



A Lowcountry Wedding (Lowcountry Summer)

By Mary Alice Monroe



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Nothing could be more enchanting than a summer wedding—or two!—in Charleston’s fabled lowcountry. A centuries-old plantation, an avenue of ancient oaks dripping moss, a storied ballroom, a sand dune at sunset...

Yet when a stranger arrives, a long held family secret could silence the bells ringing for the Muir sisters. Scandals surface, family bonds are questioned, and promises are broken and renewed. In *A Lowcountry Wedding* Monroe delves into the heart of marriage, commitment, and family ties. *Huffington Post* calls the Lowcountry Summer series “the perfect beach read and a whole lot more.”

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Editorial Review

Review

"There is no way to describe Monroe's writing style other than to say it is uniquely wonderful. She has a heart for the lowcountry and the talent to bring it to life." (Huffington Post)

"I feel like I've struck the jackpot this spring. Mary Alice Monroe has decided to add one more book to her Lowcountry Summer series. And, folks, I'm here to tell you it is the BEST of the four!!" (Maurice on Books)

"The story flows as smooth as silk." (Charleston City Paper)

"Monroe creates four beautifully drawn, strong, vulnerable heroines each grappling with her own personal questions, choices, doubts and thoughts about family, commitment, relationships and the future. Wonderfully written with a poignancy and nostalgia that will warm readers' hearts, this story and its well-crafted, engaging plot will keep readers captivated until the last page." (RT Book Reviews)

"Readers who enjoy Monroe's blend of fiction that weaves family drama by the seaside and environmental issues will want to pick up a copy." (The Chicago Tribune on *The Summer's End*)

"It is hard to describe the beauty of Monroe's work. The words on the pages flow from the author's eyes to create a world of rare enchantment. Next, Monroe's brain assembles a plot that moves the characters from one amazing event to another. Then from Monroe's heart comes the passion for the story, one that is rich with love and depth." (Jackie K. Cooper, The Huffington Post, on *The Summer's End*)

"To describe Monroe's books is like trying to describe the Lowcountry itself. There is warmth and beauty found on every page, and it is simple yet complex in its nature. Storms may rage in the night, but morning always follows." (Myrtle Beach Online on *The Summer's End*)

"If you are searching for a great beach read—friendship, family, a touch of ecology and romance—well, then, this is the book for you... keep tissues by your side as you read this book." (Joan Leotta on *The Summer's End*)

"Mary Alice Monroe is an exquisite author who blends the magnificent Lowcountry setting with human emotions... This is a must read for fans of Southern literature." (Ariesgrl Reviews on *The Summer's End*)

"This is *the* perfect summertime beach read." (Maurice on Books, on *The Summer Wind*)

"Pulls at your heartstrings." (Posting for Now on *The Summer Wind*, 5-star review)

"Written with convincing Southern charm and thoughtfulness, **The Summer Wind** explores the bonds of sisterhood and the challenges of modern womanhood with warmth and genuine affection." (Amy Garvey, Bookpage.com, on *The Summer Wind*)

"Monroe's writing is as lean and elegant as the lovely young women who grace the beach... a cool, refreshing breeze of a read." (Joan Leotta, Recipes for Success, on *The Summer Wind*)

"Mary Alice Monroe has a way with words when it comes to her characters and her locations. No other author has ever made me want to be sitting on the beach more." (Charming Chelsey's on *The Summer Wind*)

"Once you get to know the sisters and Mamaw, you'll want to follow their lives beyond the summer, and the beach." (Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan, *The Herald Sun*, on *The Summer Wind*)

"*The Summer Wind* makes for an excellent beach read this summer." (The Literary Housewife, on *The Summer Wind*)

"Mary Alice Monroe has taken the rich waters of the Atlantic Coast as her own field of dreams. In *The Summer Girls*, she sings a song of praise to the bottle-nosed dolphins that bring so much joy to the men and women who gaze at the creeks and rivers of the low country each evening. Like all her books, *The Summer Girls* is a call to arms." (New York Times bestselling author Pat Conroy)

"*The Summer Girls* is more than just a beautifully written, moving portrayal of three sisters finding themselves and each other after years of separation. It's also an important book that deals head-on with significant issues so skillfully woven into the narrative that I often stopped to consider the import of what I'd just read. If you're a dedicated environmentalist, this book is a must-read. If you're just someone who enjoys a good story, you'll get that, too, and much more." (New York Times bestselling author Cassandra King)

"*The Summer Girls* conveys sound environmental messages through a captivating story of how the ocean and a charismatic dolphin reunite sisters in the alluring ecological setting of the Lowcountry of South Carolina. The story resonates on a personal level and, moreover, delivers a powerful reminder of the importance of protecting dolphins and the environment in which they live." (Patricia Fair, Director, Marine Mammal Program, NOAA)

"Monroe's resplendent storytelling shines even brighter . . . [with] startling insights into the intimate connection between nature and the human heart." (New York Times bestselling author Patti Callahan Henry)

"In the bestselling tradition of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, Mary Alice Monroe skillfully weaves together issues of class, women's rights, and domestic abuse set in the tumultuous South during the 1970s. . . . Beautifully wrought, and rich with keen insight . . . an unforgettable tale of marriage, resilience, and one woman's private strength." (*Bookreporter*)

"Magical! Mary Alice Monroe's writing is always sensitive and true, and as inspiring as the natural wonder about which she writes. This luminous tale—set in the South Carolina Lowcountry that we both love so deeply—was hard to put down." (Dorothea Benton Frank)

"Monroe brings authenticity and a sense of wonder to the plight of the endangered sea turtles and their miraculous capacity for survival." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Monroe utilizes her signature combination of informative storytelling wrapped in the relatable sagas of her protagonists." (*Charleston City Paper*)

"An exquisite, many-layered novel of an unsolved mystery, an obsession, a reconciliation, and a little romance.... Treats readers to lush descriptions of nature." (*Booklist*)

"An author of power and depth." (*RT Reviews*)

"A consummate storyteller." (*The Best Reviews*)

"A master storyteller." (*Southeastern Charm magazine*)

"A strong, warm voice that brings the South to life." (*Powell's Book Review*)

"Mary Alice Monroe has written another novel that is helping to redefine the beauty and magic of the Carolina Lowcountry. Every book she has written has felt like a homecoming to me and...she has succeeded in making the marshes and rivers of the Lowcountry her literary home.... Haunting." (New York Times bestselling author Pat Conroy)

"Monroe makes her characters so believable, the reader can almost hear them breathing." (*Booklist*)

"Mary Alice Monroe has become one of the premier voices contemporary women's fiction today. Her lyrical, emotional, and gripping stories make for superb reading experiences." (*RT Book Reviews*)

"A soaring, passionate story of loneliness and pain and the simple ability of love to heal and transcend both. Mary Alice Monroe's voice is as strong and true as the great birds of prey of whom she writes." (Anne Rivers Siddons)

"Mary Alice Monroe writes from her heart to the hearts of her readers." (*Charleston Post & Courier*)

"Such a wonderful, exciting new read! Very well written and addicting! Looking forward to the next book in the series. Mary Alice--hurry up!" (Books Unlimited)

"Mary Alice writes the most readable books with important environmental story lines, but "The Summer Girls" might be my favorite. It's about family, finding yourself, getting through bad issues that could weigh you down, and enjoying the ride with the warm embrace of family. And there's a wild dolphin who helps heal the pain but finds his own. This book has everything--sense of place, family, strong characters, romance, a love of dolphins and more. This is BETTER than a beach read; this is a great book club book to discuss! Can't wait for the next in the trilogy. thanks, Mary Alice!" (First Reads)

"How wonderful it is to be able to dig into a summer novel and not only get so much pleasure from the awesome story, but to learn, learn, learn...[S]he brings new awareness to those of us who need enlightening." (Maurice on Books)

"[A] beautifully written and thought provoking work of fiction. Mary Alice Monroe once again delivers on her promise to write books that explore the beauty in nature and the complexity of human relationships as she delves into the human psyche." (Linda Hitchcock of Booktrib)

About the Author

Mary Alice Monroe is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than a dozen novels, including *The Summer Girls*, *The Summer Wind*, *The Summer's End*, *Last Light Over Carolina*, *Time Is a River*, *Sweetgrass*, *Skyward*, *The Beach House*, *Beach House Memories*, *Swimming Lessons*, *The Four Seasons*, and *The Book Club*. Her books have received numerous awards, including the 2008 South Carolina Center for the Book Award for Writing, the 2014 South Carolina Award for Literary Excellence, the 2015 SW Florida Author of Distinction Award, the RT Lifetime Achievement Award, and the International Book Award for Green Fiction. An active conservationist, she lives in the lowcountry of South Carolina. Visit her at MaryAliceMonroe.com and at [Facebook.com/MaryAliceMonroe](https://www.facebook.com/MaryAliceMonroe).

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A Lowcountry Wedding

Chapter One



It's never too late. Not to begin again. Not for happy ever after.

If the lowcountry was her heart, then the salt water that pumped through all the mysterious and sultry creeks and rivers was her life's blood.

Carson sat in a window seat of the small jet staring out at her first glimpse of the lowcountry in six months. From the sky she stared out the portal window at the estuarine waters snaking through the wetlands looking every bit like veins and major arteries. Carson was heading back home. Back to Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, like so many of the migrating birds and butterflies journeying along the coast. She was so close she could almost smell the pluff mud.

Carson had been traveling for over fifty hours from New Zealand to Los Angeles, then from there to Atlanta, and now, at long last, on the final puddle jumper to Charleston. The past days had been one long blur of plane changes, long lines, endless waiting, and hours cramped in crowded airplanes. She thought she might sleep on the red-eye from Los Angeles, but she'd reached that odd point of being too exhausted to sleep. She couldn't turn off her brain.

She was drained after four months of film photography in the wild forests of New Zealand followed by extended postproduction work. Her life had been a series of breakfast, lunch, and dinner meetings where the powers-that-be debated over the best shots for the film's press and publicity. The film's star was a major A-list actor with a high "kill shot" allowance, which meant he could select those photographs he liked and reject those he did not. This prima donna had killed 75 percent of Carson's best work because he had an issue with his nose. In all that time Carson didn't have a free moment to surf, kite, or even stick a toe in the Pacific Ocean. Not even during her two-day stopover in Los Angeles. She'd packed up her few belongings from storage, had them shipped to Sullivan's Island, knocked on a few doors to bid farewell to friends, then called a cab and headed to LAX. Too long a time away from the water put her in a dismal state of mind. She felt fried. She couldn't wait to get home to the good ol' Atlantic.

Home.

Carson tried to stretch her impossibly long legs in the cramped space of economy seating, wondering again if she'd really been so clever to exchange her first-class seats and pocket the money. Resting her chin in her palm, she stared out the small oval window, marveling how, after years on the road, she'd actually been homesick. Carson was lucky to have had a successful run of gigs with shooting on location and long flights back to LA. She'd been good at her job, cooperative, indefatigable on the set. Her personal life consisted of long-term friends and countless short-term suitors. By the time she hit thirty-four, however, the long hours and endless partying, the ever-present alcohol and drugs, began to take their toll. Her work got sloppy, she was drinking too much, and her work ethic grew lazy. When she'd overslept and missed a major scene, it was the last straw for the director and he fired her on the spot. Word got out and her reputation was ruined. No one would hire her.

It had been a long dry spell until that same director, Kowalski, himself a recovering alcoholic, learned Carson had joined AA and offered her a second chance. Carson had given this film her best work, and despite the frustration of the many setbacks and the prima donna actor, she'd stayed clean. Kowalski noticed. At the film's closing he shook her hand, then offered her another film job. That offer had meant the world to Carson. Not only had her reputation been restored, but she'd proved to herself she could stop drinking under pressure. She'd felt validated and proud—and hopeful.

Carson blew out a stream of air. Now she was in a quandary. She'd promised Blake that this would be her last film gig. That she would end her wandering, return in four short months to settle down with him in Charleston to marry and start a new and different life. A life that meant she'd have to begin the dreaded task of searching for any work she could get in a tight job market. That was the plan. Yet when Kowalski offered her another film job, she couldn't flat-out refuse. Instead, she'd asked him for time to consider the offer.

She shuddered at the thought of once again joining the ranks of the unemployed. She'd been out of work so long she'd lost her self-esteem. This time, rather than spend recklessly, Carson had saved money from this gig to tide her over until she got another job. Whatever and whenever that was. But it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. She had to land a job soon. Carson was too proud to enter a marriage penniless, jobless, and completely dependent on Blake.

Carson looked down at the small diamond bordered on either side with a sapphire resting on her ring finger. Her engagement ring had been Blake's mother's ring and her mother's before her, thus all the more meaningful to Carson. This symbol of his love, of continuance and commitment, had been her touchstone during the six months they'd been apart. She'd held tight to the ring and all the promises it held whenever she'd been tempted to drink—and she'd remained sober. It had been hard, there was no denying it. At times she'd almost slipped. But she'd held on to the promise of the ring.

She covered her hand with her other palm, squeezing tight as she took a deep breath. Was love enough to calm her fears? Could she maintain her independence, her sense of self, if she relinquished her career? She couldn't bear falling back into the wallowing self-pity of the previous summer.

Her racing thoughts were jarred by the grinding noise of the wheels lowering beneath her. Her heart quickened as touchdown approached. Almost there. Across the aisle a young couple sat, shoulders touching, holding hands. She recognized them as a couple that had boarded the plane with her in Atlanta. The young man's hair had been shorn by an energetic barber. He wore a crisp blue gingham shirt under his navy blazer and a sweet smile as he looked into the woman's eyes. Her blond hair was long and curled, and she wore the classic pink Lilly Pulitzer dress and matching sweater, and the ubiquitous pearls at the ears and neck. Looking up at him, she beamed. They had to be newlyweds, Carson thought. Or another in a long line of couples who came to Charleston to get married.

Like me, she thought, and the notion surprised her. This was more than a return home to Sea Breeze. She, too, was a young bride flying in to get married. Carson studied the young woman. She was in her early twenties, and fresh as a dewdrop. Utterly enamored with her beau. Is that what I should look like? Carson wondered. Brimming over with dew and sunshine?

She glanced down at her California-chic style of clothing. Faded jeans torn at the knees, a long boyfriend shirt, rows of bracelets on an arm, and strands of beads at the neck. Turquoise and silver hoops at the ears and cowboy boots on her feet. Her long dark hair was twined into a thick braid that fell over her shoulder. She hardly thought anyone would use "dew and sunshine" to describe her. To begin with, she was at least a decade older than that sweet Georgia peach. Studying her dewy-eyed expression, Carson couldn't help but

wonder if the young woman shouldn't wait a few years before getting married. Experience more of life before settling.

After all, girls were getting married later now. She'd read that twenty-seven was the average age of today's bride, closer to Harper's age. In bigger cities such as New York, Washington, and Los Angeles, women were disinclined to tie the knot before they were well into their thirties. At thirty-four, Carson wasn't completely sure she was ready even yet.

With a great thump and screeching of brakes the plane landed at Charleston International Airport, jolting Carson's thoughts. Soon the plane was filled with the sounds of seat belts clicking and rustling as restless passengers stood and anticipated an escape from confinement and the continuation of their journeys. She felt herself awakening at the prospect of seeing Blake again. She needed to freshen up before she faced him after so long a time.

In the ladies' room Carson stood in front of the industrial mirror under the harsh light. She saw the ravages of long hours of travel and exhaustion in the chalkiness of her skin. Her blue eyes, usually brilliant, appeared dull and bruised by the dark circles. After rinsing her face with cold water and patting it dry with paper towels, she dug into her large leather bag and pulled out her makeup. She added just enough blush to look healthy, a smattering of shadow and lip gloss. Then she untwined her braid and brushed it until it fell like glossy dark silk down her back. Blake loved her hair, liked to wrap his fist in it when he kissed her.

She stuffed everything back into her bag and straightened her shoulders.

"Dew and sunshine," she said, feeling the bride-to-be at last. She grabbed her suitcase and strode into the corridor. When she reached the exit guard to the terminal, she heard Blake's voice.

"Carson!"

She swung her head toward the sound, surprised. She'd expected him to pick her up at baggage claim. But there he stood at the exit, looking very much the same tall, slender, and tanned man she'd left last fall. Over the winter his dark hair had grown longer. Thick curls amassed on his head, not yet shorn for the summer. His eyes were the color of chocolate and they were warm now, bubbling over with anticipation. When their gazes met, he lifted his hand in a boisterous wave, revealing an enormous bouquet of white roses.

All her nervousness, worries, and fatigue fled the moment she saw him. Like a light at the end of a tunnel, his gaze called to her.

"Blake!"

Suddenly she was grinning wide, face flushed, trotting in her boots to close the distance between them. In a rush his arms were around her, holding her tight, her lips smashed against his in a devouring kiss that was filled with discovery, reconnection, and promise.

"Baby, you're home," he said against her cheek.

Hearing the words, she felt the truth in them. She was home.

He grabbed her bags, eyes only on her, oblivious of the glances they were gathering, mostly from young girls and older women with smiles on their faces.

The drive from the airport in Blake's pickup was filled with catch-up conversation, questions fired and answered, mixed with laughter. Outside, the day was dreary. Rain whipped the windshield while the wipers clicked like metronomes. They crept along Coleman Boulevard, past shops lit up like night, though it was barely one o'clock in the afternoon. Blake kept a firm grip on her hand, releasing it briefly only to shift gears, then clasping it again, as though afraid the bird would fly off again. As they left the mainland and headed over the wetlands, she looked out to see that the tide was so high only the tips of grass were visible, like some great green lawn seemingly ready to overflow with the rain. She knew that in six hours the powerful tides would turn and the water would recede again, exposing mounds of mudflats with glistening black, sharp-tipped oyster shells, an army of fiddler crabs, and, if the storm was over, regal snowy egrets. These, she thought, were the seaside sentinels welcoming her home to the lowcountry.

They went directly to Blake's apartment on Sullivan's Island. Once a military barracks, the long, white wood building had been converted to apartments. The history of a military presence on the island went back to the Revolutionary War. Passing Fort Moultrie, Stella Maris Church, her hand went to the window, as though to caress these touchstones. If she turned here toward the back of the island, she'd head toward Sea Breeze, she thought. But Blake drove straight down Middle Street.

They held hands as they climbed the stairs to Blake's apartment, then paused at the door and smiled. They both knew what awaited them on the other side. Once the key entered the lock, Hobbs began his deep-throated huff of warning. They heard the dog's nails clicking on the hardwood, then the exploratory deep sniffs at the door.

"Are you ready for your welcome?" Blake asked, turning the key.

Carson smiled and nodded, bracing herself. When the door opened, the giant golden Labrador licked Blake's hand, then immediately went to sniff the new person—Carson's boots, her jeans, her extended hand. Then, with a high yelp of recognition, Hobbs began barking and whining with excitement, his tail waving back and forth. Carson couldn't have asked for a warmer homecoming. She bent low to scratch behind his ears and pet his fur.

After Blake settled his dog and they entered the small two-bedroom apartment, a moment of tension came between them, the first since she'd seen him. The air around them felt charged with energy and want.

"I'll put the flowers in water," Blake said, taking the roses from her.

She brought them to her nose, inhaling their heady scent once more before relinquishing them to Blake. He was watching her, his pupils pulsing. He stood motionless for a second, then in a sweep tossed the roses to the nearby sofa and stepped forward to place his long hands on her cheeks and draw her lips to his.

He drank from her lips like a man parched. His tongue probed, separating her lips and plunging into the moisture he'd not tasted for months. She welcomed him, clasping herself tighter to him with a soft moan in her throat. It was always like this with them. A kiss was like spontaneous combustion. Neither of them could stop now, nor would they want to. Outside, lightning flashed, and seconds later, thunder rumbled close, loud. The lights flickered. Hobbs whined and curled up in his bed.

Blake pulled back from Carson's lips, let his hands slide down her arms to her hands, and said, "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too."

He took her hand and, without another word spoken, led her to his room and to his bed. The cold front gusted at the windows, rattling the frames as rain sluiced through the air. But inside, the small apartment welcomed the lovers and protected them from the storm.



“It’s still raining,” Carson said.

She lay on her back, her long dark hair spilling over the pillows, one arm flung over her forehead. Her breathing had calmed, and spent, she felt suddenly tired, as if she could sleep for hours listening to the rain pattering outdoors. Lovemaking often had this effect on her. Unwinding like a tight coil, the passion gave her a great release.

“It’s supposed to rain all day, then move on tonight. Tomorrow should be sunny.” Blake rolled to his side and propped his head on his palm. He reached out to shift the sheet up over her naked breasts. “You must have jet lag. Rest.”

“I am tired.”

“It was a good idea to stop here first, before going to Sea Breeze. Give you time to decompress. Besides, I want my time first, before I have to share you with everyone else.”

Carson lifted her arm to gently slide her hand along the side of his head. “True, though I miss them. Especially Mamaw. But, yes, we need this time alone. To talk.”

“And sleep. It’s a good day for sleep.”

“Yes.” Her lids blinked slowly, listening to the patter of rain on the roof. She felt safe here, with Blake, protected from whatever ill winds blew outside this apartment.

“Oh, Blake,” she said in a choked whisper. “I’d forgotten what it was like here with you.”

He smiled. “Then don’t go away again.”

He gathered her closer to him so she could rest her head on his shoulder. They lay entwined in each other’s arms, listening to the softer roll of thunder compete with Hobbs’s snores.

Carson’s fingers played with the hairs on his chest. Furrowing her brows in consternation, she sighed heavily.

“What?” he asked, alert to her shift in mood.

“Oh, I’ve been wondering. . . .” She looked at Blake and saw his alert expression. Like a man waiting for the other shoe to drop. She paused. Carson had hurt him before. She couldn’t hurt him again. She tried to couch her words.

“While I was away, the work was hard, yes. Demanding. Frustrating. That cyclone that hit really slowed down production. I’ve lived through Category One hurricanes here on the island before, but this cyclone was worse. There were moments I wasn’t sure we’d make it. We were all pretty scared.” She snorted. “I don’t

know if Kowalski was more afraid of the storm or the cost of the delay.”

Blake waited without speaking, his hand stroking her bare arm.

“All those delays. I know I swore I’d be back earlier. I’m months late. I couldn’t help them. I’m sorry.”

“I know. We talked about it. It’s done. You’re here now.”

Carson hesitated. “I also said that I wouldn’t take another film job.”

Blake’s gaze sharpened. “Did you?”

“No.” She took a breath. “Not yet. But Kowalski offered me another job. A good one, with good pay. He told me I did an excellent job.” Her lips turned up. “That applied to my not drinking, too.”

Blake nodded slowly, his brow furrowing as though he wasn’t quite sure what she was getting at, but he knew he didn’t much like where it was going. “That’s what you wanted. Validation. Your self-esteem back. You succeeded.”

“Yes. And it feels wonderful. It’s like I got myself back.” Her hand touched her heart. “The strong, confident me. Feeling that again, I . . .” She took a breath. “I can’t go back to the way I was last summer. Lost, penniless, unable to get a job.”

“The way you felt last summer had a lot more to do with all that you learned about yourself than the job issue. You joined AA. That took a lot of personal strength. And your bond with your sisters. I like to think I was part of that, too.”

“You were. Of course you were. But learning that about myself and going out into the world, testing myself and succeeding, are two different things. I’m a recovering alcoholic. I’ll never be cured. The temptation to drink is present every day, and every day I have to have the personal strength to say no. To do that, I have to be centered and strong. Blake, I’m terrified of going back to that woman I was last summer—broke, wallowing, unemployed. So I’m wondering . . . why do I need to go through that when I was offered another job? One perfectly in line with my career, too. I know people who would kill for that job offer.”

Blake gently disentangled himself from her arms and rose to sit on the bed. He crossed his legs and looked out the window a moment, but she knew he wasn’t looking at the rain.

“How long would this job take you away for?”

“I’m not sure of the details, but probably two months.”

“Does that mean four?”

“Hey, a cyclone doesn’t usually hit while filming.”

“But there are delays.”

“Sometimes. Of course.”

Blake shook his head. “You said this was your last film job.”

“I know. At the time I thought it was. But I’m not sure now. I have nothing else here.”

Blake snorted derisively.

“I don’t mean you. You know that.”

“You haven’t looked.”

Carson scrambled to rise and sit across from him, unaware of, unconcerned about, her nakedness. “Yes, I have! Last summer. All summer. I had to take pity donations from Harper.” Carson shook her head violently. “I can’t do that again. And why should I? Why should I take a job I don’t love when I have a job that I do love?”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

She looked at him questioningly.

“We’ll be married. You’ll be my wife. You won’t be penniless. What’s mine is yours. That’s what a marriage is.”

Carson took a deep breath and turned away from the sincerity on his face. The room was half-dark with the lights off and the dark sky outdoors. “Please understand,” she began, trying hard to keep her voice calm and reasonable, “that I appreciate that. But I can’t sit back and let you take care of me. I need to feel I can take care of myself. You know how I grew up—my father took me away from Mamaw when I was a little girl and moved me to Los Angeles, where he was going to make his name and fortune. He was always trying to write or sell something. By then he’d given up on his dream to write the great American novel and got into screenplays, magazine pieces, ghostwriting, anything he could so that he could pay the rent. And when he couldn’t, he took what little money we had and got drunk. I learned pretty early to depend on myself. I had to hide his money to buy groceries. I cooked, cleaned, got myself to school. I was more the parent than he was. When I turned eighteen, I’d had enough and left. When he died a few years later, I was sad. But I also felt a little relief.” She shrugged, a physical effort to remove the guilt she carried. “It’s always been me, taking care of me. That’s all I’ve ever known.”

“First, I’m not your father. I come from a long line of steady, hardworking stock. Secondly,” Blake said with a hint of humor, “independence isn’t the key to a good marriage.”

Carson shivered, feeling chilled. She reached out to pull the sheet up over her shoulders. Carson knew that commitment of any kind, much less marriage, was difficult for her. She didn’t like long-term leases, jobs that kept her tied to one city, one place. In the past, whenever a boyfriend had started getting serious or mentioned the word ring, she’d run. Only with Blake had she found herself able to consider a pledge of commitment. For better or worse, through sickness and health, till death do us part. Blake never had any doubts, was steadfast in his belief in her. In them. But she was beginning to feel shackled by the promises she’d made last fall, bound not only to marry but to give up her independence.

Carson answered seriously, “I know you’re not my father. You’re as far from him as a man could be. But . . .” She looked down and tugged at the sheet, pulling it closer.

“But what?”

“But as for my independence, I’m worried.” She twisted the sheet in her hands, taking a breath, looked up, and met his eyes. “I’m not prepared to give it up.”

Blake’s dark gaze sharpened. “What are you saying?” Then, visibly paling, he said with caution, “Are you breaking our engagement?”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jerald Elliott:

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