justin sighed and returned to his work.

When Justin came home that night, he was pleasantly surprised to see Carrie leave the parlor to walk to the front door to welcome him. “I got your flowers.”

He smiled. This time he had sent her pink roses to represent love. He figured that at this point, they had established a good foundation for friendship. Sure, it wasn’t based on years of knowing each other, but he figured they knew each other well enough to start their marriage. He already bought her a crystal heart but wouldn’t give her that until he sent her the red roses to represent passion. He hoped that this would be the night they would finally consummate the marriage, which he was getting more and more eager to do with each passing day.

“Do you like roses?” he asked her as he hung up his hat.

“Of course, I do. What woman doesn’t?” She stepped closer so she could kiss him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

Encouraged by her affectionate move, he took her in his arms, dipped her and gave her a long kiss on the mouth.

"If you'll come up for air, I'd like to get the door," Geoffrey stated, grinning. "I believe I heard the doorbell. Your guests are starting to arrive."

Justin reluctantly let go of her. He pleasantly noticed that she seemed happy about the kiss. He smiled at her and whispered, "Anytime you're ready, give me the word and I'll join you in bed."

She blushed but didn't protest, so that was a promising sign. He was beginning to believe that things would work out as his uncle said they would.

Geoffrey opened the door and began letting their guests in. Justin was ready to join Carrie in welcoming Helen Ritter and Mr. and Mrs. Tobias when he realized Louis was shouting at Jim again.

"Please excuse me," he told Carrie and his guests as he rushed to take care of the situation before it got out of hand.

As soon as he entered the kitchen, Louis turned to him. "Mr. Monroe, I found this cheater's card on Jim's forehead when he took off his hat."

"It was supposed to stay pinned into the hat," Jim quickly explained. "I didn't want to mess up the veal. I know it has to be seasoned a certain way but I get those spices mixed up in my head."

"A chef worthy of a fine meal does not need to resort to reminders. It should all be up here." Louis pointed to his temple.

"I can't remember everything like you can!" He leaned against the counter but accidentally knocked a bowl so the salad fell all over the floor.

"Why did you hire him?" Louis asked Justin. Louis' face was bright red. "This is how it's been for me ever since you brought him here. I am not a chef in this kitchen. I am a maid, for I have to clean up his messes."

"I can clean it up myself," Jim insisted as he ran to get a dishcloth. He put some soap on it and dipped it in a bowl.

“That is the soup, you idiot!”

“I thought it was water.”

“Water is not yellow.”

“But the bowl is yellow. How was I to tell the difference?”

Louis groaned. “What am I to do, Mr. Monroe? So far the salad and soup have been ruined, and the guests are arriving as we speak! My poor heart cannot take this kind of excitement.” To emphasize his point, he put his hand on his chest.

“Jim, get Constance in here to help,” Justin said.

Jim eagerly left the room to do as instructed.

Justin turned to the bewildered and angry man. “I realize you are having a lot of problems with him, but I actually think the index cards are a good idea. Maybe they will prevent him from messing up the meals. I don’t know how long he’s been using them, but I’ve noticed less tension between you two lately.”

“If he listened to me give the instructions, he wouldn’t need those cards,” Louis insisted.

“Maybe. Maybe not. He might work better with a visual aid in front of him. I use visual aids when I give presentations.”

“Mr. Monroe, I know you have a soft spot for people, but this is greatly affecting my work. I do not mind it so much when it is just you and your wife, but when there are guests, my reputation is on the line. People do talk and I pride myself on being one of Virginia’s finest chefs. I don’t wish to compromise that title because Jim can’t do a good job.”

“Well, he has a gift for making pizza. Have you tried one?”

He shuddered. “Pizza is for poor people. I make real food, food that is fit for a king!”

Constance entered the kitchen. “Oh my,” she said when she saw the floor. “It’s just as you said, Jim. I’ll clean this up while you make another salad.”

“No!” Louis quickly argued. “I will make the salad.”

"I have to do something to be useful," Jim replied.

"The veal needs to be taken out of the oven. Can you handle that simple task?"

"Louis," Justin began, "please be polite."

"I am sorry, Mr. Monroe. Jim, the potholders are on the counter by the oven."

Justin realized that Louis was too proud to apologize to Jim, so he settled for whatever he could get. He had handled tough clients in his day, but the tension between his two chefs was something he had not experienced. He wasn't sure what to do.

After Constance cleaned up the floor and threw the ruined food into the trash, she cut up vegetables while Louis made another soup. Jim set the tray of freshly cooked veal on the counter and put in several pies. He went over to the seasoned vegetables and stirred them with a large spoon.

"Everything looks great," Justin told them. "Does anyone need anything else from me?"

"I don't think so," Louis grumbled.

Geoffrey entered the kitchen. "All the guests are seated, sir. Shall I start serving the salad?"

"I wish you could, Geoffrey," Louis wailed, "but I am finishing it as fast as I can. The pressure is too much." He loudly sighed and worked as fast as he could.

"It's not a big deal," Justin assured everyone. "The guests can mingle in the backyard for a couple of minutes. Some cool evening air will be a nice change after the hot day we've had. Take your time and let us know when you're ready."

Louis nodded.

On his way out the kitchen door, he stopped by Jim and said, "Don't worry about it. I use index cards too." He patted him on the back and walked to the dining room where the ten guests waited expectantly for him to speak. "There was a slight problem in the kitchen. Would you like to go to the parlor or outside to talk for a short while?"

The guests, thankfully, were good sports about it and went outside.

Carrie stood up from her chair and went over to him. "Do you know where Mary is? I thought she was coming."

Justin recalled the incident that happened at work earlier that day. "I meant to tell you that Mr. Tyndall came by this afternoon and pretty much demanded that my uncle get Mary to go to his dinner party tonight so she can play billiards at his house. He apparently wants to win a game against one of his friends, and since Mary is the best billiard player he's ever seen, he wants her there."

She frowned. "I don't understand. Is this another business meeting?"

"From Uncle Jonathan's viewpoint, it is."

"Why weren't you called away?"

"Because I'm not a good billiard player."

"Did Mary want to go there?"

"I don't know. She wasn't there when this conversation took place."

"I wonder why she didn't tell me about it."

"She probably didn't have time. Tyndall came into the office shortly before I left to come home. My guess is that once my uncle explained the situation to her, she only had enough time to change before going to the dinner party."

"That doesn't make any sense. She's my best friend, but she doesn't know Mr. Tyndall."

"No but she obviously enjoys the game. You should have stuck around on Wednesday and seen her play. I was impressed."

She sighed in disappointment. "She is free to do as she wishes."

Geoffrey walked over to them. "Dinner is finally ready, sir."

Justin thanked him and announced that it was time to eat, so everyone returned to their seats. Carrie sat on his right while

Brad sat on his left. Helen sat next to Carrie. The fact that Brad sat on his left and Carrie sat on his right reminded him of their engagement dinner, only now he knew why she had been nervous. She was trying to find a way out of marrying him. As he studied her, he realized that she was relaxed and smiling. She had been looking forward to the chance to welcome her friends to her new home. He noticed the difference in her mood and knew that, even if she didn't want to admit it yet, she was content to be with him. With any luck, she would learn to enjoy their marriage.

Geoffrey came out with bowls of salad and dinner rolls for everyone.

Brad took a roll and put butter on it before speaking to Justin. "I was thinking of investing in chocolate bars."

He didn't hide his surprise. He turned to Brad. "Why?"

"Because they taste good. I took a trip to Pennsylvania and met a man there by the name of Milton Hershey who is trying out different candy recipes. He's been specializing in caramels but is looking into making more chocolates. I was thinking that candy would be a good market to invest in."

"I heard about Milton Hershey. He tried to start up his business in 1876 but it failed."

"Yes, but since then he's been using fresh milk in his recipes. I got a chance to sample his candy and it's good. I think people will want to eat it."

"Maybe. I mean, people like to eat food that tastes good."

"But...?"

"Well, candy isn't very practical. I think people will be more likely to want electricity in their homes than a candy bar."

"Why can't they have both? The candy will be cheap enough."

"True."

"I'm also considering the Dr. Pepper company for investing in. That soda is pretty good too."

Justin laughed. "You have a fascination with food and drink. Not many people know about Hershey or Dr. Pepper."

"Not yet but it's a matter of time before Hershey and Pepper expand their clientele. Besides, Hershey almost went bankrupt. His story was inspiring."

Considering the fact that Brad's father faced bankruptcy, Justin could understand Brad's sudden interest in the candy maker's new company.

"I'm thinking of investing in motion pictures," Mr. Edwards, who sat on Brad's left, joined in the discussion.

"I'm looking into that too," Justin agreed. "I like to think of motion pictures as books you can see instead of read."

He heard Carrie cover up her laughter by coughing. He glanced at her. Was she laughing at him?

"Carrie, I hear that chocolate has something in it to increase sexual desire," Brad blurted out. "Perhaps I should send you a sample of Hershey's candy."

Her face turned bright red.

"It works both ways," he continued when she didn't respond.

Justin knew Brad well enough to understand he was warning her not to embarrass her husband in front of other people. "It's alright, Brad. Don't worry about it." He would rather deal with his wife than have other people do it for him.

"You know," Helen began, "Mrs. Walker had her baby today. It's another boy, and he's eight pounds and five ounces. Carrie, we should go by the hospital tomorrow and pay her a visit. Wouldn't it be nice to see what you could bring home in nine months?"

Carrie looked like she was ready to bolt to another room.

Justin forced aside his own amusement. If seeing a baby was what it took to make her want to consummate their marriage, then he was all for it. "I think congratulating Mrs. Walker is a good idea," he told the two women.

Helen winked at him when Carrie wasn't looking.

He started to smile but stopped when Carrie glanced between him and Helen.

Geoffrey came out to set down the soup and take away the empty salad bowls. Justin resumed his discussion with Brad and Mr. Edwards over which stocks looked the most promising. Then it came time for the main course, and everyone looked favorably at the veal, vegetables and baked potato.

As soon as Justin took a bite of the veal, he gasped for air. He quickly swallowed it and drank all the water in his glass. He motioned for Geoffrey to bring more water for everyone else who had noticed the unusually spicy meal.

Once everyone no longer felt as if their mouths were on fire, Louis ran out of the kitchen and quickly apologized to them. "You'll have to forgive the kitchen staff. We thought the recipe called for a cup of pepper instead of a teaspoon. I am so sorry. This mistake will never happen again. We'll use index cards if we have to!" He hurried to help Geoffrey remove the plates from the table. "I shall find a substitute right away!"

Justin was pleased to note that Louis hadn't blamed Jim in front of the guests. In fact, the middle-aged man took part of the blame on himself. He grinned. Perhaps his two chefs would get along after all.

Geoffrey brought out more dinner rolls. "We will be having pizza in as little as ten minutes."

Suddenly, Carrie burst out laughing. "I was wondering if Jim would ever find a way to make his pizzas for dinner. You won't be sorry. He makes excellent pizzas," she told the group of bewildered people.

"Well, he sure did clear up my sinuses with that veal," Helen stated. "My head hasn't been this clear in months. I should ask him to give that recipe to the cooks at the nursing home."

The Cold Wife

One by one, the other people began to relax and chuckled as they shared their own amusing stories of disastrous dinners. And when the pizzas finally came out, they were such a big hit that even Louis had to try a slice.

“I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but this is worthy of a king,” he said.

As he opened the door to go into the kitchen, Justin noticed that Jim looked very pleased with Louis’ compliment.

Chapter Seventeen



On Saturday, Justin had just made plans to spend the day with Carrie when his uncle notified him of some last minute business meetings with two of their clients who were suddenly getting curious about the Grants' investment services. After apologizing to Carrie, he joined his uncle and met the clients to update their investment portfolios.

"Am I going to have to do this every time someone panics and threatens to go with the Grants?" Justin asked his uncle once the last client left the firm.

"I have a feeling that we won't be competing with the Grants for long," Jonathan replied. "Either they will bankrupt us or we'll be able to beat them at their game with Mr. Walker's and Mr. Leroy's help."

Justin hid his apprehension at the thought that they might be sitting ducks, just waiting for the Grants to wipe them out too. He struggled to not think about it. While he took care of business, Carrie went with Helen and Mary to visit Mrs. Walker and her newborn son before she came home from the hospital. Fortunately, he was done with the meetings in time to accompany

Carrie to the play that her friend Mary was starring in. To his surprise, his uncle was there as well. He couldn't recall a time when his uncle attended a play.

On Sunday, Justin took Carrie to the orphanage so she could see Ryan. He noticed that Ryan seemed to respond better to her than Mrs. Tobias or Mrs. Edwards who attempted to bring him out of his shell. Carrie confided that she had started coming by to see him every day which explained why the boy was beginning to open up to her. Then she took him to see Helen.

"Where is Mary? I haven't seen her since church," Carrie asked Helen.

"She and her father are teaching Jonathan Monroe how to sharpen his billiard skills," Helen replied. "Apparently, she's better at the game than she thought she was. When she was at Mr. Tyndall's house Friday night, she beat everyone there. Some of the men weren't happy, but it did them good to realize that a woman can play just as well as a man can."

Justin couldn't recall a time when his uncle was interested in billiards. He had a nagging suspicion that his uncle was more interested in Mary than he was in the game. He decided to keep the observation to himself. Instead, he joined Helen and Carrie in their discussion. He was pleased that Carrie thought to include him into her world by allowing him to join her at the orphanage and nursing home. It meant that she was getting used to the idea of being his wife.

When Monday morning came, Jonathan threw a copy of the newspaper in front of him on his desk at work. Justin glanced up from the proposal he was writing for Mr. Dean.

"You can forget the proposal," Jonathan told him. "He just went bankrupt yesterday."

"What?" He wasn't sure he heard right.

Justin picked up the paper that his uncle motioned to and had to read the headline twice before the news made any sense to him. *Carl Dean Loans Goes Bankrupt, Taking Others Down With Him.*

The article explained how the owner of the loan business made unfortunate investing decisions, based on the advice from the Monroe Investing Firm.

"I'm already getting requests from some of our clients to close their accounts with us," his uncle said as he walked over to the window to look out of it. He solemnly crossed his arms. "With Carl Dean out of business, that leaves Conrad Leroy's bank and Harrison Grant's firm as the only places where people can obtain loans."

"But our investments are sound. I've made a considerable profit off of them."

"So have I, but that's beside the point. I just talked with Carl and he told me that his investments were changed without his knowledge."

"Isn't that what happened to Mr. Allen?"

"It is."

Of course, this knowledge led Justin to the conclusion that the Grants were behind this stunt too. How did they do it? He understood that Harrison Jr. pretended to be interested in Carrie so that he could gain access to her father's files, but how did they take down Mr. Rivers and Mr. Dean? Harrison married Julie Muse on Saturday, and his father was at the wedding. So what did they do on Sunday?

"Conrad is safe for the time being," his uncle continued. "We're moving quickly to the top of the list. For all I know, we could be next on their 'to do' list. You've double checked all our records this morning?"

"I have. Everything checks out."

"Good."

He detected the worried tone in his uncle's voice which only increased his own fears. He hadn't realized they were in an unstable position. After a couple of minutes, he finally asked his uncle, "Have you had a chance to speak with Conrad?"

“Not yet. We agreed to keep things as discreet as possible so that the Grants don’t get suspicious. Chad Walker has agreed to act as a liaison between us and Conrad. I plan to meet with him at lunch.”

“I didn’t get around to asking about Tyndall on Saturday. How did things go on Friday evening? Is he still our customer?”

“Yes, he is. Miss Duff did an excellent job of reining him in for us.”

“So she willingly went to his dinner party?”

“I managed to get to her house before Harrison Grant Jr.’s new wife did. As you know, Julie is good friends with Mary. Anyway, I was explaining the situation to her, and letting her know she had the right to decline the invitation if she wished when Julie showed up. Mary graciously accepted and I escorted her to the dinner party, so Harrison couldn’t claim being the one who got Mary to show up.”

“She sounds like a bargaining chip.”

His uncle turned to look at him. “To Harrison, she would have been. To Tyndall, she certainly was. But that’s not the case with me. I made it clear that she could refuse and I would make sure no one else would talk her into it.”

Justin raised an eyebrow. “I never thought I’d see the day when you fell in love.”

The older man shook his head and returned to looking out the window. “I’m not falling in love with her. I’m too old. I merely wanted to protect her.”

“It seems like I’m as bad of a liar as you are when it comes to the affairs of the heart.”

“Justin, I am old enough to be her father.”

“It’s not uncommon for a man your age to marry a woman Mary’s age.”

“It would be better for her to marry someone closer to her age.”

“You’re right,” he casually said as he recalled his uncle’s words to him a week before. “Those investment reports are much more interesting to hold and kiss than a woman is. I mean, who needs to feel the soft warmth of a woman’s embrace? I still haven’t been in bed with a woman but heard it’s one of life’s most pleasurable experiences. Of course, there’s pleasure to be had in the fact that we kept Mr. Tyndall on our clientele list.”

Jonathan scowled at him and promptly left the room.

Justin grinned. He could turn the situation around if he had to.

Carrie decided that she had to get Jim and Mary together. Since she wasn’t able to use the excuse to alter Mary’s dress, she decided to ask Mary over to sample one of his pizzas. She understood that Jim was below Mary’s economic class, but she had grown to know Jim well enough to understand he wasn’t the kind of person who would only display an interest in someone because they were from money.

Since the summer day was actually cooler than the previous days had been, she decided to go for a walk and enjoy the nice breeze and sunlight. On her way to Mary’s house, she saw her brother. She grimaced. She was still miffed that he made that comment about her needing to be interested in marital relations at the dinner party. He didn’t have to come out and say it in front of everyone. It was embarrassing for the entire group to be reminded of her awkward marital situation. She knew he said it because she tried not to laugh at another one of Justin’s odd analogies. She couldn’t help it if she found his comparisons to be humorous. At least this time she had tried to hide her laughter. Who but Justin would think to compare a movie to a visual book? She hadn’t wished to hurt Justin’s feelings, which was why she coughed over her laughter.

She quickly walked down another street so she wouldn't have to run into him. If he knew what was good for him, he'd leave her alone. As far as she was concerned, he had given her nothing but grief ever since their father announced his bankruptcy. It was even worse now that she realized he was right about Justin all along. She no longer wanted out of the marriage, but she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that. At least not yet.

To her dismay, he followed her. He called out to her, but she pretended she didn't hear him and quickly ran into a dress shop. She knew he wouldn't venture in there. She turned to the window and saw him roll his eyes at her. She smiled and decided it would be good to pick up a gift for her friends while she was there. She did have the spending money that Justin had given her. This would be the perfect opportunity to use it.

She decided to pick out a hat for Mary, a shawl for Helen, and a purse for Julie. She wrote a quick note to each person. She wasn't sure what to say to Julie, but she didn't want to continue to be on bad terms with her. Julie was married to Harrison now, so she would do her part to support their marriage. She set up arrangements for the gifts to be delivered.

"Won't you be picking something out for yourself, Mrs. Monroe?" Mrs. Lyon, the owner of the store, asked.

She glanced around. She hadn't thought to buy anything for herself. She glanced outside the shop and saw that Brad was sitting on the bench near the front entrance. *What is his problem? Why doesn't he just leave me alone?* Turning her attention to Mrs. Lyon, she nodded. "I suppose I can get something."

She took her time in making her selection. Fortunately, she didn't have any plans to meet with anyone, so she could afford to be in the store for as long as possible. She finally bought a couple of new dresses with matching hats and a new pair of shoes. She couldn't remember the last time she went on a spending spree but had to admit it was fun.

"You know, I do carry some nightgowns suitable for a newly married woman," the saleswoman told her.

Her face grew bright red but she decided to buy one. Maybe it would still the rumors that she was *The Cold Wife*. Since she started her menstrual cycle the previous Friday, she knew it would be four days before she would consummate the marriage. She couldn't bring herself to discuss such things with Justin, so she kept quiet about it. After she was done making the purchase, she slipped the nightgown into the very bottom of her bags so no one would get a glimpse of it.

Realizing she couldn't hide in the dress shop forever, she peered out the window and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Brad was no longer there. She thanked Mrs. Lyon for her assistance and left the store. Just as she passed the store, Brad jumped out at her. She almost dropped her packages.

"Why are you avoiding me?" he asked as he offered to carry the packages for her.

She refused his assistance and walked toward her home. She would have to see Mary later. Next time, she would let Franklin take her in the stagecoach so that this unfortunate occurrence wouldn't happen again.

"Well?" Brad pressed.

"I don't feel like talking to you and you know exactly why," she finally groaned.

"No, I don't."

"You've been on my case ever since I got engaged to Mr. Monroe. You can be very annoying."

"You're still calling Justin by his last name?"

She shrugged. It wasn't his business what she called her husband. Her husband. Funny how she hadn't actually thought of Justin that way until that moment.

"I'm sorry I've been such a pill," Brad said. "I was doing what I thought was best for you."

"It's strange how other people know what's better for me than I do. It is my life, but apparently, I'm incapable of making my own decisions because I'm a woman."

"That's not true. I don't think that."

She shook her head. "If I were a man, I wouldn't be in this situation." Not that it was a bad situation to be in. In fact, she rather enjoyed it, but there was no way she'd let him know that...not yet anyway. *Let him squirm. It would serve him right.*

"Your reputation is well deserved," he muttered. "I'm sorry I put Justin through this. I should have let you run away on your wedding day."

She refused to acknowledge his statement.

"Anyway," he continued, "I thought you might like to know that Father found an apartment in Oregon."

That got her full attention. "He did?" She stopped walking and turned to him. "What is it like out there?"

"Well, there are a lot of trees."

"So it's like Virginia."

"I suppose it is. I hadn't thought about it."

"How did he contact you?" It would be too soon for a letter to arrive that far from them.

"He sent a message through a telegraph. He doesn't have a telephone yet. He is looking for work."

"And?"

"That's all. Oh, and he misses us."

"I miss him too." She sighed and started walking again.

"When I send him a message, what should I say about you? Should I tell him about the annulment?"

"I'll send him my own message. Just give me his address and I'll fill him in on the details."

"I suppose that's the best I can expect."

"Do you mind telling me why you waited for me for two hours while I was shopping?"

"I had nothing better to do."

She found that hard to believe.

"Well, I can help you carry those." Again, he reached for the packages.

She refused to let go of them. "I got them. I can do this myself."

"Are you being this difficult with Justin?"

"That's none of your business." She breathed a sigh of relief when she reached her home. Maybe she could get Geoffrey to make him go away.

As soon as she reached the door, Geoffrey opened the door and welcomed her in.

Jim must have heard her come in, for he ran to her and started explaining his new idea for a pizza.

"That sounds delicious! Can I try it?" she eagerly asked.

"I was hoping you'd ask. Come on to the kitchen. I saved you a couple of slices." He ran back to the kitchen.

"May I take those packages to your room?" Constance came up to her, ready to do her bidding.

"No. I got it," Carrie quickly answered. She didn't want anyone to know that she got the indecent nightgown.

"Very well, Mrs. Monroe."

Carrie ignored her brother as she walked up the steps and put her things in her bedroom. She realized that she wouldn't be in here much longer but still took the time to put her things neatly away. She hid her nightgown so Constance wouldn't find it when she cleaned the room. By the time she went down the stairs, she nearly shouted at Brad to leave. Why did he have to insist on being such a pest?

"Brad, you are getting on my nerves!" she snapped.

"I'm getting on your nerves? You're the one who's running off to the kitchen to spend time with the cook every time I come over here."

"Jim happens to be a gourmet chef when it comes to making pizzas. Even the head chef here agrees to his talents."

“Jim? Isn’t it interesting that you refer to the cook by his first name but your husband is reduced to a formal name?”

She reached the bottom of the steps and loudly sighed. “What are you getting at?”

“I think you’re being too friendly with the help.”

“Oh, be serious, Brad. I’m on a first name basis with everyone in this house.”

“Everyone but your husband.”

“What is your fascination with Mr. Monroe? I know you’re his friend, but this is bordering on obsessive behavior.”

“Why is it wrong for me to want my sister to be married to someone who can be a good husband to her?”

“It’s not,” she consented. “There is nothing wrong with that. But there is something wrong with you controlling me. Really, Brad, in case you weren’t aware of it, slavery was abolished from this country.”

“You think I’m treating you like a slave?”

“I wasn’t given a choice in this marriage. I was just told to do it. Isn’t that what a slave is? Someone who doesn’t have the freedom to decide her own destiny?”

“Is this about Harrison?”

“No. It has nothing to do with Harrison. Why do people assume I still want him?”

“Then it’s about Jim?”

Were they back to that? “You are making me dizzy. All you do is go around and around in circles.”

“I wouldn’t have to go in circles if you would answer my questions.”

“I have answered them. You just haven’t been paying attention.”

“You’ll go through with this annulment just so you can be ‘free’ from the chains I’ve forced upon you. The way you make it sound, it’s as if women have a horrible time.”

“Personally, I don’t think women are granted enough rights.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Men can vote but women can’t. As if women don’t have the intellectual capacity to make an informed decision on who to vote for. You believe that we’re helpless little creatures that need to be told what to do, how to do it, and who to marry. As if not marrying is the worst thing that can happen to a woman. And that’s another thing that’s not fair. If a woman wants to work, she should have that right. She shouldn’t have to be confined to a marriage she opposed because her father and brother forced her into it. If she wants to work instead, that should be her right.”

“You act like we did the worst thing anyone could possibly do to you.”

“Not only did you take away my right to choose my course in life, but you also made that snide comment at dinner last Friday. My private life is none of your business. In fact, nothing I do in the privacy of my home is any of your business. I will thank you very much to focus on your own life for a change.”

At that moment, Justin opened the front door.

They turned to look at him.

His eyes grew wide. “Did I come at the wrong time?”

She looked at her brother, waiting for him to say something.

“Do you know that she’s been eating Jim’s pizzas while you’re at work?” Brad finally asked him.

Oh, the nerve! She found a closed umbrella by the hat rack and started hitting her brother with it. “Get out of here!”

“Carrie, you’re being childish.” Brad quickly grabbed the umbrella from her and tried to pull it out of her hands.

“You have no right to come into my house and badger me. I didn’t do anything wrong, yet you’re treating me like a

criminal.” She struggled for control of the umbrella. She nearly tripped on her dress to maintain her hold on it.

“I’m beginning to think being an only child was a good thing,” Justin commented. “Brad, let go of the umbrella.”

Brad immediately obeyed and she lost her balance and fell on the floor. Frustrated, she quickly took off her shoes and flung them at him. At least she got the satisfaction of watching one of them hit him on the forehead.

“I give up!” Brad screamed. He turned to Justin. “Get the annulment. She’s not worth it.” He quickly left the house before she could throw the umbrella at him.

Justin slowly closed the front door. He walked over to her and helped her up. “Do you mind telling me what that was all about?”

She rolled her eyes. “He thinks I’m in love with Jim.” She smoothed out the bottom half of her dress. “Just because I try his new recipes with Constance and Geoffrey in the afternoon, he has it in his head that I don’t care for you the way I should.” When she finally stood up straight to look at Justin, she saw that he was smiling at her. “What?” she demanded.

“You just said you cared for me.”

Did she? She hadn’t noticed. She shrugged. “You’re alright after all.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. She felt the stress of her brother’s visit vanish as she melted into her husband’s arms and kissed him back.

“So, are we still going to Earl’s Steak House tonight?” she asked when their kiss ended.

He frowned. “I can’t. Mr. Dean just went bankrupt and we lost some notable clients today because of it. Rumor is that we gave Mr. Dean bad financial advice and those clients fear we have done the same to them. In light of that fact, my uncle and I are going to meet with Mr. Walker tonight to see what our options

are. We're trying to avoid the same thing happening to us that's happened to your father, Mr. Rivers and Mr. Dean."

She blinked in surprise. "I had no idea that things were that serious."

"Neither did I. There is the possibility of gaining Mr. Davidson on as a client. He'd help make up for the clients we lost today, but Mr. Davidson wants to meet with me while you entertain his wife. My uncle offered to go in my place, but Mr. Davidson is adamant that a woman must be with his wife during the day. Apparently, he wants to hunt for a deer before discussing business. Since my uncle isn't married, he asked if you would be willing to come with me and humor the man. My uncle's offered to give us a week at his beach house afterwards. It would give us some time away from all the distractions that is my job. But it's up to us. We don't have to go to Mr. Davidson's."

"Where does he live?"

"He lives close to the beach, so it will be an overnight trip out there. The good news is that my uncle's beach house is only ten minutes away if we take the train."

"When would we go?"

"We would make it there by Friday evening. We'll spend Saturday there and then be at the beach house by Saturday evening."

And I'll be done with my monthly cycle. The thought of being alone with Justin had horrified her during their engagement but now she found that she rather liked the idea. "Alright. I'll go."

"Really?" He seemed surprised.

"Sure. Why not? How hard can it be to spend the day with his wife? I'm sure I'll have a good time."

He smiled at her. "You're amazing, you know that? I don't know many women who would be willing to be around a client's wife for an entire day."

She blushed, pleased that he was delighted with her. "It's no big deal."

The Cold Wife

Constance came out of the kitchen. “Mrs. Monroe, will you be trying the pizza? It’s as good as anything else Jim has made.”

“Do you have time to eat something?” Carrie asked Justin.

He nodded. “I can spare a few minutes.”

“You won’t be sorry,” she assured him as she wound her arm through his and led him to the kitchen.

Chapter Eighteen



*T*hat Friday as they packed for the trip, Justin notified her that they would have to share a bedroom at Mr. Davidson's house. "Don't worry. I won't take advantage of the situation," he assured her. "Should you decide you want to consummate our marriage, I'll be more than happy to oblige you. I'll just wait for your signal." She was too excited and nervous to speak. She decided to pack her new nightgown for this occasion.

When they arrived at the Davidson residence, she noticed that the couple prided themselves on their mansion and collection of flowers in the yard. On the inside of the house, she was shocked when she saw all the cats running around the place. A couple of birds remained free to fly around. She was afraid one would fly down on her but, to her relief, none did. During their dinner, a small poodle sat on the table in the place next to Mrs. Veronica Davidson. She insisted the dog receive the best part of the steak and cut it up into bite-sized pieces and set them on her best china. The dog even drank from a crystal bowl. The cats were given their own scratching posts next to their own litter boxes. Each cat had its own miniature mansion, and the ten birds

had fancy birdhouses. Veronica was an eccentric fifty-two-year-old woman.

"We don't have human children," she told them at one point during the meal. "Our pets are our kids." Then she went into a detailed description of each animal's personality and likes and dislikes. "I even have an entire room where I display all of their paintings. They are very artistic," she told Carrie.

Carrie forced herself to smile. She decided that even if she had to adopt children, she would find a way to have them. She didn't want to end up like Veronica. The woman gave her the creeps. She suddenly realized that the next day was going to be a long one since she had to spend it with her.

Mr. Davidson remained quiet during the entire meal. The only time he did contribute to the conversation was to grunt when his wife asked him, "Isn't that right, Howy?"

"Howy," Carrie soon learned, was short for Howard.

After dinner, Veronica gave Carrie the tour of her pets' houses while Howard showed Justin his collection of animal heads. Carrie tried to pay attention to Veronica but after the fifth house, all the houses began to look alike. By the time it was eleven, her eyelids were drooping. All that she wanted to do was sleep.

"Well, we can continue to talk about this tomorrow," Veronica told her as she patted her hand. "I will have to show you all the scrapbooks for each of my kids."

There was more to this woman's pet collection? Carrie simply nodded and followed the maid, Theodora, to her room for the night.

Justin was still listening to Howard, so she changed into her newlywed nightgown and went to bed. She wondered if Justin found the evening remotely interesting. She had been bored to tears. She couldn't imagine how many scrapbooks that Veronica could possibly own, and she dreaded finding out.

She waited for Justin to show up but she fell asleep shortly after her head hit the pillow. Surprisingly, she heard Justin enter the room and softly shut the door. As soon as she realized he was there, she was wide awake. She heard him quietly move around the room and get ready for bed. She wasn't sure what she should do, so she finally opted to wait for him to make the first move.

He slid into bed next to her. She was keenly aware of his body, though he wasn't touching her. Her heart raced with a mixture of feelings. She was as nervous as she could possibly be. She also experienced an exciting thrill of anticipation that increased the heat in her face and pounding of her heart. She had her back turned to him so she couldn't see what he was doing or how he was lying on the bed. She was too timid to roll onto her back to find out.

As the minutes passed, she realized that he was keeping his word. He really wasn't going to take advantage of the situation. He would wait for her permission to approach her. She wasn't sure why, but she was disappointed. If he loved her as much as he claimed, then wouldn't he at least make an attempt to gain her permission? As it was, he seemed as interested in her as she was in his investment reports.

The minutes turned into an hour. And one hour, turned into two, and then three. She lay in bed, unable to sleep. Her body was too wound up to relax, no matter what she did. She closed her eyes and counted backwards. She imagined being at the beach with the sound of the surf pounding against the sand. *Just the very nearness of him is driving me crazy.* She gritted her teeth and willed the building tension in her to die down, but the more she tried to resist it, the more she wanted him. *Why doesn't he make a move toward me?* Was he lying every time he expressed his desire to consummate their marriage?

Through the next hour, she began to grow angry. *He should at least say something or touch me or kiss me. He should do something to engage my interest as he has done on several occasions in the past when we*

were at the house. She heard his steady breathing. Was he asleep? She frowned. Was she so dull that he could actually sleep with her next to him? She decided it was time to make him aware that she was beside him in a very intimate place. She had to be careful in how she did this since she didn't want him to think she was doing this on purpose. She closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep as she rolled over so that she was facing him. She kept her eyes closed and wiggled toward him until her body lightly touched his. *He feels so amazing!*

"Finally!" He rolled off his back and on top of her.

He kissed her passionately. The very intensity of his actions sparked a fire in her that raced through her entire body.

He quickly sat up and unbuttoned his pajama shirt. He threw the shirt aside and lay back on top of her. "I was beginning to think you weren't going to give me permission to do this," he whispered in her ear as his hands hungrily roamed her body, caressing her breasts and her hips.

"You...you weren't asleep?" she stammered, hardly able to focus on anything but how good he was making her feel. She pulled him closer to her.

"Are you kidding? I've been too wound up to sleep." He kissed her neck.

"Then why didn't you do something?" Though she tried to sound appropriately angry, she was enjoying his actions too much to give energy to that anger.

"I promised to wait for you to tell me you wanted this." He kissed her again. "I knew you weren't asleep."

"How could you know that?"

She heard him softly laugh. "You weren't snoring."

Oh. She had forgotten she told him that she did that. She pulled him closer to her as he continued to kiss her. She was hardly aware of the knocking on the door, but it continued until she realized she wasn't imagining it. Justin yelled for the person to

go away before he kissed her again. The knocking didn't stop. It seemed to only grow louder.

Hands on her hips, Justin stopped kissing her and sat up, clearly annoyed. "Who is it?" he demanded, not hiding his agitation.

"Mr. Davidson wants you downstairs right away," the person on the other side of the door informed him.

She recognized Harrison Jr.'s voice. Apparently, so did Justin. He looked as startled as she felt that he was there.

"Go away, Harrison," he snapped. "I'll be down there when I'm ready."

"He is quite insistent that it be now," the other man insisted.

He rolled his eyes. "I'll be down there when I'm ready," he repeated through clenched teeth.

"Aren't you done with your wife yet? You've had all night."

Suddenly feeling as if everyone knew what they were about to do, she moved away from Justin. Her face was hot from embarrassment.

Justin heavily sighed and resigned himself to the task at hand. He climbed out of the bed and opened the door. "I'll be there," he snapped. "Go away."

She couldn't make out what Harrison told him, but she saw Justin's shoulders tense before he shut the door.

When Justin turned to her, he groaned. "I suppose if I got back into bed with you and continued what we started, he would return and bother us again." He angrily grabbed a clean pair of black pants and a green long sleeved shirt. "I'm sorry, Carrie. I had no idea that Harrison would be here, and I didn't dream for a minute that Mr. Davidson would want to hunt at this early hour. He had me up past midnight. I thought he was going to sleep in." He looked out the window. "It's not even daybreak for goodness' sakes."

The Cold Wife

She watched as he removed his pajama pants. He had a gorgeous body. She wanted to ask him to stay with her instead and to forget about trying to gain the older man as a client, but she lost her nerve as he put his pants and shirt on. Though she was disappointed, she replied, "It's alright, Justin. Your uncle warned me that Mr. Davidson can be demanding."

He glanced at her with longing in his eyes. He went over to her and kissed her. "Harrison said that Mr. Davidson plans to be back at two. After I come back, let's go to my uncle's house and spend the rest of the week there. Then we can pick up where we left off."

The promise of making love later that day brightened her mood. She nodded her agreement, returned his kiss and watched as he finished getting dressed.

"You might as well sleep in," he told her as he tied his boots. "You'll need your energy for tonight."

Her heart raced as he smiled suggestively at her. She settled into bed as he left the room and softly closed the door behind him. Shortly, she fell asleep.

When she woke up, the sun was brightly shining. She looked at the clock and saw that it was already ten. She hadn't realized she slept so long. She quickly got ready for the day and packed her suitcase, grateful that two o'clock was only four hours away. It wouldn't be long before she could get away from the many animals that lurked about the house in the oddest places. On her way down the steps, she nearly tripped on a cat that hissed at her. She jumped back and waited for the angry animal to run up the steps before she continued her descent down the steps. When she reached the bottom of the staircase, a bird flew past her. She shuddered. She didn't like feeling its wings against her hair. *I'll be glad to get out of here!*

She hadn't had any pets while growing up, and being surrounded by so many of them made her aware that none were better than a zoo full of them. She hated to think of how much time the servants spent cleaning up the bird poop. She cringed. She hadn't considered a bird pooping in her hair until that moment. She was tempted to throw on a hat but it was improper to do such a thing indoors.

By the time she reached the parlor, she recognized Julie's laughter as she listened to Veronica discuss her pets' personalities. She paused. Of course, Julie would be there since Harrison was. She wasn't sure what to say to her friend. *If Julie is still my friend.* Their last conversation hadn't ended well. She took a deep breath and entered the parlor.

Veronica was showing Julie one of her many scrapbooks. "This is Puffy's favorite shirt," the older woman happily said. "I made it myself after a pattern I saw in the store."

Carrie couldn't remember which cat Puffy was and didn't really care to remember. The two women glanced up as Carrie walked further into the room.

"It's nice of you to make an appearance," Veronica commented.

Carrie didn't know how to respond since she couldn't tell if Veronica was happy to see her or being sarcastic. "I'm sorry I overslept," she finally decided to say.

"Perhaps you and Mr. Monroe should have come at four thirty like Harrison and Julie Grant did."

So she's not pleased with me. At least Carrie knew where she stood with the woman. "We probably should have," she consented as she awkwardly stood in front of them. "Good morning, Julie."

Julie smiled at her. "Hello, Carrie."

"You two know each other?" Veronica asked.

"Yes. We've been friends for a long time."

Carrie felt much better knowing that Julie hadn't crossed her off her friends list.

"Well," Veronica began, "this is quite unusual. My husband will pick one of your husbands to work with. I suppose it depends on which one suits his fancy. He believes that a partnership should be amiable. Hopefully, your husbands are both charming men."

"Mr. Davidson will pick the one he wants, but it has nothing to do with us, right Carrie?" Julie asked.

Carrie relaxed. "Right."

"Come look at Puffy's diamond necklace," Veronica insisted, patting the seat next to her.

Carrie obeyed, though the couch was meant for seating two people, so they were all crunched together. She struggled to pay attention to the woman but two birds kept circling the room and three cats climbed the furniture in an effort to get the birds. At one point, one of the cats ran on her and leapt off of her head. She shrieked and jumped up. She tripped on another cat which darted in front of her. Startled, she fell to the side and reached for the end table to steady herself but it was too light to support her weight so she knocked it over. She didn't have to see the cat shaped glass lamp to know that it smashed into a zillion pieces.

Veronica bolted out of her seat and cried out, "That was a gift to Zipper on his second birthday!"

"I'm sorry. It was an accident," Carrie stammered. She put her hands on the floor to steady herself enough so she could stand. That was a bad decision, for shards of glass cut into her palms. She brought her hands up and nearly shrieked when she saw that a couple of shards were stuck in her hands.

"You're getting blood all over Tiffy's white rug!" Veronica gasped.

"Did it occur to you that I might be in pain?" she yelled. The woman and her stupid animals were impossible!

“Here. Let me help you up,” Julie offered as she rushed over to lift Carrie by the elbows. “We need to get those out,” she said as she inspected her hands. “Fortunately, it looks worse than it is.” Turning to Veronica, she asked, “Do you have any rubbing alcohol?”

“Get out of this room before you destroy something else,” Veronica told Carrie.

“We can buy you a new lamp and rug,” Julie offered.

“Can you replace a memory?” Veronica asked. “Forget it. Your friend has caused a lot of grief today.”

At that moment, a bird pooped in Carrie’s hair. She screamed and ran out of the room, Julie following close behind as she raced up the stairs. She bumped into another cat on the steps and was tempted to kick it but refrained since she didn’t want to hurt the thing. She simply stepped past it and ran into the first bathroom she saw. After she removed broken pieces of glass from her hands and washed her hair, Julie came in with the rubbing alcohol.

Julie gently applied the rubbing alcohol into her hands. “I had no idea a woman could be so attached to her animals. Did you know she has a house for each one, and those houses come with working clocks, a plush bed and individual addresses?”

Carrie laughed. “She does go overboard in her love for her pets.”

“Maybe that’s what happens when people don’t have children.”

“No. I think it’s just her personality.”

Julie finished drying her hands.

“Thank you,” Carrie said.

Her friend sighed as she set the bottle down on the counter. “Carrie, it was hard to get married without you and Mary there.”

She nodded. "It was hard not to be there." She paused. "I'm sorry I was so hard on you at my wedding. We shouldn't let a man come between us."

"I'm sorry too. It was wrong for me not to tell you what was going on. I was afraid if I told you, then Harrison's father wouldn't let him court me anymore."

"Harrison's father?"

"His father runs his life for him. He tells him what to do and when to do it. He's under a lot of pressure to win this account today. I think he struggled his entire life to gain his father's approval."

"What do you think of his father?"

She shrugged. "I don't really know much about him. Harrison tries to keep us apart. He says that his father will most likely try to tell me what to do if he got the chance. The reason I didn't say anything when Harrison was pretending to be interested in you is because Harrison said his father made it clear that he wouldn't be honoring him if he didn't go along with his plan. I'm not sure what his father's plan was and Harrison said it was best if I stayed out of it. I know you think Harrison isn't a good person, but I believe in him. I think when push comes to shove, he makes the right decisions."

Carrie wondered if that was true or not. She wanted to believe that Harrison was a decent person underneath it all for Julie's sake, but it was hard to accept that notion when her father was forced out of town because of the Grants.

Julie studied her. "You think he's as bad as his father, don't you?"

She wanted to tell her friend no. She tried to form the word in her mouth but it wouldn't come out.

"I see."

"Julie, I hope you're right." It was the best she could offer her friend.

"He wasn't responsible for what happened to your father."

“Then who could it have been?”

Her friend hesitated to answer but finally did. “Did you even stop to consider that your father may have made some bad decisions that led to his bankruptcy?”

Her face flushed in anger at the assumption. “No. He was always careful in his work. Besides, how do you explain Mr. Rivers and Mr. Dean?”

“I can’t but I know Harrison.”

“Do you know him well enough?”

“Who told you that Harrison is behind all those bankruptcies?”

“It makes perfect sense. Why else would Harrison feign interest in me if he wasn’t trying to take my father out of the competition? It’s obvious that he and his father are building a monopoly in town. When they’re done, how many people will have lost their homes and fortunes because of their greed?”

The words were out before Carrie had time to debate whether or not saying them was a good idea. Obviously, it wasn’t. Julie was married to Harrison and would be loyal to him.

“I think I’ll go see Veronica now,” Julie softly said.

Carrie closed her eyes as her friend left the bathroom. She steadied her emotions before she went to her temporary room to check the clock. It wasn’t even eleven and the day was already proving to be a disaster. When she went downstairs, the maid informed her that she would not clean up the mess that Carrie created when she tripped over the cat.

“I have enough to take care of with the ungodly bunch of animals living here. I don’t need you to add to my work load.” Then she shoved the broom and other cleaning supplies at her and motioned to the broken lamp, white rug with drops of blood in it and the bird poop on the walls. “Birds are messy but I didn’t bother them this time so I won’t clean that stuff up either.”

Realizing that Veronica no longer wished for her company, Carrie mutely nodded and went to work. An hour later,

she was done and looked for Veronica, but the maid informed her that the woman had taken Julie shopping in town.

“What am I supposed to do until my husband returns?” Carrie asked her, bewildered and hurt that Veronica would leave her like this.

“I don’t know and I don’t care. I have animals to bathe before her majesty returns,” the maid bitterly replied.

Deciding that sitting in her room was probably the safest bet so she could stay out of trouble, she went back there. She began reading her book but as the hours passed, she grew more and more restless. She was tempted to leave the room but didn’t dare. When two o’clock came and went, she became aware of the growing sense of foreboding in the pit of her stomach. An hour later, she was even more hurt and angry than she had been with any of the events that occurred earlier that day.

At four, she was fuming. She knew that Justin’s work was important, but it didn’t dawn on her until that very moment that he preferred his work to her. It seemed that he was always running off from one business meeting to another, and she was left to sit around and wait for him to return. At five, she was fighting back tears of rejection and fighting the urge to take all of Justin’s things and throw them out the window. Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore. She grabbed her suitcase and left the house. Veronica and Julie were still gone, so no one cared or noticed that she left. She paid the stagecoach driver to take her to the train station. She boarded the train and went back home. If Justin was smart, he’d leave her alone for the rest of the weekend!

Chapter Nineteen



Justin's agitation was growing stronger and stronger by the minute. His jaw was sore from gritting his teeth for the past three hours. He couldn't even walk back to the house since they were out in the middle of nowhere and he had no idea how to get there. He tried twice to get back but only got lost. The trees surrounding him made him lose track of direction. At one point, he even slipped in some mud. He managed to stumble his way back to the two men who looked very content to stay there forever, if necessary.

Every time he asked Howard Davidson to go back to the house, he promised he would in another five minutes. "What's your hurry? We're here to enjoy ourselves," he added.

It didn't help that Harrison was encouraging the older man to stay out as late as he wanted to. "This is fun," he agreed. "We need to wait for the right deer."

"Exactly," the man agreed. "Sit down and relax. You're too tense."

Justin sat in the grass, swatting at the many mosquitoes that buzzed around him, and prayed that Howard would finally

spot the *perfect* deer. It was insane that he should spend twelve hours in the forest in hopes of finding the one deer that would catch his fancy.

“What about that one?” Justin asked as he spotted a buck.

Howard seemed to consider it. “The antlers aren’t symmetrical enough. The head will look too crooked on my wall.”

He stifled an aggravated scream. So far he found an excuse as to why none of the deer were right. One was too thin so it wouldn’t make good steaks. Another was too young and wouldn’t look impressive to his colleagues. Then there was the deer that wasn’t the right shade of brown. Howard couldn’t shoot a deer that was too large since it would be hard to drag back to the house. There was the deer that moved too slowly. “Its reflexes are way off,” he commented. “It won’t be a challenge.” The excuses kept rolling off his tongue. Justin wondered if the man intentionally found something wrong with every deer they found just so he could stay out of the house and far away from his wife who obsessed over her animals.

Poor Carrie. What she must be going through with that boring woman. He desperately wanted to get back to her and not just so he could consummate their marriage. He missed her. She was already a part of him. He couldn’t wait to see her again.

“Do you hunt with your father?” Howard asked Harrison.

“On occasion,” Harrison replied.

“What about you, Justin?” Howard wondered.

“My father passed away when I was two. My uncle raised me, but we didn’t hunt.”

“That’s too bad. A man can build character in the hunt. He learns patience, precision, and peace.”

He can also learn boredom, Justin thought. *Lots and lots of boredom.*

“I remember a time when I went hunting with my father. I was only five,” Howard began.

"I'll be back," Justin said, not wishing to hear anymore of Howard's 'I remember when' stories about hunting. He set down the rifle and walked far enough from them so he could go to the bathroom. As soon as he was done, he buttoned his pants and turned around to see Harrison. "Do you make it a point to watch other men do their personal business?"

Harrison ignored the question. "Do you really think it's wise to stay silent all afternoon? Mr. Davidson might not pick you if you insist on moping."

Justin growled at him.

"Oh come on. Aren't you blowing things out of proportion? It's not like you and Carrie haven't done it yet."

The fact that Harrison knew exactly what he had interrupted made Justin's frown deepen.

Harrison's eyes grew wide. "Oh, you're kidding." He laughed. "You've been married for two weeks now and you are still a virgin? What is taking you so long to make your move?"

Justin shook his head and walked past him.

"Maybe I should have done you a favor and broken her in for you. Maybe then she wouldn't be too timid to have you bed her."

One minute Justin was several yards away from Harrison and the next minute he was punching his nemesis in the nose. Harrison didn't miss a beat. He returned Justin's attack with his own punch, except he punched Justin in the stomach. Justin hunched over for a moment but quickly stood straight enough to land a punch squarely on Harrison's jaw.

"Carrie would never compromise her virtue," Justin hissed.

"Maybe not," he consented as he felt his jaw. "But I would have had her on the wedding night had I accepted her proposal."

Justin's blood turned cold. "You're lying."

“Am I? Just ask her where she was the day before your wedding. You can ask my butler if she came over to my home to see me. She asked me to go for a walk and said she wanted to marry me instead of you. You really should thank me for telling her no. I made sure you had a wife. Well, at least she will be until the month is up since you’re so incompetent at sealing the deal. It’s no wonder that everyone’s calling her *The Cold Wife*.”

He realized that Harrison was most likely telling him the truth. She had been desperate to get out of the marriage. It seemed that she would have done anything to avoid it. All the fight that had been raging inside of him departed. Why? Why had she found him so offensive and found Harrison so appealing? But he hadn’t mistaken her desire for him that morning. Surely, she had to love him on some level to want to consummate their marriage.

Harrison, still grinning, walked by him and patted him on the shoulder. “It’s time you became a man and let her know that she better perform her wifely duty to you. After all, it is your right.”

A surge of hot anger resurfaced. “A real man never forces himself on his wife.”

The other man shook his head and chuckled. “You must like lonely and frustrating nights.” Then he finally left.

Justin closed his eyes and took a deep breath to settle his nerves. Why was he letting Harrison rattle his cage? He already knew he couldn’t trust the man.

Howard called out for him.

He shook his head and walked back to where Harrison was talking to the middle-aged man. *If I knew how to get out of this maze, I’d go straight to Carrie and beg her forgiveness for leaving her alone for all this time.*

“Justin,” Howard began, looking unusually solemn, “I realize that you and Harrison don’t get along, but a gentleman never punches another man.”

As the man turned his back to him and Harrison, Harrison smiled slyly at him. It was then that Justin realized what Harrison had done. He instigated the fight to gain Howard's sympathy. Justin supposed he should make an effort to explain the situation to the man, but he didn't care anymore. He wasn't thrilled that the potential client didn't care that he wanted to spend the afternoon and evening with his wife. As far as he was concerned, Harrison could have the account and all the hours sitting in a forest waiting for a perfect deer that never appeared. If Harrison didn't care to be with his bride, that was his business. But Justin desperately wanted to see Carrie again.

"With all due respect, Mr. Davidson, I would prefer to go back now," Justin said. "I promised my wife I'd be back by two."

Howard looked startled. "Why did you promise her that? I specifically told Harrison to tell you that we would be hunting until sunset."

He forced himself not to punch Harrison again. "I was told that we would return at two," he slowly stated.

The man glanced at Harrison.

"I told him sunset," Harrison lied.

Justin had to admit that Harrison was a very convincing liar. "Fine. How do I get back? Just point me the way I need to go and I'll leave."

Mr. Davison looked like he wanted to protest but decided against it. "I see where your priorities lie. Very well. The house is in that direction."

Justin thanked him and left. By the time he reached the house, it was six. He saw Mrs. Davidson and Julie laughing as they sorted through the items that they bought for the birds, cats and dog.

"Excuse me for interrupting," Justin began as he entered the parlor, "but do you know where Carrie is?"

The older woman shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't seen her since she destroyed Tiffy's rug and Zipper's lamp."

The Cold Wife

He had no idea what the woman was talking about, nor did he care for clarification on the matter.

"She's not here," the maid stiffly informed him. "The stagecoach driver said she left an hour ago."

He momentarily closed his eyes so he wouldn't scream in frustration. When he opened them, he calmly asked, "Did she mention where she was going?"

"No."

He doubted she would go to the beach house if she was upset. Naturally, she would be upset if she left without him. *She must have gone back home.* "Thank you. I will be leaving as well." He didn't waste any time in getting out of there.

Carrie paced back and forth in the entryway, thinking of what she would tell Justin. She'd heard a buggy pull up in front of the house while she was trying to read in the parlor, so she ran to the door, ready to give him a piece of her mind. She had the entire lecture planned out and ready to go. She stopped pacing, put her hands on her hips and got ready for a fight as soon as he entered the house.

He took his hat off and placed it on the hat rack before he set his luggage down. Giving her a pleading look, he began, "I—"

"How dare you leave me all day so I had to fend for myself at Mrs. Davidson's house! You promised you would be back at two, and I waited for you but you never showed up!"

"I can explain." He glanced at his dirty clothes and sighed. "I better take these things off first."

"Are you trying to get out of an argument, because I'm not letting you off the hook."

"I don't expect you to. I just don't want to explain everything while I feel filthier than a pig in the pigpen."

She angrily followed him up the stairs. Since she had to lift up the lower half of her dress so she wouldn't trip on it, she couldn't catch up with him. It was unfair that women couldn't wear pants.

By the time she reached the top of the stairs, he was in his bedroom, taking off his shirt. If he thought she was going to be easily deterred, he had another thing coming. She didn't care if he had his shirt on or not.

"I'm really upset, Mr. Monroe."

"I know." He dumped the dirty shirt in his hamper and gathered some nightclothes from the drawer. Slipping off his shoes, he continued, "I don't blame you for being upset. I would be too if it happened to me."

Some of her anger dissipated. "So, what happened? Did you want to stay out all day with them?"

He went to the bathroom so she followed him. "No. I didn't want to be out there at all." He placed his nightclothes on the shelf and turned on the bath water. "Harrison told me that we would be back at two, but Mr. Davidson had told Harrison that we were supposed to be back at sunset. I didn't realize that Harrison lied to me." He started to unbutton his pants.

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks. He wasn't actually going to completely undress in front of her, was he? He was going to wait until they were done with this conversation and she was out of this bathroom...right?

To her surprise, he walked over to her and shut the bathroom door. "I don't want anyone seeing me naked."

Her eyes grew wide. Oh goodness! He really intended to undress in front of her...with the lights on and everything?

He stopped in front of her. "I kept asking Mr. Davidson to take me back, but he'd find some excuse not to. I tried to get back without asking him for directions but I kept getting lost in the forest. I finally had Mr. Davidson tell me how to get back to the house when I realized he had no intention of returning until

nine. Even then, I got lost a couple of times. Carrie, I'm sorry. I feel awful for leaving you alone all day."

"I worry it'll happen again," she admitted.

"It won't," he whispered before he turned back to the tub and took off his pants. He got into the tub, turned off the water, and took the washcloth and soap to start cleaning himself. "I haven't been very comforting to you about that, have I? You must be afraid I'll be like your uncle."

She fought the urge to stare at him, to note the male part of him that intrigued her, and turned her attention to the wall. She needed to focus on what he was saying. This conversation was too important to get sidetracked, though he should have realized that if he started bathing in front of her, then she'd have a tough time listening to him. After all, the male body was one she hadn't seen before. Naturally, it interested her.

"I just don't want to go through another incident like today," she finally said. "Sometimes I wish you didn't have the job you do."

"What if I never went on another business trip like that? I do have the ability to set down such boundaries with my clients. If they don't like it, then they can take their business somewhere else."

"Is that really an option? What about the Grants?"

"They aren't worth our marriage." He washed his hair. "My uncle is reasonable. I can make sure that I only work during regular business hours, but I will have to go to dinner parties and host dinner parties."

She thought it over and looked at him. "Really?"

He nodded.

She released her breath, relieved. "I could deal with that."

He finished his bath and asked, "Will you please hand me my towel? It's right behind you." He stared at her and waved his hand to get her attention.

She blinked and concentrated on his face. "What?"

He grinned. "I need my towel. It's on the hook on the door that's behind you. I need you to hand it to me. That is, unless you want me to stand up and get it myself."

"Don't be silly," she quickly replied. She turned around and got the towel for him. She held it out.

He looked amused. "My arms aren't that long. You'll have to walk over here."

She loudly sighed and slowly walked toward him.

"At the rate you're going, it'll be Christmas by the time I'm out of this tub."

She picked up the pace. "Here you go." Her heart raced with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. She wasn't sure what was going to happen once he got out of the tub but wanted to find out.

To her surprise, he grabbed her other hand and pulled her toward him. She lost her balance and ended up kneeling by the tub. Her face was close to his and he gently held her hand. Her other hand still held the towel.

"Say my name, Carrie," he softly requested.

"Justin," she whispered. The very nearness of him was making her weak.

"Say it again. I like hearing you say it."

"Justin."

He smiled. "I love you, Carrie."

"I love you too, Justin."

"Then will you come to my bed?"

"Tonight and for the rest of our lives."

He kissed her. She responded to the softness of his lips, forgetting all about the water in the tub or her embarrassment at being with him while he was naked. He reached up and drew her into his arms. She parted her lips and he slid his tongue into her mouth. The butterflies in her stomach fluttered as his tongue touched hers.

When he pulled away, he whispered, "Let's go to bed."

Blushing, she forced aside her sudden unease and nodded. Standing up, she retrieved another towel from the small closet and turned to him. As he got up from the tub, her gaze fell to his erection, but she quickly looked up again. She couldn't look him in the eye though. She focused on the wall behind him.

He stepped out of the tub and wrapped the towel around his waist. She waited for him to take her hand and lead her into his bedroom. He softly closed the door, making her jump. She cleared her throat and wiped her sweaty hands on her dress. Though Helen had taken the time to explain what happened between a man and a woman in the privacy of their bedroom shortly after her mother died, she had the sudden inclination to change her mind and go back to the safety of her bed. But she wouldn't. She did love him and she wanted to finish what they started at the Davidsons'.

"Do you need help out of this dress?" he softly asked as he approached her.

Nodding, she turned her back to him, her face flushed with heat as his hands unbuttoned the back of her dress. It felt strange not having one of the servants do it, but it was a nice change at the same time. He was gentle and slow, taking his time as if she were fragile.

She held her breath as he finished and allowed the dress to slip off her shoulders and down to the floor.

"I'm not familiar with corsets or petticoats," he whispered.

She pulled the strings of her corset, noting her trembling hands. Why was this easier when they were at the Davidsons? Was it because they were already in bed and had time to prepare for this? Taking a deep breath, she removed the rest of her clothing, aware that he watched in the moonlight. She could feel the weight of his stare, as if his gaze had the power to touch her.

Self-conscious, she went to the bed and slipped under the covers, thankful for the reprieve from his intense stare. He followed her and slipped in next to her before she had the chance

to settle into the comfortable mattress. The sheets and the pillow smelled of him. Masculine and clean.

When he gathered her in his arms, his warmth enveloped her, and she knew she was safe with him. He wouldn't hurt her or force her. She lay in his arms, her head resting on his chest which was mostly smooth. A few fine hairs dusted the flat surface, and she lightly touched him, wondering if he'd let her explore him for a moment. And he did. He remained still for a good while, just holding her. He gently rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head. She was grateful to him, for he was giving her time to adjust to him...and what was to come.

Her body gradually relaxed. Her breathing was still shaky but she was no longer trembling. She swallowed the lump in her throat and closed her eyes, engaging him in her senses. His touch, his smell, his patient breathing. She did want him. She wanted to do this with him. She lifted her head from his chest and looked at him.

He smiled at her, his love shining in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time," she spoke, her voice low and uncertain. Her gaze lowered to where her hand remained on his chest.

"You're with me now. That's all that matters."

Before she could respond, he kissed her. She thought he might start kissing her on her neck as he'd done before, but he didn't. He let his lips linger on hers, and she enjoyed that. They spent a couple of minutes just kissing each other. Sometimes, he'd let his lips brush hers and at other times, his tongue would seek permission to interlace with hers. And as their kissing continued, her nerves eased and she became aware of a building tension settling between her thighs.

When he did end their kissing, she heard his raspy breathing and knew hers mirrored his. She groaned as he lowered his head and nibbled at her earlobe. The very tips of her toes tingled with delight. He rolled her onto her back and kissed her

again, this time his lips were more demanding, but she felt the growing need swelling inside her so she liked his insistence.

He moved closer to her, pressing that male part of him that she'd caught sight of while he bathed. Somehow, it seemed intimidating now that it was so close to her flesh. She forced aside her spike of apprehension as he caressed her breast. He still kissed her, and she heard his low groan as it rumbled from his throat.

He made her feel good. Her skin tingled with a desire for more of his touch and more of his kisses. He treated her as if she were precious, as if she were the most person in the world, and she realized that, to him, she was.

She readily parted her legs for him when his hand lowered to the mound of curls between them. She squeezed his biceps, willing him to continue so she'd know what his touch would feel like on her tender flesh. He obeyed her silent command and caressed her. She sighed and arched her back, opening herself up to the thrilling sensations that spread through her.

He stopped kissing her mouth and let his lips brush her neck. "How can I please you, Carrie? Tell me what to do."

No longer shy, she took his hand and guided his fingers into her. His groan emboldened her, for she knew he liked this too. Then she took his thumb and moved it in deliberate circular motions on her sensitive nub.

"Yes," she whispered and released his hand. "This feels good."

He continued doing as she had instructed and she gave herself to the feel of it, letting her mind focus on the mounting pleasure coursing through her. Helen had told her if she relaxed and just felt, then she would be able to enjoy the physical peak that God gave to both men and women to experience. It was part of the blessing of the marital bed, and when her release came, Carrie silently thanked God for making her body able to receive such pleasure. As her flesh clenched around his fingers, she cried

out, pressing him closer to her. Shortly afterwards, the peak faded into a lingering satisfied feeling.

“Make me your wife,” she whispered, still breathing hard.

He removed his hand and eased his body on top of hers. The tip of his erection pressed against her entrance, and she widened her legs and raised her hips to take him in. He moaned and pressed forward, tentative in his movement. She was a little tight, but for some reason, it felt both pleasurable and painful at the same time. She raised her hips and wiggled closer to him.

“I want you,” she murmured.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, his voice raspy.

“You aren’t.”

That seemed to be all the encouragement he needed, for then he thrust forward and she gasped. Even though it stung, it was wonderful too. He filled her, and she had never felt more feminine in her entire life. Wanting to give him the same pleasure he’d given her, she wrapped her legs around him, moving him deeper into her.

When he found his release, she held onto him, noting the way his muscles grew taut. When he collapsed in her arms, she kissed his neck. It was a wonderful experience, she realized, and it made her feel closer to him than she’d ever been with anyone in her entire life.

“I love you, Justin.”

Through his heavy breathing, he whispered, “I love you.”

And there they remained in each other’s arms, content to silently share the moment that bonded them as man and wife.

Chapter Twenty



*I*n the morning the next day, Carrie went to visit Helen. She was surprised to see Mary and Mrs. Walker there. Mrs. Walker had brought her four sons over. She occasionally brought her children over so the nursing home residents could enjoy talking to them.

“What are you doing here?” Helen asked. “Shouldn’t you be enjoying your honeymoon?”

“Don’t worry, Helen. We won’t be getting an annulment.” Carrie blushed as she recalled the way she and Justin had made that official.

“If that’s true, then what are you doing back?” Mary wondered.

“Mr. and Mrs. Davidson turned out to be difficult people,” Carrie replied.

Helen cleared her throat. “You should show her your baby,” she told Mrs. Walker. “Who knows, Carrie? You could be pregnant this very instant and not know it.”

Carrie shook her head. “Really, Helen. Isn’t it enough that I’ve consummated my marriage?”

“Would you like to hold him?” Mrs. Walker offered.

“Yes, I would.” Carrie took the baby and smiled at him.

“Did you hear about Ryan?” Mrs. Walker asked her.

“No.” Carrie felt her blood turn cold. “What happened to him?” She couldn’t bring herself to ask if he was sick, or worse.

“Yesterday afternoon when the children were playing outside, he ran into the street. A man happened to be driving a horse buggy and didn’t see him jump under it. Ryan’s alright but his ankle got crushed. He’ll have to go through life with a limp but he should be able to walk without a cane if he receives the proper help.”

“Is he in the hospital?”

“No,” Mrs. Walker answered. “He stayed at the orphanage. He’s still there if you want to see him. I’m sure he could use some cheering up.”

“I’ll come with you,” Mary offered.

Carrie handed the baby back to his mother, said good-bye and walked to the orphanage with Mary. An idea came to her. “Mary, are you doing anything for the next two hours?”

“No, I don’t have any plans. Do you have something in mind?”

“I was wondering if you would like to try one of Jim’s pizzas again? It would be a good snack before dinner.”

“He does make good pizzas. Alright.”

They passed by a baby furniture and clothing store and Carrie paused. “I wonder if Justin would be willing to adopt Ryan.”

“I think he’d be willing to, especially considering the fact that his uncle adopted him.”

Mary’s words broke Carrie out of her thoughts of what kind of crib and toys to buy Ryan. “Speaking of Ryan, we should go see him.”

Two hours later, Justin decided to go to his office. If he guessed right, his uncle would be there and he could explain the promise he made to Carrie the night before. To his surprise, his uncle had been there the entire night and was carefully double checking all of their documents so they wouldn't face the same situation that Mr. Allen, Mr. Rivers and Mr. Dean had.

Justin walked into his uncle's office. "Don't you ever sleep?"

Jonathan stopped reviewing the papers in front of him and looked at his nephew. "You weren't supposed to come back for another week. What's wrong?"

A grin crossed his face. "Nothing. Well, there was that catastrophe at the Davidsons' house, but Carrie and I won't be getting an annulment."

"That explains the foolish smile on your face. But what happened with the Davidsons?"

Justin sat down and placed his briefcase on the floor. "Where do you want me to start?" When his uncle didn't answer, he continued, "Harrison Jr. was there at the Davidson residence, which I didn't find out until about five in the morning when he knocked on my bedroom door. And he spent the day with me and Mr. Davidson. We sat for twelve hours in that forest because that persnickety old man didn't find the deer that he wanted. Apparently, the animal had to be just right or he wasn't interested, and he found something wrong with every single deer that popped up. Then I had a fistfight with Harrison and decided I had enough so I left and went back to his house. Apparently, Mrs. Davidson refused to be hospitable to Carrie because Carrie accidentally broke a vase."

The older man took a moment to absorb all the information. Finally, he said, "Don't worry about Mr. Davidson. There are other clients, and as long as we keep a close eye on our paperwork, we should be alright. But you and Carrie are alright?"

“Yes, but I promised her that I wouldn’t go on any more weekend or overnight trips to a client’s house. I told her I would work regular business hours and only give or attend dinner parties.”

His uncle nodded. “For now on, if there’s an emergency meeting, I’ll go to it, and if the client wants you there, I’ll have to make it clear that your priorities lie with your wife, which is exactly where they should be. I’ve been putting a lot of pressure on you to bend over backwards for our clients. As of this very minute, that’s changing. If you tell Carrie you’re going to do something, do that before you do anything else. Always put her before work. Take it from me. You don’t want to end up forty-three and only have a pile of papers on your desk to show for those years you spent on Earth.”

Justin watched as his uncle returned to his paperwork. For the first time, he saw his uncle in a new light. He’d always thought of his uncle as a businessman and a father. But now, he realized his uncle longed for a good woman, just as he had. Not knowing what to say, he picked up his briefcase and left his uncle’s office.

The bell above the front door rang and Mary and her father walked into the building with a basket.

“Hello, Mr. Monroe,” Mary greeted when she saw him.

Justin didn’t hide his surprise that they were there. “Good morning.”

“I just saw Carrie. I’m sorry about the Davidsons.”

Justin shrugged. “Not all clients are logical.”

Jonathan walked out of his office and walked over to them. “I thought I heard some familiar voices,” he greeted. “Good morning, Mr. Duff, Miss Duff.”

Justin noticed Mary blush. “Good morning, Mr. Monroe.”

“We heard you’ve been stuffed up in here since yesterday afternoon and wanted to know if you could use a break,” Mr. Duff explained. “Mary made a lunch.”

“I just made the coffee cake. The cook did the rest,” she clarified.

Justin grinned. He suspected that his uncle and Mary got along very well when they played billiards at the restaurant, but he hadn’t thought anything would come of it. Apparently, her father approved of the match or else he wouldn’t have offered to act as their chaperone.

“That is very thoughtful of you,” Jonathan replied. “I could use a break. Justin, will you be joining us?”

“No. I need to take care of some work.” He motioned to his briefcase and went to his office.

Three hours later, Carrie led Mary to her home so Mary could meet Jim. But even as her thoughts were on matchmaking, she couldn’t get her mind off of Ryan. She had mentally planned out exactly what Ryan’s bedroom would look like and when she would take him to the park so he could play. Though he wouldn’t be running, she could help him adjust to walking with assistance, though for the time being, he would be in a stroller. Of course, that was if Justin agreed to adopt him. She really shouldn’t jump to conclusions, and yet, she had a feeling that Justin would be happy to adopt him.

When they reached her home, Carrie opened the door and motioned for Mary to follow her. “From the smell of it, I think Jim is making another apple cinnamon pizza for dessert. Louis is partial to those. When I first got here, I didn’t think those two would ever get along, but they’re like old friends. Even when Jim accidentally drops something, Louis doesn’t mind anymore. He just laughs the whole thing off. It’s a much nicer environment.”

"That's good news." Mary handed her the hat she was wearing.

After Carrie put their hats away, they went into the kitchen. She noticed that it was only Constance and Jim in the kitchen. "Constance, are you actually cooking?"

"I thought I would give it a try," she said. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Monroe, Miss Duff."

"Where are Geoffrey and Louis?"

"They're at the grocery store picking out the menu for Wednesday evening."

"Isn't that the night when Mr. Jonathan Monroe is due to give the presentation for the annual proposal?" Mary asked.

"It is. Mr. Monroe writes it and his uncle presents it," Constance responded. "Thank goodness it only happens once a year. It's a stressful time for the chefs to prepare meals catered specifically for each client's taste buds."

"They don't eat the same thing?" Carrie wondered.

"Some clients are pickier than others, so Louis has to make separate dishes for about a fourth of the clients."

"Would Mr. Tyndall be on that list?" Mary inquired.

"Yes. He has to have his steak medium rare, and if it's cooked too much, he makes Louis and the chefs Louis hires for that night miserable. I won't even discuss what happened three years ago."

Turning her attention to Jim, Carrie asked, "What type of pizza are you making today?"

"I'm helping Constance make the vegetable one," he replied.

"Jim only uses the freshest ingredients in his pizzas," she told Mary. "He has a real heart for people. He wants only the best for them. Such a man would make a good husband."

"That's nice," Mary uneasily stated.

"So, anyway, I believe that besides cooking, Jim also likes riding horses. He worked at a ranch before he came here. He has

a great sense of humor and tells some good jokes. Jim, why don't you share one of your jokes with us?"

"Um, Carrie," Mary spoke up. "May I speak to you in the parlor?"

Surprised, Carrie nodded and followed her friend to her parlor. "What is it?"

"I thought you knew that I have become fond of Jonathan."

"You are fond of Justin's uncle?"

"Yes." She shrugged. "I got a chance to talk to him that day we were at the restaurant with the billiards room. He's quite handsome and fun."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to wait and see if anything came of it first. I suspect he's going to ask me if he can court me, but until he actually does, I can't be certain."

"Wow. Where have I been for the past week?"

Mary smiled. "Apparently, Justin occupied your thoughts more than you let on."

Apparently, Carrie returned her friend's smile. "Then you might get married?"

"I'm still waiting for the courtship first."

"If you marry Jonathan, you'll be my aunt."

"Let's not discuss that yet. Like I said, I need to see if he wants to court me first."

"Alright."

Mary looked at the clock. "I better get home."

After Carrie showed her out, she returned to the kitchen. "So, can I help make a pizza too?" she asked.

Jim smiled. "Sure. Roll up your sleeves and I'll teach you what I know."

She did as instructed. She and Constance rolled out their dough. "Are we going to eat all of these pizzas?" she wondered.

Constance chuckled. "Mine may not be edible when it's done. I burnt a bowl of soup one time. It stuck to the pan. I didn't realize liquids could evaporate when left to boil too long."

The doorbell chimed.

"I better get that." Constance wiped her hands on her apron before she went to get the front door.

"I think I'm ready for the sauce," Carrie announced. "What ingredients do I mix in together?"

As he told her, she carefully measured out what to put in the bowl. She stirred the mixture together. He took a clean spoon and dipped it in the bowl so he could test it. "You got it just right!"

The door opened and Brad gasped when he saw them. "Get away from her!" he barked at Jim.

"Brad, what do you think you're doing?" she demanded as he pushed Jim aside.

"You're fired," he told Jim. Turning to her, he grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her out of the kitchen.

"Mr. Allen, Jim was teaching us how to cook a pizza," Constance quickly explained.

"A likely story," he scoffed, not pausing on his way to the staircase.

"Unhand me, you buffoon!" Carrie screamed as she struggled to pull away from him. As he reached the first step, she managed to break free from him.

Jim and Constance ran after them.

"But Mr. Allen, I have no interest in your wife and she has no interest in me," Jim argued. "You are jumping to conclusions."

"Didn't I just fire you?" Brad snapped. He ran after Carrie and grabbed her around the waist. He picked her up and flung her over his shoulder.

"Oh really!" she yelled in disbelief. "This is barbaric treatment!"

"She and Jim are innocent," Constance pressed. "Check out the kitchen and you'll see that I was making a pizza too. Why, just look at my apron! There's flour all over it."

"Nice try to cover up for my sister but it won't work," Brad stated. "Where is Mr. Monroe?"

"He's at his uncle's working on the investment proposal," the woman answered him, too stunned to stop him as he carried his sister up the stairs.

"The poor man has no idea what's going on in his own house," he muttered.

"But, sir. Be reasonable," Constance insisted as she began to climb the steps.

He spun around.

Carrie had to duck before her head hit the wall.

"Don't follow me!" he ordered.

Jim and Constance immediately backed away from the staircase.

Carrie ducked again as he turned back around. "Watch where you're flinging me," she told him.

"You would do better to watch your virtue." He finished storming up the steps and found Justin's bedroom. He threw her on the bed and started searching for something.

"You're impossible!" She stood up to leave the room, but he picked her up and dropped her on the bed. "I'll sit on you if I have to."

"Oh, the nerve!"

He crossed his arms and glared at her.

"Brad, be serious. Do you honestly think I would cheat on my husband?"

"You've been itching for an annulment ever since you got married, so don't you try to play the devoted wife."

"I'm not playing," she insisted as he grabbed the cords that tied the drapes away from the window. "Justin and I aren't getting an annulment. I've decided I love him."

He snorted.

"I'm not lying."

"Right. Like I'm supposed to believe that one!"

Her jaw dropped when she realized he was going to use the cords to tie her hands to the headboard. She quickly moved away from the headboard, but he pulled her back to it and began tying her left hand to it. "This is my house! You can't tie me up in here."

"I can and I will."

She struggled against him but he might as well have been made of stone because he didn't budge a single inch from her.

"You are going to stay in this bed until you consummate your marriage to Justin," he ordered.

"You're too late. I already did." She twisted her body so she was lying on her side and jabbed him in the back with the heel of her shoe.

He screamed but didn't loosen his hold on her. He finished tying her left hand and flipped her on her back so he could tie her other hand to the headboard.

"You're insane, do you know that?" She squirmed and kicked against him. She might not be able to stop him but she wasn't going to make it easy for him either.

When he was confident that she was securely tied to the bed, he stood up and nodded in satisfaction. "I can't believe I actually came over here to apologize to you," he said. "When I saw Justin this morning, I thought you two had worked things out. I thought maybe you were coming around. But then I come over here and find you alone in the kitchen with Jim." He shook his head at her. "I am so disappointed in you. How am I going to break the news to Father?"

"Oh please! I was alone with Jim because Constance had to answer the door."

He clearly didn't believe her. "You will stay in this bed until you have sex with your husband. Then with Jim long gone, you won't be tempted to stray."

She rolled her eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you that Justin and I have already done it? Not that it's any of your business," she quickly added.

"If that was true, then why aren't your things in this room?"

"Because we were too busy doing other things. I'm not going into detail on that explanation. You'll have to make do with your overactive imagination."

Just then Justin entered the room. "Brad, what are you doing to my wife?"

"Are you aware of how much time she spends with Jim?" Brad asked him.

She groaned so that they would both know how aggravated she was.

"Yes, actually I do," Justin replied. "She eats one of his pizzas almost every afternoon around this time. I was going to join her today." He walked over to her and started to untie her.

"Justin, your love has blinded you to the reality of what's really going on," her brother persisted. "Sadly, it's always the husband who's the last to know."

"Do you see what I have to deal with?" She motioned to Brad. "And you wonder why I was hitting him with an umbrella."

"Nothing's going on between her and Jim," Justin told Brad. "She eats pizza this time almost every day with Constance and Geoffrey. Geoffrey and Louis are at the market getting food, so it's just her, Jim and Constance today. Jim said he was going to show Constance how to make a pizza." He turned back to Carrie and untied her hands.

She gladly sat up and massaged her wrists. She knew it was childish but she stuck her tongue out at her brother anyway.

"Did she sleep with you last night?" Brad asked.

Justin's face grew red. "I don't think our private life is any of your business."

"Thank you, Justin," she said. "I've been trying to tell him the same thing but he won't leave me alone. Maybe he'll listen to you."

"We're fine, Brad." Justin stood up from the bed. "We're staying married. Let's just leave it at that, alright?"

Her brother finally calmed down. "So there really isn't anything going on between you and Jim?" he asked her.

"Of course not," she responded. "Really, where do you come up with these ridiculous ideas?"

"Now that I think about it, Constance was wearing an apron and she did have flour on her hands."

Finally, her brother was beginning to see the light. She stood up and tied the curtains back with the cords again.

"I'm sorry," her brother stated. "I was wrong when I assumed the worst."

"That's better," she remarked.

Justin grinned. "Alright. Now that everything is settled, do you want to eat some pizza?"

"Do you think Jim will welcome me into the kitchen after I fired him?" Brad chuckled.

"You didn't do that."

"I was trying to make sure Carrie wasn't tempted to do something she shouldn't be doing."

Justin looked at Carrie. "What you must have put up with while growing up."

She smiled at her husband. "It's nice to know I have you to protect me from him for now on."

He walked over to her and kissed her. "I missed you," he whispered.

"I missed you too," she whispered back.

"It's good to see you two together," Brad commented.

"Now are you satisfied?" she asked him.

“Very much so.”

“Good. Now you can stop pestering me.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me if I’m satisfied?” Justin looked expectantly at her.

She blushed. “I know you are.” She recalled the previous night vividly in her mind. As she walked past Brad on her way out of the room, she told her brother, “And no, I’m not going to explain it to you.”

Justin chuckled as he followed her.

Chapter Twenty-One



*F*irst thing on Wednesday morning, Justin joined Carrie in Franklin's stagecoach to go to the orphanage to sign the adoption papers for Ryan. She was excited by the prospect of bringing him home. She was surprised, in a good way, that Justin had readily agreed to her request.

Mrs. Tobias smiled as she finished putting together the paperwork they needed to prove they had adopted him. "Ryan obviously adores you both."

Mrs. Edwards put Ryan in Carrie's arms.

Ryan smiled and wrapped his arms around her neck.

Justin leaned over and kissed Carrie on the cheek, and Ryan laughed. He playfully ruffled the boy's hair. "You'll have to kiss me a lot so he'll laugh more," he told her.

"Now I'm stuck. You know I'd do anything for Ryan," she joked.

"Everything is in this folder," Mrs. Tobias said. "You're good to go. It'll be fun to watch him grow up in a good home. Good-bye, Ryan. I'm sure we'll see you around."

Ryan settled in Carrie's arms and sucked his thumb and held his blanket close to him.

Justin took the folder and box full of Ryan's things and walked Carrie to the stagecoach.

"Thank you for adopting him," she told Justin as he placed the box on the stagecoach floor.

He smiled at her. "I like him too."

She was pleased to know this.

He held Ryan while she sat down in the stagecoach. Then he placed the boy on her lap. "I thought Franklin would be back with his new shoes by now," he commented.

"I'm sure he'll be back at any moment," she replied. She wrapped the blanket around Ryan so he could be comfortable.

Just as Justin was ready to sit next to her, a policeman walked up to him. He turned his attention to the officer.

Carrie couldn't make out what he was saying, so she smiled at the boy in her arms. "I'm going to be your mother for now on. And Justin will be your father."

He was sleepy so he barely managed to look up at her as she spoke.

She kissed the top of his head.

Justin turned back to her. He looked worried. "Someone broke into my uncle's firm."

"When?" She didn't hide her shock.

"Late last night. I have to see what's missing from my office. Will you be alright without me?"

"All I have to do is take Ryan home. I'm sure I can manage that on my own." Though she tried to sound upbeat, his concerned expression over the news of the break in made her words sound hollow to her ears. She wondered if the Grants were behind it.

After Justin left, she remained in the stagecoach. She figured that five minutes passed before the stagecoach began to move. *That's odd. Why didn't Franklin greet me like he usually does?*

She reasoned that he heard the news and wished to get her back to the house so she could be there for any immediate updates on the break in.

When he passed by her home, she felt a wave of cold panic wash over her. Something was wrong. She gently put the sleeping child on the floor and made her way to the door. She noticed that they were moving faster than normal, and they were quickly heading out of town. Whoever was driving the buggy wasn't Franklin, and it was up to her to find out who it was. She slowly opened the door. Using the box for support, she stepped up on it so she could get a good look at the driver. She held onto the door with one hand and the side of the stagecoach with her other hand.

From the angle she was at, she got a decent look at the driver. He had on a long brown trench coat, a scarf and a hat, so she couldn't tell who it was. She knew it wasn't Franklin because this man had a different slouch when he sat. She stepped off the box and slowly closed the door.

Someone rode off with her and Ryan at the same time the Monroe Investing Firm got broken into. She didn't make it a habit of reading mystery novels but it didn't take a genius to deduce that the two events went hand in hand. Whoever was driving the stagecoach wanted her safely out of the way...and to make sure Justin couldn't stop him. She glanced at Ryan who had woken up and was looking up at her. If it had just been her, she would have felt better. Not that this situation was pleasant. It was profoundly disturbing, but knowing that Ryan depended on her for his safety made it absolutely terrifying.

She opened the box and searched for anything that she might be able to use as a weapon. She saw the wooden walker that Mr. Walker specifically made for Ryan, which would accommodate his limp. She also saw toys and clothes. The walker was the only suitable thing she could use. As much as she hated to destroy it, she stepped on the bottom of it and pulled the

top off. It took all of her strength to do, but she managed to tear the thing into three pieces. One piece was big and heavy enough to use as a club. She noticed that it had a long thick nail sticking out of it.

She glanced uneasily at Ryan who stared at her. She knelt by him and softly said, "I need you to stay here. Don't move."

He kept staring at her.

She said a quick prayer that the boy wouldn't leave the moving stagecoach and slowly opened the door again. This time she put her foot on the step she usually used to get into and out of the stagecoach. One hand gripped the wooden club and the other hand remained on the door. She made sure Ryan was still seated before she took a step on the box.

They were on a vacant path that was out of town and surrounded by trees. It was too late to cry out for help. She would have to figure out a way to save herself and the boy. She needed to get to the top of the stagecoach. She put her foot on the door handle but the door flung wide open. She grabbed the side of the open window with her hand. Her foot was shaking by the time she returned it to the step she was standing on. Had her other foot not been firmly planted on that step, she was sure she would have fallen out.

Ryan called out to her. His name for her was "Cari" but soon enough it would change to "Ma"...if she lived that long...and if he lived that long. She hadn't considered that the man who had abducted them might kill them. She couldn't think of a possible reason why anyone would want to harm them unless... What if this was Ryan's father and he didn't want Ryan to be taken to the orphanage to begin with? Perhaps he simply meant to get rid of her and keep Ryan. She steadied her emotions. It was no use in getting worked up over possibilities. She didn't know for sure that he was Ryan's father. He could be someone else. Whoever he was, she had a responsibility to protect Ryan from what she saw as a threat.

The pounding of the horses' hooves on the surprisingly smooth trail was loud. She wondered if it was loud enough to mask the sound of what she was going to do next. She knew that there was only one way she was going to get on the top of the stagecoach. Making sure her footing and hold on the window frame were secure, she tightened her grip on the club and turned the piece of wood until the nail stuck straight up toward the sky. She knew she would only get one chance at this, so she had to use all of her strength, which wasn't easy when she was slightly trembling. She counted to three and threw the club over her head and slammed it into the top of the stagecoach. The nail went right through the roof.

The driver whirled around to look at her.

She gasped when she recognized Harrison Grant Sr.

He cursed.

She quickly tugged on the club. Good. It was firmly nailed in place. She scrambled to put her foot on the open window ledge so she could boost herself to the top of the stagecoach. She ignored Ryan who suddenly cried out to her. Just as she managed to get her entire body on the roof, Harrison pulled back on the horses' reins so the stagecoach came to an abrupt stop. Had she not been holding onto the piece of wood, she would have went flying off the stagecoach. Outwardly shaking now, she quickly squatted in front of the board and struggled to pull it up with her hands.

"You don't know what's good for you," Harrison spat as he stood up in his seat and moved toward her.

She frantically pulled on the club. *Come on! Let the nail loose already!* She nearly cried with relief when she saw part of the roof give way as she succeeded in dislodging the nail from it. She strengthened her hold on the club and pulled again.

Harrison put his hands on the roof and grabbed for her arms but the board gave way so she fell back. The club was still in her grasp.

“You should have stayed in the stagecoach,” he told her in a low voice that sent shivers down her spine. “I was going to take you safely out of town and leave you in peace so I could finish off your husband and his uncle, but now you know who I am and what I’m doing. Do you honestly think I can let you live to tell the police about this?” He reached for her foot but she quickly stood up.

The pounding in her ears was nearly deafening. The trees around her began to spin around. She knew she was going to faint if she didn’t breathe properly. The stupid corset made it hard to breathe and move as it was. She didn’t need this stress too.

Harrison gave her the smile that a snake gives its prey before it strikes.

She took the moment to steady her nerves and slowly took a deep breath. It worked. The trees stopped spinning and her hearing returned to normal. She had both hands on the base of the club and the nail was pointed at his head.

“You’re pathetic,” she suddenly said, her voice dripping with disgust.

Her ploy worked. The snake coiled back. “Do you know who you’re talking to?”

“Sure, I do. You hide behind your son to do most of your dirty work. You can’t make it on your own merits in the workplace, so you use unethical means to wipe your competitors. Then you have to drag a defenseless woman out of town so you can bankrupt another business. I’ve figured you out. A real man wouldn’t have to resort to these low measures in order to succeed.”

Having managed to catch him off guard, she swung the board straight for his head. Unfortunately, the horses got spooked and backed up so her aim was off as she wacked him. She lost her balance, fell off the side of the stagecoach and landed in the grass. Her right shoulder and hip hurt but she could easily

move so nothing was broken. She struggled to stand up since her dress wrapped around her legs. If she could wear pants, this would go so much easier!

She didn't see Harrison Sr. anywhere but she did see Harrison Jr. riding up to them on a horse. *That explains why Franklin's horses jerked back.* She wondered why the father hadn't locked the wheels in place. She saw a tree branch that had fallen off one of the trees and grabbed it. It wasn't as good as the club but it was something she could use to defend herself and Ryan. She gasped. Was Ryan still in the stagecoach? Before she had a chance to look, Harrison Sr. appeared from the side of the stagecoach. She cringed. The nail had swiped his left eye and part of his nose. He began to walk toward her when he noticed his son. He stopped.

She braced herself as she watched Harrison Jr. walk up to his father.

"Tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing to Mrs. Monroe. Tell me you didn't do what I think you did to Mr. Allen, Mr. Rivers, Mr. Dean and the Monroes," Harrison begged his father.

"Mind your own business, Junior," his father warned. "Get back on that horse and return to town."

His son closed his eyes and shook his head. "I didn't want to believe Julie when she told me what you were doing. I stood up for you. I told her that there was no way you would sabotage other people's businesses, but here I am and here you are and Mrs. Monroe looks like she's fighting for her life." He looked at her. "I'm sorry. For everything."

"I told you not to ask questions and not to believe what women tell you," his father angrily spat.

"You know, I spent my entire life trying to please you. Just once I wanted to hear you say that you were proud of me. Just once! But you never did. I pushed myself hard to earn your

respect and treated other people as objects to get things done for you.”

“You don’t understand how the real world works, Junior! You think it’s all dinner parties and business meetings? It’s survival of the fittest. You have to be tough and do whatever it takes to make it if you’re going to be successful.”

“I used to believe that. But now that I see what you’re doing, I’d rather have my integrity back. I’m going to start by turning you into the police and telling them what you did to her.” His voice cracked.

Carrie realized that this was probably the hardest thing Harrison Jr. ever had to do. He reached for his father who ran off. She didn’t bother to watch them as he chased his father. Instead, she raced to the stagecoach and looked inside. Tears came to her eyes when she didn’t see Ryan. As stupid as it was to do, she opened the box and peered inside. There was no way he could fit in there but suddenly, she wasn’t thinking clearly. Where could he have gone? He couldn’t even run anymore.

She quickly checked under and around the stagecoach but he was nowhere in sight. *This is like a nightmare!* The fear she experienced when Harrison Sr. came after her was nothing compared to losing a child. “Ryan!” she screamed as panic gripped her. She was half aware of the fact that the father had punched his son in the nose. She cried and screamed the boy’s name again. She frantically went to each side of the stagecoach, frantically wiping her tears so that she could get a clear view of the landscape in front of her. There were so many trees that anyone could easily get lost in them. She didn’t even know where to begin.

Harrison Sr. managed to untie a horse and jumped on it. His son swore and ran to his own horse. As the son chased his father, she spotted the blue blanket tangled up in a large fallen tree branch. She eagerly ran toward it.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Gone. All his business documents were gone. Justin examined his office with a mixture of disbelief and dread. His entire life work had vanished overnight.

“Where is your briefcase?” his uncle asked him.

He looked at Jonathan as if he didn’t understand what he was asking him.

“The proposal for tonight,” the older man clarified. “I need that proposal if I’m going to present it.”

“It was in my briefcase,” Justin dumbly stated.

“Where is the briefcase? Did you leave it in your parlor at home?”

He cringed. “No. I left it here.”

“Why?”

“Because I was done with it. I figured that you would pick it up today and review it before tonight.”

His uncle was quiet for a long moment while Justin mentally kicked himself for being stupid enough to leave his briefcase at work. He never imagined that the Grants would be

able to break into the Monroe Investing Firm since they had a security guard watching the place.

"It's alright," his uncle finally said, breaking him of his thoughts. "Maybe I can wing it tonight. Thankfully, we have backup documents at home."

"Backup what?"

"You do have copies of everything at home, don't you?"

A new wave of nausea washed over the young man.

"Alright," Jonathan slowly replied as he understood that Justin hadn't thought to make a copy of his work. "If we act fast, we may be able to find everything. If I'm right, those documents and the proposal are at the elder Grant's residence. Come on. Let's get them back." He walked over to a police officer and asked for permission to check the man's place for their stolen materials.

"We'll need to get a search warrant in order to do that," the cop told him.

"How long will that take?"

"It depends on which judge we go to and how busy that judge is."

"Which judge do you recommend?"

"Judge Wayne would be my first choice if I were you."

"Great. We'll go with him."

Two hours later, Justin and his uncle sat in a courtroom, waiting for their case to be heard before Judge Wayne. Mr. Walker, Mr. Conrad Leroy, and Mr. Dean joined them. Police officer Osmund was sure that they had an airtight case with the witnesses and the suspicious activities that Mr. Mitchell had collected over the past week. Now it was a matter of waiting. And the waiting was driving Justin insane. Every second that ticked on the clock was one more second of time that Harrison Sr. had to destroy the evidence.

He couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't right. Wasn't it odd that Franklin hadn't returned in the time that it took for him and Carrie to fill out the adoption paperwork? He hadn't known Franklin to take long in any store since he hated to shop. *I should have waited until Franklin returned.* He was so startled that someone broke into his office that he hadn't even bothered to think of anything but going to check out the crime scene. He was beginning to regret that decision.

After another half hour of waiting, he turned to his uncle. "Do you mind if I give Carrie a call to see how things are going with Ryan?" he whispered.

"Go ahead," his uncle replied. "If we get called up, we can manage without you."

He nodded and went outside the courtroom so he could call his home on the telephone. When Constance answered, she told him that Carrie hadn't been there since she left with him for the orphanage. He hung up the phone and tapped his fingers on the wall in front of him. Then he dialed the orphanage. Mrs. Tobias reported that she hadn't returned for anything she might have forgotten. A call to the nursing home and Mary's house reported the same thing. No one knew where Carrie or Ryan were.

"It's not like Carrie to run off somewhere without telling someone where she went," Mary told him.

At this point, he didn't hide his apprehension. "I've been at the courthouse for the past two and a half hours. If she's been trying to find me, she wouldn't be able to." *Lord, if there's an emergency and I'm not there to help her...* He didn't even want to consider the consequences involved with that scenario.

"Why are you at the courthouse?" Mary asked.

He quickly explained the fact that someone broke into his uncle's firm and stole important documents. "So we're waiting to get a search warrant from the judge in order to see if the person we think did it is guilty," he concluded.

"If you need someone to help with presenting the proposal you and your uncle worked on, I can help with that. I remember everything I read and I worked on it with your uncle this past weekend. I was adding and subtracting numbers but I recall the words in the document too."

"You have a photographic memory?"

"Yes."

She had no idea how much this was going to help his uncle. "My uncle could definitely use your help tonight. You can help him remember the key points he planned to discuss. I will tell him to call you once we get things taken care of."

"I understand. I'll stay by the phone and leave a message at the courthouse for you if I hear from Carrie."

"Could you leave a message with Constance instead? I think I'm going to go home but need to stop somewhere else first."

She agreed and hung up.

He returned to the courtroom where the men were still waiting for the judge to hear them. He explained the situation to his uncle who assured him that he could take care of everything.

Justin didn't waste any time. His first stop was the shoe store where he asked the owner if Franklin had been there. The owner confirmed Justin's fear. He hadn't seen Franklin. He went by Franklin's house and his wife hadn't seen him since he left for work that morning. With nowhere else to go, he went to his house to see if Carrie had shown up or if Mary had left a message.

As soon as he entered the house, he saw Franklin sitting on one of the benches in the hallway, looking disoriented. Constance and Geoffrey had given him a glass of water and were asking him what happened. When they saw Justin, they stopped talking and stood up straight.

"Are Carrie and Ryan here?" he asked them.

"No, sir. They're still gone," Constance replied. "Franklin's horses and stagecoach are missing too."

"I was on my way to the shoe store when someone grabbed me and pulled me into an alley," Franklin explained. "The person put a cloth up to my nose. I suspect chloroform was on it, for I passed out. When I regained consciousness, nearly three hours had passed and my horses and stagecoach were gone. I came right over here to see if you or Mrs. Monroe could tell me what happened."

"No, I can't, and she's nowhere to be found. I checked with everyone who's close to her and she hasn't been seen since I left her in front of the orphanage." Justin was regretting that decision more and more by the minute.

He didn't know what to do next. Finally, he realized the only thing he could do, besides run through the town and knock on every door he came across to see if Carrie was there, was to call the police. When they seemed hesitant to begin an immediate search on her since she was an adult, he requested a search to begin for Ryan. This, at least, got their attention. Maybe now he would begin to get some answers.

Three hours later, the phone finally rang and Justin didn't wait for the second ring before he picked it up. It was the police.

"We don't know where Carrie or Ryan are, but Harrison Grant Jr. said his father took them about five miles out of town in a stagecoach. He said that Carrie appeared to be fine but she apparently had to fight his father. We saw his father when he brought him in and she got him pretty good in the eye. Anyway, Harrison said that the last he saw of Carrie, she was running into the trees looking for someone. He thinks he heard her calling for Brian."

"That's Ryan." The pounding in his head was getting worse. He had developed a headache over the past hour. Pain medicine hadn't helped.

“So chances are, the boy ran off and she went to look for him. They are both probably fine though it’s possible that they got lost in the woods. We’re sending out some officers to look for them.”

“What road did he take them out on?”

“They went north on Washington Avenue.”

He took a deep breath before he was able to thank the police officer and hung up. Turning to Geoffrey, he said, “I need a horse and I need it now.” He couldn’t sit by the phone and wait for word to reach him. He needed to be active or he’d go insane. The past three hours had been the longest of his life. The only thing that gave him peace of mind was knowing neither Carrie nor Ryan had been hurt. Though it sounded like Harrison Sr. tried to harm them. He knew if he saw the man at that moment, he would try to kill him. Such rage shocked him since he hadn’t experienced it before.

Just as Geoffrey brought a saddled horse and a compass to him, his uncle showed up on a police horse with Office Osmund beside him.

“We got the search warrant, but we have to move quickly. Grant Sr. set fire to his house before the police were able to apprehend him,” his uncle told him. “The firemen are trying to put the fire out but it’s going to take awhile to accomplish.”

“I can’t go. Carrie and Ryan have been missing for about six hours. I just got word on where they probably are. I have to find them.” He got on the horse. He hadn’t ridden one in over a year so it felt unnatural to be on it but he adjusted to its movements the best he could.

Jonathan gave him a long look. “You do understand that if your documents burn up, you stand to lose all your money since you don’t have backup copies on hand. Conrad Leroy said all your funds showed that you dropped your sound investments this morning. Unless we find those papers proving otherwise, you could be facing bankruptcy.”

Justin felt as if he was being squeezed from all sides. No matter what he did, he was doomed. But he couldn't afford to lose Carrie. "I have to find her and Ryan or at least make the effort."

The older man nodded. "I'm proud of you, Justin. I'll do what I can to find those papers for you."

"Oh, before I forget, I talked to Miss Duff earlier and she said that she remembers the investment proposal word for word. Apparently, she has a photographic memory. She said she would be willing to help you recall parts of it during your presentation tonight."

He shook his head in awe. "She never ceases to amaze me. Alright. Keep me informed about Carrie and Ryan." He urged his horse to run down the street toward Harrison Grant Sr.'s house.

Justin turned his horse toward Washington Avenue and went north. Once he was out of town, he let the horse run as fast as it could. It didn't take long for him to find two other policemen. They were inspecting the stagecoach and the area around it. It was Franklin's stagecoach, and judging from the tear in the roof of it, Harrison Sr. and Carrie had a confrontation.

"My wife and child are the ones lost in these woods," he told the officers. "Do you know which direction they went?"

"I believe Mr. Grant said they went that way." The officer motioned to the direction he was talking about. "We have three men looking for them."

Justin thanked them and took the horse into the trees. Thankfully, it was mid-afternoon so the sun was still out. He heard the other men call her name, and he added his own voice to the chorus. By dusk, his nerves were shot. How could a woman and a child disappear? Certainly, between four men looking for them, they should turn up somewhere.

When he finally did find them, it was almost dark. Carrie seemed to have given up on walking for she was sitting against a

big tree and held Ryan who was sleeping in her arms. Though Ryan was sweating because of the summer heat, he was content to have his favorite blanket wrapped around him. Justin was so relieved he found them that he had to fight back his tears. He wasn't one to cry but the desperate fear of not finding them was catching up to him.

As soon as she saw him, she jumped up and ran over to him.

He quickly got off the horse and held them tightly to him. "Carrie, I was beginning to think I wasn't going to find you." His voice choked, preventing him from saying anything else. She felt wonderful. He kissed her on the top of her head and rested his cheek against her hair.

He heard her softly crying as she clung to him and Ryan. "I was going in circles. I thought I kept passing the same tree so I made a marker and passed it three times before I gave up. I thought I lost Ryan. I've never been so scared in my entire life."

"You think you were scared? I thought I lost both of you. I love you, Carrie." He reluctantly pulled away from her and saw that Ryan was awake. "And I love you." He widely smiled and ruffled the boy's hair. "Have you ridden a horse before?"

"A couple of times," she replied.

"This saddle will only seat one person, so I want you to ride him. I'll carry Ryan."

"Do you know how to get out of here?"

He took out the compass Geoffrey had given him. "The town is a mile in that direction. You managed to get far from the stagecoach, which is why the police and I didn't find you for so long. I'm going to take you and Ryan home and then I'll let the police know that you two are safe."

She looked exhausted. She let him take Ryan and she got on the horse. "This isn't a sidesaddle."

He suddenly understood her hesitation. It wasn't proper for a woman in a dress to ride on a regular saddle. "Once we're in town, you should get off and walk with me."

"It'll be good to get home."

His heart constricted as he wondered what she had gone through. "Will you tell me what happened?"

As he led them to town, she did as he requested.

Though Harrison Grant Sr. was put in jail for arranging his competitors' bankruptcies, Justin was unable to reclaim his wealth. In one day, he went from being one of the wealthiest people in town to being one of the poorest. Jonathan tried to save as many documents as he could but the fire had been too rampant and only Mr. Dean and Mr. Rivers were able to rectify their economic standings.

"I'm sorry, Justin," his uncle told him as they sat in the parlor in the house that Justin would have to move his family out of in a matter of days. "Mr. Grant put your belongings to the other side of his parlor, and it was closer to where he started the fire."

Justin sighed. "I don't know how I'm going to tell Carrie that we lost everything." It was only seven in the morning, so Carrie and Ryan were still asleep.

"I could help you out. You are my nephew."

"I appreciate the offer, Uncle, but I'm an adult and I want to earn my wealth back. I got up early this morning and worked through the numbers. I have enough to rent an apartment and provide for my family for a month. I can take a couple pieces of furniture but everything else will have to go."

"I notice that Carrie's crystal figurine collection is in the box of things you plan to take with you. Those are worth a pretty penny."

"I can't get rid of them. She enjoys them too much." And it reminded him of his efforts to win her over.

"You have a lot of experience with investing. You know you're always welcome to keep your job at the firm."

He considered that option but it suddenly occurred to him that without Harrison Grant Sr. working with Mr. Leroy, there was an investing job opening at the bank. It would be ideal. He would only work regular business hours and the only entertaining he'd have to talk Carrie into would be dinner parties, and she was used to those. There wouldn't be any more Mr. Tyndalls or Mr. Davidsons making irrational demands. He could do what he loved doing and Carrie would be happy with his work hours.

"I appreciate the offer but I'm going to apply for the job at Mr. Leroy's bank. Will you have to run the Monroe Investing Firm by yourself?" Justin asked.

His uncle smiled. "For a couple of months. Then I will marry Miss Duff and I'll ask her to become my partner. I was thinking of having her join the team anyway, but now that I consider it, three is a crowd."

"You proposed to her?"

"I did last night when I realized that you loved Carrie so much you were willing to give up everything for her. I figured that if a good woman is that important, I'd be stupid to let something like age stand in my way. Mary doesn't seem to mind the age difference. I think we will do well together."

"I thought you didn't believe in mixing romance and business." Not that he could ever recall his uncle even having a romance but still...It wasn't common for men to become partners with their wives.

"Last evening, she quoted the entire proposal you wrote word for word and she can calculate numbers in her head in a matter of seconds. Such talent shouldn't go to waste. Plus, she handles clients with great finesse. She was made for this type of

work. It would be an insult to sit her on a chair and tell her to look pretty and be quiet.”

“I think you’ll find that going to bed with a soft and warm woman is much more enjoyable than brining another client to the firm.”

His uncle grinned. “I have a funny feeling you’re right, and I look forward to finding out for sure on my wedding night.” He raised an eyebrow as a new thought occurred to him. “You know. If you get that bank job, we’ll be competitors.”

He chuckled. “I guess we will.”

“Harrison Grant Jr. decided to move out of the state. He intends to start up his own investing firm but wants to be in a place where people won’t connect him with his father. He said that he wants to earn his own way based on his merit. I think it will be good for him to expand his wings instead of living in his father’s shadow.”

Justin considered that his uncle was probably right but still didn’t care much for the man, though he admitted he owed him some gratitude since he stopped his father from harming Carrie.

“I better get to the office,” his uncle said, breaking Justin out of his thoughts. “Good luck when you give Carrie the bad news.”

After Jonathan left, Justin bathed and got dressed in his best suit. He needed to appear as professional as possible for his job interview. He just hoped Mr. Leroy would let him apply for the job without prior notice. Since the bank opened at eight, he was the first one there. To his relief, Conrad interviewed him and hired him on the spot.

“I know you have to move due to the unfortunate situation with Mr. Grant, so I’ll have you start work on Monday,” Conrad said as they shook hands.

Feeling much better about his financial situation, he took Carrie and Ryan for a walk down the main street after he returned home.

“Why are you taking the day off?” she wondered.

“I’m not. I don’t start work until Monday,” he replied.

“What?”

He stopped in front of a building and motioned to it. “What do you think of this apartment building?”

She glanced at it as she stopped the stroller. “It is fine. Are you going to explain about your job?”

“I will. But I need to ask you something first. Can you see yourself living in this apartment building for the next year?”

She frowned. “Are you going buy this building and rent the apartments out to tenants?”

“No.” There was no easy way to tell her. He took a deep breath. “We have to move out of our house and into an apartment because we don’t have enough money to get us past the next month. I figure it will take about a year to save enough money to put a good down payment on a house.”

Her eyes grew wide.

“What happened to your father, happened to us yesterday,” he explained. “The fire at the Grant house burned everything I kept in my office at work. I have no way to prove I didn’t transfer funds to bad stocks or that I didn’t empty out my savings account.”

To his surprise, she burst out laughing.

Was laughing a good sign or was she laughing at his inability to hold onto their wealth? He eyed her warily.

“Just wait until my father and Brad hear about this,” she said between fits of giggles. “They made me marry you because my father went bankrupt and you were rich. And now that I decided to stay married to you, you went bankrupt.”

He uneasily nodded. “Right.”

“Oh Justin.” She hugged him. “I love you. I don’t care if we’re rich or not. I’d marry you all over again if I was given the choice.”

Suddenly, he felt much better. "I just got the investment job at the bank. It will give me regular working hours and you won't ever have to deal with another Mrs. Davidson who'll give you a hard time. The only entertaining we'll have to do for Conrad's clients is a dinner party. My uncle was going to let me keep my other job, but I thought this one would work better for both of us. I start work on Monday."

"That sounds wonderful. I like having you around more often. You may not believe this but I can't remember why I ever fought my father and brother on marrying you."

Now that was music to his ears. He smiled and gave her a long kiss.

"It's good to see *The Cold Wife* warm up," a man commented, chuckling as he walked past them.

Despite her embarrassment, she and Justin laughed.

"I have an idea," she whispered. "Let's go home and I'll show you how hot I can get."

"That is an offer I will never turn down," he confessed and followed her home.