

• • • REFINED BY LOVE • • •

# *The Brickmaker's Bride*

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## JUDITH MILLER



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For Jessa:  
A special joy in my life.

*A*nd they said one to another, Go to,  
let us make brick, and burn them  
thoroughly. And they had brick for stone,  
and slime had they for mortar.

*Genesis 11:3 KJV*

# Chapter 1

*Along the banks of the Tygart Valley River, West Virginia  
September 1868*

An unexpected rush of sentiment caught Laura Woodfield by surprise. She tightened her grip on Winston Hawkins's arm as she stepped down from the carriage. Why did entering the brickyard, even the one established by her father, provoke such an awkward show of emotion?

Winston patted her gloved hand. "You have more strength in that small hand than I would have ever imagined. Don't falter now."

"I'm sorry." Laura loosened her grasp and forced a smile. "This place holds many memories, and I haven't been down here since . . ." The final words caught in her throat.

Her father hadn't returned from the war. Still, the Tygart River continued to flow, and the seasons still changed without fail. Fall had arrived and the ancient trees that surrounded the Tygart River Valley were already bursting with color. Her father had often declared that God had given him the most beautiful place in the world to perform his labor, and Laura agreed.

While her friends had longed to move to Wheeling, Allegheny

City, or Pittsburgh, Laura remained content, feeling more at home in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains. Though she enjoyed occasional visits to the city, she was always happy to return home. Over the past week, she had wondered if her feelings about this place would change once they sold the brickyard. Surely not. Surely she would never want to leave the valley.

She removed a lace-edged handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed her eyes.

“This isn’t a time for sadness. You and your mother should be delighted that someone has finally shown interest in purchasing this place.” Winston’s words were firm yet kind. He gestured toward the huge kilns in the distance. “It’s been more than three years since the war ended. Your father would want you to ease your burdens and sell the business.”

A brown curl escaped Laura’s bonnet as she tipped her head to one side. “I don’t know how you can speak with such authority when even I don’t know what my father would have preferred. He always spoke of this business as something that would sustain our family for the rest of our lives.”

“I’m not attempting to speak for your father, Laura, but when he told you of his dreams for the future, he had no idea the country would go to war.” Winston removed his black felt bowler and traced his fingers through his thick sandy-brown hair. “Where are those two Irishmen?” The corners of his lips drooped into a frown as he settled his hat back atop his ruffled hair. “I dislike tardiness. If a man can’t keep on schedule, how can he expect to succeed? I’ve been told the Irish are prone to drinking. I do hope they’re not sitting in a saloon somewhere.”

“Only yesterday you told me they were excellent prospects, industrious and financially stable. Today you believe they are sitting in a saloon rather than coming here to discuss a contract?” Laura arched her eyebrows. “I wouldn’t want to deal

with men of ill repute, and I certainly do not wish to sell my father's business to men who won't be good employers. Father prided himself on treating his employees with respect and paying them a fair wage."

Winston straightened his shoulders and appeared to immediately grow several inches taller, his lanky frame towering over Laura's mere five foot two inches. "Forgive me. My words were spoken out of frustration, but I detest tardiness almost as much as I dislike surprises. I suppose it's the lawyer in me."

There was a strained note in his voice that deepened Laura's confusion. She wasn't sure what to expect from these prospective buyers. Were they good, industrious men who could be trusted, or were they drunken immigrants to be avoided at all costs? Surely Winston wouldn't have presented the offer to her mother if he didn't have confidence in the men.

Unable to remain still for even a moment, Winston pressed his spectacles onto the bridge of his nose. If the men didn't appear, he likely feared her mother would consider him a lack-luster representative.

Moments later he turned his head and gazed toward the road. "Ah, I believe I hear hoofbeats." He pointed toward the path leading down to the brickyard. "Here they come." Heaving a relieved sigh, Winston folded his arms across his chest. "You would think they'd urge their horses to move with a little more speed. I'm certain they can see us waiting on them."

Turning aside, Laura surveyed the vast expanse that had been her father's pride before he'd marched off to war. He'd worked so hard to create this business, determined to make it a success. And he had. Their home and financial security were a testimony to his resolve.

Even his departure had been filled with optimism. The day he and many of the local men had headed off to war, he'd spoken

of the future. And his subsequent letters had revealed no fear. Instead, he wrote about the new machinery he would purchase when he returned and how he planned to expand the brickyard. Of course, none of that would happen now.

Winston placed a steadying hand on her arm. “If this is too difficult for you, please tell me. It’s my intention to achieve the highest financial gain for you and your mother, but if you appear weak in front of the prospective buyers, it could hurt our chances.”

She inhaled a deep breath. “I’ll be fine as long as I can rely upon you to take the lead.”

“Of course, my dear. That’s what your mother hired me to do. I wouldn’t consider anything less, but please try to appear strong—don’t let them see any hint of tears.”

She’d momentarily forgotten Winston was performing a duty for his client. Fortunately, he possessed no personal attachment to the brickyard and could remain firm and detached as he conducted the business at hand.

“I plan to put all of my negotiation skills to good use so that you and your mother will receive the highest possible price for the brickyard.”

Laura didn’t doubt his word. Winston was considered one of the finest lawyers in the area, and though there’d been no mention of fees, her mother would expect to pay Winston. The fact that he’d been courting Laura would not deter her mother. She would insist upon compensating him for his time and services.

Laura appraised the two riders as they approached. Winston had revealed the men were related, an uncle and nephew from Ireland who were in search of a fully operational brickyard—one that would turn a generous profit in a reasonable amount of time. They claimed to have had years of experience making bricks back in Ireland and believed a brickworks best suited

their capabilities and would provide a sound return on their investment. Winston seemed certain the Woodfield Brickworks would meet their requirements. Laura wasn't as sure. Much depended upon what these men considered a generous profit and a reasonable amount of time.

The younger of the two men cut a fine figure, with broad shoulders and a muscular build. Laura leaned a bit closer. "The younger one looks like he's worked in a brickyard all his life."

"Either that or digging potatoes." Winston grinned and tugged on his jacket sleeves. "His physique would put most any man to shame, but I suppose he has manual labor to thank for his muscles. I do wish the buyers weren't Irish, but we've had no other offers."

The men had dismounted and were walking toward them, but Laura silently reminded herself to inquire later about Winston's dislike of the Irish. Many people still held Irish immigrants in low esteem, but she didn't realize Winston's negative feelings ran so deep.

The older man extended his hand to Winston as he neared. "Mr. Hawkins. 'Tis a fine day we have for our meeting. A wee bit of sunshine with the smell of autumn in the air." He dropped his hold on Winston's hand and nodded at Laura. "'Tis a surprise to see a woman in the brickyard."

"Miss Woodfield is more knowledgeable about her father's brickmaking operation than I am, and it was her wish to be here." Winston turned toward Laura. "Miss Laura Woodfield, let me introduce you to Mr. Hugh Crothers and his nephew, Mr. Ewan McKay."

Laura dipped her head. "Women and children were never an unusual sight in this brickyard, Mr. Crothers. They often brought lunch to their husbands and fathers. During the summer months of my childhood, I spent as much time at my father's

side as he would permit. Once I was older, I tallied the hours and pay for the workers. Of course, that was before the war.”

“I might add that her mother wasn’t particularly pleased,” Winston put in.

Before Winston could speak any further about her mother’s protestations, Laura motioned the men forward. “Shall we begin?”

Both men praised the clay deposits in the hills that surrounded the site and expressed their approval of the eight domed brick kilns, their chimneys rising to the skies. Laura escorted them past the long storage sheds constructed around the periphery of the complex, and they offered favorable smiles when Laura added that the Tygart River gave them easy access to water for the soaking pits.

“We have access to both the railroad and the river for transporting the bricks.” Laura inhaled a deep breath. “I think you’ll agree it is a sound operation. The Woodfield Brickworks is well known for producing quality bricks.”

“Aye, I do not doubt what you tell us, Miss Woodfield. You do have a fine brickyard. But I must be truthful with you. Ewan and I struck an agreement that we would not purchase a yard that did not have at least two VerValen machines. You have only one machine in your yard. If we’re to secure the kind of contracts we want, I think we need to have the ability to produce in larger quantities.”

Ewan studied the yard and then looked back at Laura. “Though I think one VerValen would be enough, my uncle is firm about having two.”

Laura sucked in a breath. “My father managed very well with this equipment. He paid his men a fair wage, and our family never wanted for anything. Perhaps our brickworks isn’t a good fit for you gentlemen.”

Winston shot her a warning look. “Please forgive Miss Wood-

field. Since her father's death, she has been particularly sensitive to criticism of his business." His lips curved in a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure you gentlemen understand."

"Aye." Mr. Crothers nodded, then reached into his pocket and removed a pipe. "True it is that womenfolk are better suited to tending the home fires than the kilns of a brickyard."

Angered by the condescending comment, she attempted to pull free of Winston's arm. With a quick movement, he held her hand in place and gave a slight shake of his head. She understood Winston's concern: He didn't want her to ruin the possible sale, but given the price these men had been quoted for the brickyard, they expected far too much. And they needed to be told.

She'd abide by Winston's warning and remain calm, but she didn't intend to remain silent. "If you have visited other brickyards in the area, I'm sure you've discovered there are few that have even one of the VerValen machines. I cannot imagine any brickyard owning two. It simply isn't necessary."

After a long draw on his pipe, Mr. Crothers blew several smoke rings into the air. "Fine it is this brickyard of yours, Miss Woodfield, but our Scots-Irish dreams are much larger than you can imagine."

The man must be daft. Either that or he had no idea how many bricks could be molded in one day using the machine. "That one machine can mold at least fifty thousand bricks a day, Mr. Crothers. Do you believe you'll have orders that require you to surpass that quantity?"

"Is it unskilled at securing customers you think us, Miss Woodfield?" There was a lilt to his voice and a twinkle in his eye.

"Of course Miss Woodfield doesn't believe you are unskilled as brickmakers or as businessmen, do you, Laura?" There was a hint of panic in Winston's voice. He wanted to close this deal for her mother.

“No. I don’t believe either of those things, but I do think their expectations are unreasonable. If they want two VerValen machines, then they’ll need to purchase one themselves or look for another brickyard. They’ll not secure a better yard or a better price than what we’ve offered.”

Mr. McKay chuckled and nudged his uncle’s arm. “You may have met your match, Uncle Hugh.”

“Tis true you are as determined as any woman I have met, Miss Woodfield. But we need a contract that is a good arrangement for everyone, not just for you. Purchasing an additional machine would be a huge expense.”

“That’s true enough, but you need not purchase a second one immediately. And certainly not until you’ve secured contracts that prove you have need of the additional machinery.”

Mr. Crothers glanced toward the sky as a bank of gray clouds gathered. “There are some other sites we yet need to visit.” He extended his hand to Winston. “We will contact you once we have made a final decision.” He turned toward Laura. “If you and your mother should decide to lower your price, have your lawyer send word. My wife and her sister will be staying at the hotel in Bartlett while we continue our search.”

When the two men started toward their horses, Winston stepped forward. “If it’s the money to purchase machines that’s holding you back from making a decision to purchase this brickyard, I believe I can be of some assistance.”

The older man glanced over his shoulder. “How is that, Mr. Hawkins?”

“I’m on the board of directors at Bartlett National Bank. I think we could offer you a loan at very low interest should you wish to purchase additional equipment.” Winston gestured toward the yard. “You would have more than enough collateral

to secure a loan for a VerValen molding machine—even two or three, if you'd like.”

Mr. McKay stopped short. “That is most kind of you, Mr. Hawkins. I believe—”

“Ewan!” Mr. Crothers glared at his nephew before tipping his hat to Laura and Winston. “Thank you for showing us the yard. When we make a decision, I will let you know.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and Winston clasped Laura's arm as they stepped toward the carriage. “We should hurry. I don't want you to be stuck out here in a downpour.”

He didn't wait for her response before grasping her elbow and urging her toward the carriage.

Once they were on their way, Laura folded her hands in her lap. “I have a feeling you're unhappy with me, but I felt compelled to speak my piece. Besides, there are no brickyards in the area that are anywhere near the size of this one. I think Mr. Crothers is bluffing to see if we'll give in to his demands.”

“There's nothing to say they're not looking elsewhere, is there? There are brickyards in many other parts of the country. They could take a train up to New York and discover many a brickyard along the Hudson River up near Haverstraw. I still hold strong hope that they'll return with an offer your mother can accept.”

Laura had heard tales of the huge brickyards on the Hudson River from her father. He had kept every news clipping and article he'd ever read about various yards and the production of bricks. She surmised Winston had learned of Haverstraw while going through her father's papers.

“They were in Pennsylvania, up near the New York border, before coming here, so I would assume they've already surveyed all of the brickyards farther north.”

“You never fail to surprise me with what goes on in that head

of yours.” The horses, undeterred by the continuing rumbles of thunder, plodded onward.

Laura arched her brows. “I hope that doesn’t mean you think women can’t so much as deduce the obvious.”

“Of course not. I give credit where credit is due. You’re more intelligent than many of the men with whom I conduct business.”

His tone was flattering, but she doubted Winston’s words were entirely genuine. Few men thought women their equal when it came to business. Still, she was pleased by his compliment.

The skies continued to darken. Changing winds labored through the densely wooded hillsides, and leaves scattered to the ground in a profusion of autumn-colored confetti.

Winston’s face tightened as a bolt of lightning split the sky. “We’ll talk more when we get back to the house.” He flicked the reins. “Come on, boys. Let’s get the lady home before the rain begins.”

She wondered if he hoped to convince her mother the sale was in their best interest. Would her mother agree with Winston? In any event, Laura was determined to make certain Winston understood her position. “I do hope you’ll remember that the brickyard has been an important part of my life.”

Winston pulled back on the reins as they came to a halt in front of the Woodfields’ grand brick mansion. “I do understand, Laura, but your mother believes it’s time to move forward, and I agree. This sale will give you both the freedom to do so.” A groomsman scurried from the carriage house and held the reins while Winston circled the buggy to assist Laura. He tilted his head to the side and met her gaze. “I hope you don’t think me unsympathetic, but I believe your mother will know what’s best in this circumstance.”

“We’ll see. I do hope you don’t plan to use all of your courtroom skills in an attempt to convince her to sell.” Laura extended

her gloved hand and stepped down. “There are very few things I believe are worth an argument, but the brickyard is one of them. I would be extremely unhappy if the brickyard sold for less than its value.”

“I think you might want to give further consideration to the burden the brickyard places on your mother and consider bowing to her wishes.” Together they continued up the front steps. “The final decision belongs to your mother, so I hope you won’t hold it against me when I advise her to sell to these men.” Winston gave her a sideways glance. “After all, there have been no other offers.”

Laura stepped into the foyer and met his gaze. “True enough, but Mother values my opinion, and I hope that after you plead your case, she’ll take my advice.”