

Chapter One

Medicine Bow Mountains, Wyoming Territory
January 1869

Garret Stevenson kicked the snow off his boots, climbed the steps to the roofed platform of the Union Pacific Railroad station and stopped. Light from the train's lamp pierced the deepening twilight. Snowflakes shimmered in its gleam, were swallowed by the smoke the wind wrenched from the stack. He slid his gaze over the few passengers whose business had driven them from the train to brave the winter cold. There was only one woman among them. She had to be the one. His chest tightened. The flames in the oil lamps flickered and snow swirled through the frigid air, making vision difficult. He clenched his jaw, yanked the brim of his hat lower and started forward, noted the woman's fur-trimmed hat and coat and stopped. The woman couldn't be Millie Rourk. No maid would wear such a costly coat and hat. Or carry a fur muff. He frowned and swerved toward the passenger car.

A gust of wind swept across the platform, and he caught a flash of white from the corner of his eye and glanced back. The woman had stepped behind the partial protection of one of the platform posts and was struggling to hold down her long skirts. Why didn't she go back aboard the train, out of the weather? A stronger gust of wind hit, whipping her skirts into a frenzy. He stiffened, stared down at the two black leather valises revealed by her flapping skirts. Was he wrong? Was she Millie Rourk?

He skimmed his gaze back up the opulent dark red velvet of her fur-trimmed coat. No, his first instinct had to be right. The woman was obviously rich and pampered.

The train whistle blasted its signal of imminent departure. A few soldiers hurried by him, leaped down the steps and trotted to the passenger car. The conductor glanced his way. He leaned over the railing and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Is there a woman yet to detrain?"

The conductor shook his head, grabbed the metal railing and leaped onto the passenger car's small boarding porch.

His stomach churned. He raised his voice over the moan of the wind. "Was there another woman passenger aboard for Whisper Creek who missed—"

The conductor jabbed a gloved finger toward the station platform. "Only her."

He turned, looked at the woman being buffeted by the gale. She was staring at the train, a lost expression on her face.

"All aboard!"

The wind carried the words over his shoulders. A door slammed behind him. The train lurched, rolled forward and picked up speed. His stomach soured. His hands clenched. *Where was Millie Rourk?* She must have missed an earlier switch of trains. And that meant the earliest she could arrive was tomorrow morning. And that was too close to his contract deadline for comfort. What if she didn't make it on time? He stiffened, his pulse throbbing. Or—what was most likely—she could have never intended to come in the first place and had simply taken his money. He should have known better than to trust a woman! Not that he should be surprised. If your own mother deserted you, why should you expect decent behavior from any woman!

Well, there was nothing he could do about it now. He would know for certain tomorrow morning when the train arrived. Maybe John Ferndale would give him a little more time when he explained.

He slapped the snow from his hat and collar and looked across the empty platform toward the woman. She was tugging one of her valises toward the station door. He shot a quick glance down the road toward town. There was no one in sight. The woman would need help getting to wherever she was going. Perhaps he had

found a client for his hotel. He crossed the platform, his boots thudding against the snowy planks. “Pardon me...”

She lifted her head and blinked, her bright blue eyes fastened on him.

“Are you expecting someone to come for you, or—”

“Y-yes. Are you, M-M—” Her teeth chattered. She frowned, tried again. “Mr. Steven-s-son?”

He stared. “*Miss Rourk?*” He’d found his *bride*—unless she froze to death.

“I—I’m—” A shudder shook her.

His manners overcame his shock. “I’m Garret Stevenson, but that can wait. You need to get inside where it’s warm before we talk, Miss Rourk.” He grabbed her valises, carried them to the top of the steps and returned. “This way.” He placed his hand at the small of her back to steady her against the driving wind, gripped her elbow with his other hand and helped her down the steps. He turned back and grabbed a valise in each gloved hand, crooked his elbow her direction. “Take my arm and hang on. My hotel is not far, but you’re so slight, the wind will blow you away.”

* * *

“We’re here.”

Virginia shivered and lifted her head, but the snowfall was too thick to see the building. Garret Stevenson helped her up three snow-covered steps, across a plank porch and through a door—painted dark plum, from the little she saw of it in the flickering light of the side lamps. He stomped his boots on a braided rug, then led her straight across the large room toward the end of a stairway climbing the back wall. She caught a glimpse of a long desk standing parallel to the stairs, and an open cupboard of small cubbyholes hanging on the wall behind it. Warmth from the fire in a stone fireplace caressed her cold face as they walked by. She cast a longing look at the seductive flames and shivered her way after him.

The room they entered was small, well furnished. *His private quarters?* Her heart lurched. He put the two valises on the floor at the end of a short hallway on their left and motioned toward a settee and two chairs facing a fire on a stone hearth on the right side of the room. “You can warm yourself by the fire while I get some coffee. Then we’ll talk.” He strode toward a door in the wall beyond the fireplace and disappeared.

Another shiver shook her. She glanced at a rough wool jacket hanging from one of the pegs beneath a shelf on the wall beside her, then turned and hurried toward the fire. Her long skirts whispered against an oval, fringe-trimmed Oriental rug as she crossed the room. She shook the snow from her fur muff into the fire, laid it on the arm of a chair and did the same with her hat.

Then we’ll talk.

Her heart thudded. He thought she was Millie—however would she explain? This whole situation was ludicrous. And it would never have come to be if only her father believed her instead of Emory Gladen. But Emory always had a charming excuse for his small cruelties. She brushed the snow from her shoulders and removed her gloves, reminded herself she was doing Garret Stevenson a good turn by coming to Whisper Creek to marry him. To *marry* him! Her cold fingers fumbled at the buttons in the fur placket that ran down the front of her coat to its hem. She shrugged out of the heavy velvet garment, gave it a brisk shake, then hurried back across the room to hang her things on the pegs. She placed her hat beside a man’s wool hat already on the shelf.

The warmth of the fire wooed her back to the hearth, coaxed the chill from her flesh. Snow melted off her long curls and made cold damp spots on the back of her dark brown wool gown. She leaned her head back and shook her hair, tried to rub away the dull throbbing in her temples and remember the story she had rehearsed.

Footsteps drew her attention. She opened her eyes. Garret Stevenson came into the room still wearing his coat and hat. He was carrying two large cups, the steam from them rising to hover like clouds over his hands.

“This should help.”

He glanced her way, slid his gaze downward. His face tightened.

She glanced down, saw nothing amiss. "Is something wrong?"

"That's a stylish dress for a maid."

His words were curt, brusque. Her shaking increased. But it wasn't from the cold. It was from the heat of anger in Garret Stevenson's eyes. He seemed to have taken an immediate disliking to her. What would happen when he learned she wasn't Millie?

He handed her one of the cups. "Do you use milk or sugar?"

"Black will be fine." She'd rather chance the bitter taste than anger him further.

He set his cup down on the candle stand at the end of the settee, walked over to the shelf with the pegs and took off his coat and hat. He was a tall man, broad of shoulder and efficient in his movements. She slid her gaze over his suit. Expensive fabric and well fitted—

"All right, Miss..."

He turned and his eyes fastened on hers, sent another shiver up her spine. The coffee she held danced. She stilled her shaking cup with her free hand. "Yes?"

"Who are you? And don't say Millie Rourk. Make it the truth. I can't abide liars."

She squared her shoulders and met the blaze of anger in his dark blue eyes. "And I find people who leap to conclusions about others trying. I do not lie, sir."

He snorted, walked back to the candle stand and picked up his coffee. "And what do you call your presence here in my home if not a lie, Miss—"

"Winterman. My name is Virginia Winterman. And I consider my presence here a kindness to you, and a blessing to me. I believe you will agree, if you will give me a moment to explain, Mr. Stevenson."

"I don't want to listen to some concocted story. I want answers! Why did you say I was going to meet you at the train depot? How did you know my name?"

She reached into her pocket, withdrew a folded letter and held it out to him.

He glanced at the writing, frowned and looked back up at her. "How did you get my letter to Millie?"

"She gave it to me."

"And why would she do that?"

"Millie is...was...my maid. I am in trouble and—"

"You're not *with child!*" The words exploded from him.

"*Certainly not!*" She lifted her chin, glared up into his eyes. "And I will thank you not to impugn my character in such a cavalier fashion, sir!"

He stared at her, scowled and nodded. "All right. I apologize for again leaping to a conclusion. But I have troubles of my own, Miss Winterman, and—"

"I know of your trouble, Mr. Stevenson. But, if you will pardon my honesty, it does not excuse your rude treatment of me."

He took a swallow of coffee, studied her over the top of his cup. "Spunky, aren't you? And that, Miss Winterman, is an observation, *not* a baseless conclusion."

Heat flooded her cold cheeks. She put the vanquished chill from her face into her voice. "I suppose I can be—when the situation warrants it." She took a sip of the coffee, fought not to shudder at the strong, bitter taste and put her cup down.

His mouth lifted into a crooked grin. A *charming* grin. She stared, transfixed by the transformation it brought to his face.

"All right, I deserved that. But let's get back to your story. I have a problem to solve and I'm running out of time, hence my 'rude' behavior." He lifted his cup to his lips.

"I know of your time constraint, Mr. Stevenson." She turned slightly to warm her other side. "That's why I came here to marry you."

Coffee spewed from his mouth, shot by her in a violent spray. He grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket with his free hand and wiped his mouth and chin, swiped it over his vest and suit coat. “You came to *marry* me?” He stopped swiping at the coffee and looked at her. “What sort of trouble are you *in*? And what happened to Millie Rourk? Where is she? Did I get coffee on you?”

“No, it missed me.” She took a deep breath and plunged into her explanation. “My father is a wealthy man and I am his only child. He wants what is best for me—for my future. To that end, he has given his blessing to a man who wishes to marry me. The man is wealthy, and to all appearances an honorable gentleman. I cannot abide the man’s presence. There is something about him...” She shuddered, took another breath, thankful there was no need to say more. “I refused the man’s proposal. My father ordered me to accept it that evening.” She turned to the fire, shaken by the memory. “When Millie found me...distracted, I blurted out my fear.”

She turned back, her eyes imploring Garret Stevenson to believe her. “You see, my father had threatened to throw me out of the house without a penny of support from him until I came to my senses and agreed to the marriage. I had no money...save a few coins of my allowance, and no place to go. I have a cousin, but he stands to inherit all that my father possesses unless I acquiesce. That’s when Millie said perhaps she could help me.”

He stiffened, stared at her.

“Millie told me she had answered a posting for a woman who would be willing to enter into an in-name-only marriage with a young man in Wyoming Territory in exchange for a comfortable home and living. She said there was to be no...*intimacy* involved in the relationship.” Warmth returned to her cheeks. “She told me time was pressing, that the man had to be married by a certain date or lose his business, and so the man had sent her money and a ticket to make the journey. But Thomas—our butler—had proposed to Millie in the meantime, and she had decided to marry him and stay in New York.”

He sucked in air, shoved his fingers through his hair. “So, as a resolution to your problem, you came to Whisper Creek to marry me in her stead.”

“Yes.” He looked furious. And she didn’t blame him. A tremble shot through her. Garret Stevenson wanted nothing to do with her. What would she do now? Her mind raced, but there was only one answer. She needed time to make him agree to accept her offer.

She squared her shoulders and rubbed her palms down the sides of her long skirt. “Please forgive me, Mr. Stevenson. I did not mean to...to take advantage of your precarious position. I was desperate and not thinking clearly. I certainly do not expect you to enter into a sham marriage with me when it was Millie to whom you made the offer.” She took a breath. “I will wire my father to send me funds to repay you for the ticket and money I used to make the journey. And to pay you for a room if you will be so kind as to allow me to stay here in your hotel until the money arrives and I can purchase a ticket home.” *Please, Lord, let him agree. And, meantime, help me to convince him to—*

“I’m afraid not, Miss Winterman.”

“But—”

“When you used the ticket and the money I sent, you bound yourself to fulfill my proposal for an in-name-only marriage. The details of the agreement are in this letter that was in your possession.”

What was he saying? “But, Mr. Stevenson, that letter was written to Millie. You expected her to—”

“Come and marry me. That is true. But she chose to betray my trust.” He set down his cup. “Let me make my position perfectly clear, Miss Winterman. *I—do—not—want—to—be—married.* But if I am *not* married by midnight tomorrow, I will lose this hotel and all that I have invested in it to the town’s founder.” His gaze fastened on hers, held it captive. “The marriage I proposed to Millie Rourk was an in-name-only one with no intimacy involved because I *do not care* who I marry. What I *care* about is this hotel. That is why I chose Millie Rourk out of the many respondents to my postings. As a maid, she would know how to cook and clean.”

Her stomach sank. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Stevenson.”

“You won’t, Miss Winterman. I’m not going to lose all I possess because you have changed your mind about obeying your father’s wishes and returning to marry this man you said you detest.” He stepped to the shelf by the door, lifted his coat off the peg and shrugged into it. “The only man you are going to marry, Miss Winterman, is *me*. And you are going to do so right now. You are sufficiently warmed to walk to the church. It’s not far. We will discuss the details of our arrangement when we return.” He put his hat on his head, lifted her coat off its peg and held it out to her. “Shall we go?”

She could stay! The strength garnered from her fear of being forced to return home drained away. She made her wobbling legs move, walked over to him and turned her back. His hand brushed against her neck as he helped her into her coat. She jerked away. The spot spread warmth into her back and shoulder. He waited patiently while she fastened the coat and pulled on her gloves, then he extended her hat and opened the door.

“There’s one thing more.”

What else could there be? And what did it matter? Emory would not find her here. She was safe from his threats. She lifted her muff from its peg and looked up at him.

“John Ferndale knows I was...*am*...reluctant to marry. Therefore, it’s important that he believes this marriage is a normal, lasting one. And, as small as this town is, that means that whenever we are in public we will behave like loving newlyweds. In private, there will be no personal contact, as we have discussed. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I hope you can put on a good act, because right now you look scared to death.”

She lifted her chin. “It is acceptable, even expected, for brides to look a little frightened on their wedding day, Mr. Stevenson. I will play my part well.”

“You’d better let me do all the talking until we have a chance to work out a story about our courtship.” He ushered her through the hotel lobby to the outside door. The wind howled, rattling the windowpanes. He frowned, tugged his hat more firmly on his head. “I’m sorry to make you go out in this weather, but if you’re to stay here, our wedding can’t be delayed until tomorrow. There’s no chaperone.”

She stiffened, fixed her gaze on him. “There’s no need for one.”

“True. But that knowledge is ours alone. To everyone else, we are a loving bride and groom. You’d best leave that muff here so you can hold on to me.” He pulled the door open.

Snow blew into the room, plastered against their coats. She staggered backward. He slipped his arm around her and steadied her, stepped to her side. His body blocked the main force of the wind. She tossed her muff onto a nearby chair, grabbed hold of his arm and walked with him into the storm.

* * *

“We’re almost there.”

Virginia kept her head ducked low and braved a glance around Garret. Faint spots of light glowed dimly ahead. A gust of wind swept swirling snow toward them. She jerked her head back behind the protection of Garret Stevenson’s broad shoulders and tightened her grip on the gloved hand he held out behind him.

“The snow’s drifted across the walk. Stay in my tracks.”

His pace slowed. His booted feet swept side to side with each step, creating a path for her. She added his thoughtfulness to the few facts she had learned about this man she was about to marry, and hurried her own steps to stay close. Her head butted his back. “Oh!”

“Sorry.” He turned and looked down at her. “I should have warned you I was stopping. Hold on to the railing while I clear a path up the steps.”

He stepped forward and the wind hit her, whipped her long skirts to the side and drove her against the railing. “Oof!” She grabbed for a handhold, fought to stand. Hands grasped her arm, pulled her upright. Garret’s strong arms slipped around her waist and beneath her knees, lifted her. Snow crunched beneath his

boots as he carried her up the steps and across the stoop. The buffeting wind stopped. She blinked to clear her vision, looked at a red, snow-spattered door and blinked again as it was opened slightly.

“I thought I heard footsteps.” A slender man in a black suit pulled the door wide. Garret stepped into the church, and the man closed the door behind him.

“You’re supposed to carry your bride over *your* threshold, Garret.”

Heat flowed into her cheeks at the man’s smile. *Bride*. Her stomach churned.

“In this weather, we’re fortunate to have made it here at all. It’s blowing up a blizzard out there!” Garret lowered her until her feet touched the floor, stood behind her with his hands resting on her shoulders. “Pastor Karl, may I present my bride, Virginia Winterman. Virginia dearest, this is Pastor Karl.”

Dearest. She made note of the endearment, straightened and drew in a breath. She coughed and took another. Snow fell from the fur brim of her hat and melted on her cheek.

“A pleasure, Miss Winterman. Welcome to Whisper Creek. I promise this is not our typical weather. At least I hope it isn’t. None of us have been here long enough to know.” The pastor smiled, dipped his head in a small bow.

She shivered, tried to keep her teeth from chattering, and to return his friendly smile. “Th-thank you...”

“Hold still.” Garret brushed the snow from her hat onto his gloved hand and dropped it onto the rug they stood on, removed his gloves, slid his hands beneath the long curls dangling down the back of her head onto her shoulders, and shook them. His action kept the snow from melting on her neck and sliding down her back. Cold as it was outside, his hands were still warm. She resisted the urge to lean back against them.

“You and your bride must be freezing, Garret. Come stand by the stove and warm yourselves. Ivy will be along in a minute. She went to the house to check on the children.”

They followed him to the stove. The wind howled. The windowpanes on the side of the church rattled.

A door slammed somewhere in the recesses of the back of the church. Quick footsteps sounded. A short woman hurried into the sanctuary, ducked out from under a heavy wool blanket thrown over her head and shoulders, and gave it a brisk shake. Snow flew every direction. “Konrad, I don’t know if they—oh. You’re here.” The woman tossed the blanket over a pew and hurried toward them. “I wasn’t sure you could make it through the storm, Mr. Stevenson. This weather is the worst I’ve ever seen. The parsonage blocks the wind from the path or I’d never have made it back. I wouldn’t have tried if I weren’t needed...” The woman stopped beside the pastor, held her hands out to the stove and smiled.

“Miss Winterman, this is my wife. Ivy will be your witness. Ivy, Miss Winterman.”

She looked down into Mrs. Karl’s warm, blue eyes and some of the tension in her shoulders eased.

“Not for long.” Garret’s deep voice flowed over her. “I’m sorry to rush this, Pastor Karl, but it sounds as if the storm is getting worse. And Virginia is so slight, she had a hard time staying on her feet on the way here. I’d like to get back to the hotel.”

“Yes, of course. You’re right, Garret. I’ll get right to the ceremony. Step up beside your bride.” The pastor looked at his wife and smiled. “We’ll dispense with the song, Ivy.” He cleared his throat. “And I’ll just get to the important part. Oh, did you bring a ring, Garret?”

“No.” He looked down at her. “I’m sorry, dearest, I didn’t know the correct size. I’ll send for a ring after the storm passes.”

She stared up at him, taken aback by the look in his eyes, the warmth in his voice. Garret Stevenson was a good actor. Or a practiced lothario. The thought was discomfiting. So was the silence. Her answer was expected. What would she say if this wedding were real? She pulled in a breath, spoke softly. “I don’t need a ring, dearest. It’s your love that is important.”

“Well said, Miss Winterman.” The pastor smiled at her, then shifted his gaze to her groom. “Garret Stevenson, wilt thou have this woman for thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s holy ordinance—”

She stared at the pastor, listened to his words. This ceremony was *real*. *Garret Stevenson would be her husband!*

“—forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will.”

She glanced up at Garret. How could he say that so calmly and surely? This was *real*.

“Virginia Winterman, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband—”

She jerked her gaze back to the man in front of her. He was a pastor...this was his church...she was making a vow before God! Her breath froze in her lungs. A tremble started in her knees, spread through her. How could she do this? If she said yes, she would be married to Garret Stevenson. Her chance for love and happiness would be over. But she had given him her word. If she didn't keep it, he would lose all he possessed. And she would go home to a forced marriage to Emory Gladen.

“—love, honor and keep him, in sickness—”

God knew she had given Garret Stevenson her word! And God honored those who kept their word. *He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not.*

“—and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?”

Changeth not... She had to keep her word. She buried her shaking hands in the folds of her damp coat and lifted her chin. “I will.”

“Garret, you may kiss your bride.”

No! Garret's hands clasped her upper arms, turned her toward him. Panic surged. He lowered his head. She closed her eyes. His lips were hot, soft, gentle on hers, and then they were gone. She opened her eyes, stared down at the floor and resisted the urge to press her fingers to her mouth.

Mrs. Karl stepped into view, held her hand out. “Congratulations, Garret. You have a beautiful bride. I wish you every happiness.” The woman leaned forward, gave her a brief hug. “And for you, my dear.” The woman stepped back. “I made a cake to celebrate your wedding. It's at the parsonage...”

“How kind of you.” She smiled at the pastor's wife, then looked up at Garret to take her cue from him.

“Thank you, Mrs. Karl, but I think we'd better get home. I'll need to borrow a lantern, Pastor.”

“Of course. There's one on the shelf by the front door for just such a purpose. No hurry about returning it. You can bring it back on Sunday.”

Pastor Karl walked with them to the door, placed a hand on each of them. “May the Lord bless you both with ever increasing love, happiness and healthy children.”

Guilt rose, settled in her heart. She had kept her word, but all the same, she would be living a lie. There would be no such blessing from the Lord for her. Or for Garret Stevenson. Not now. Not even God could bless a pretend, in-name-only marriage.