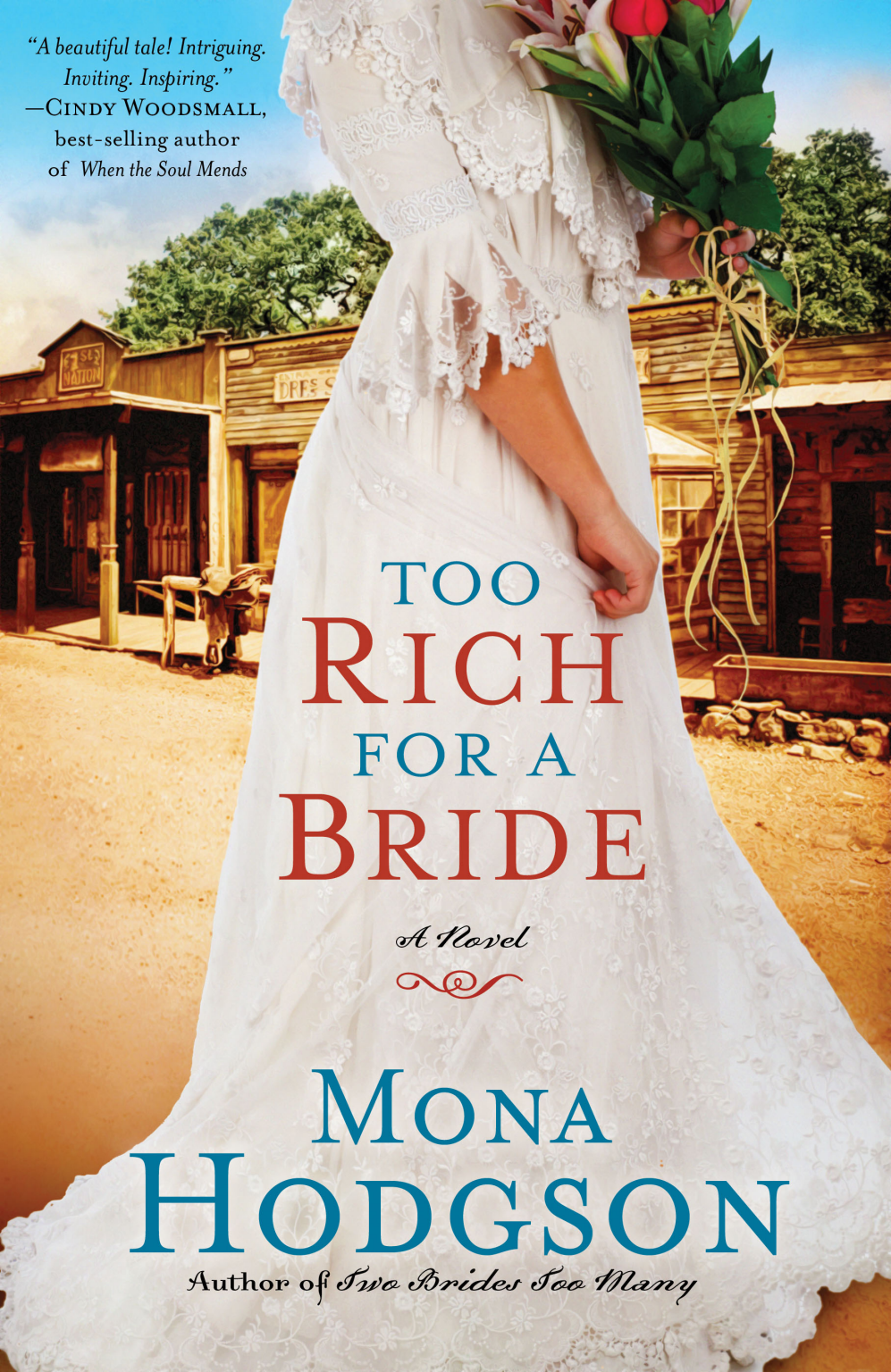


"A beautiful tale! Intriguing,
Inviting. Inspiring."

—CINDY WOODSMALL,
best-selling author
of *When the Soul Mends*

A bride in a white lace gown holding a bouquet of flowers in a Western town.

TOO
RICH
FOR A
BRIDE

A Novel



MONA
HODGSON

Author of Two Brides Too Many

Praise for
Too Rich for a Bride

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*For two sisters...
my daughters: Amy Eardensohn and Sara Hodgson*

*But thanks be to God, which
giveth us the victory through
our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I CORINTHIANS 15:57

ONE



Portland, Maine

18 September 1896

Ida Sinclair didn't know where her ambition would take her, only that she possessed a liberal measure of it. That was why the Merton School of Business was the perfect place for her. And why she sat in the front row of the classroom. She didn't want to miss any bit of information or instruction that could move her closer to success.

Gazing from the calculations on the blackboard to the guest lecturer's dark eyes, offset by traces of silver at his hairline, Ida waited for Mr. Bradley Ditmer to finish his point about customer relations and then raised her hand.

"Miss Sinclair, you have another question?"

Ida moistened her lips. "Yes. I'd like to know how one goes about securing financing to launch a busi—"

A roar of deep laughter startled her and she turned to glare at the source—a gangly, beak-nosed young man in the row beside hers.

"I wouldn't worry too much about financing, missy," he said. "Learn how to make a good pot of coffee and keep a file cabinet organized, and maybe I'll hire you to work in my company."

More laughter swept across the room until the professor made his way to the mouthy student's desk. Mr. Ditmer's footsteps stilled all other noise.

"Mr. Burn—"

"Burkett."

"You are a child to indulge in such hubris. Kindly keep it to yourself."

Ida felt the same burn she'd become accustomed to since her first day in class. Her fellow students didn't approve of her plans and aspirations. Even the women. But she also felt somewhat vindicated by Mr. Ditmer's gallant stand against such boorish rantings.

The professor cleared his throat. "To answer your question, Miss Sinclair, bankers, private investors, and those on the stock exchange could provide necessary funding for a business." He sauntered back to the front of the room then turned to face her. "However, no investor is wont to throw away money on frivolous pursuits. Each business proposal is weighed individually by its likelihood of success."

"Thank you, sir." Ida sealed her mouth shut against the numerous questions his answer raised.

She was still recording her thoughts and ideas in her notebook when Mr. Ditmer dismissed the class, making her the last to head for the door.

"Miss Sinclair?" Mr. Ditmer's clear tone resonated off the empty desks in the room.

Ida stilled her steps a few feet from the classroom door and turned to face her instructor. A pleasant view, to be sure. The man was no Teddy Roosevelt, but he exuded the same commanding presence and compelling confidence.

She glanced down at the reticule she held in one hand and her satchel in the other, then looked back at the first row of desks. She saw no evidence to indicate she'd left anything behind. So what did Mr. Ditmer want?

He walked toward her, then stopped at a respectable distance. “I wondered if I might have a word with you.”

Ida nodded while her mind raced after an explanation. She had asked a lot of questions during class this morning, but she didn’t detect any irritation in his gaze. “Is there a problem, Mr. Ditmer? I didn’t intend any disruption, sir. It’s just that I find the topic of business ethics intriguing.”

“Your questions posed no disruption, Miss Sinclair. On the contrary.” A smile revealed perfectly straight teeth. “I, for one, appreciate your participation and find your interest and questions thought-provoking. Even rewarding. Discussions on business ethics can be—as a rule—a mite drab.”

If her instructor wasn’t set on scolding her for an overactive curiosity, then what *did* he want to talk to her about?

“Miss Sinclair, you have your sights set on success in what has been dubbed a man’s world.” It wasn’t a question.

Although he didn’t seem the least bit intimidated or put off by her unconventional aspirations, she squared her shoulders anyway. She was prepared to defend her determination to him or anyone else who might question her entrance into the world of business. “Yes, sir, I do.”

“Then I’d like to discuss some possibilities with you.”

Ida shifted her weight to one foot, hoping the act would slow her pulse and make her appear more relaxed than she felt. Bradley Ditmer owned a large clothiers chain in New York City. She’d love nothing more than to discuss business with him, especially if their conversation held any promise for her future livelihood.

She glanced up at the clock atop a bookcase. Thirty-five minutes after twelve. Only twenty-five minutes remained of her lunch break between classes and her work in the school’s main office.

Unfortunately, she had no wiggle room in her schedule today, and such a discussion could require every minute of her remaining break, and then some. Her employer was out of the office until Monday, and he counted on her to see to the mound of work he'd left for her, including interviewing two prospective students. Still, this was *the* Mr. Bradley Ditmer, one of New York's foremost commerce tycoons standing before her, interested in her business ambitions.

"You want to talk with me about my future in the world of business?" she asked.

"If you're amenable to it."

"Yes." She'd allowed herself to sound far too anxious. "I'd be most interested in hearing what you have to say."

"I have a luncheon appointment. And I know you have a job to attend to." He pushed a silver-tinted strand of hair from his temple much the way her father did, only Father's was more salt and pepper than gray. "We could chat after you're finished with your afternoon's work."

A meeting after work would make for a long day, and perhaps mean she wouldn't get home until after dark, but Mr. Ditmer was very knowledgeable and influential. Father would want her to pursue her dream, and knowing she had a bright and secure future ahead of her would be a comfort to him.

"We can discuss job possibilities over coffee." His eyebrows arched into a question mark.

"Coffee sounds lovely."

"Very well, then. I'll brew a fresh pot in my office at five o'clock."

In his office. Ida fussed with the wrap draped over her shoulders. Of course he'd want to meet with her in his office. It made sense that he'd keep his list of contacts there—all of his business resources. She brought her bags together in front of her. It wasn't as if she hadn't been in his office before.

She'd delivered files and telephone messages to him there. The twinge of apprehension niggling at her stomach was senseless. She was behaving like a nervous schoolgirl, something a woman with her "sights set on success" couldn't afford to do.

Ida offered him a tight nod and took quick steps out the door, closing it behind her. She pulled her mother's pendant watch from her reticule and glanced at its face. Only fifteen minutes left of her break, barely enough time to scoot down the hall to the washroom and then unlock the office door by one o'clock.

At the end of four hours of filing, typing, and bookkeeping, Ida retrieved her belongings from under her desk and put on her wrap.

Mr. Ditmer, as the guest lecturer for the final month of school, had an office at the end of the empty corridor. Ida's low-top shoes drummed against the parquet flooring as she made her way around the corner and past three quiet classrooms. She drew in a fortifying breath as she approached his office.

Mr. Bradley Ditmer had taken notice of her business acuity. Her father and her sisters Kat and Nell expected her to move to Cripple Creek, Colorado, next month following her graduation, but surely they'd understand that she couldn't turn down a lucrative job in New York City. That'd be plain foolish.

After admiring the shine on the brass nameplate—Bradley P. Ditmer III, Industrialist and Adjunct Professor—she knocked lightly on his office door.

"Do come in."

She did, and was met with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Her instructor stood behind an oak desk, his suit jacket draped over a brass hook behind him. He motioned for her to be seated in one of the two high-back leather chairs that faced his tidy desk.

Ida left her bags by the door and sat down, watching him pour the steaming liquid into two cups at a buffet in the corner. She'd expected him to ask her to make the coffee, or at least to pour it. Instead, he was serving her. And given his calm response to her many and varied questions in class, he seemed perfectly capable of picturing a woman's role in business as something more than a kitchen aide and secretary.

"Cream? Sugar?" He returned the pot to the hot plate on the buffet and turned toward her.

"No, thank you."

He crossed the room and handed her a full cup on a saucer. "One cup of coffee, undiluted." He smiled. "I should've guessed you liked your coffee full-strength. You seem to be one who appreciates the straightforward and direct approach."

"Thank you." Ida set the saucer on the desk and loosened her wrap so that it hung at her sides.

"My apologies. This office is on the warm side. Why don't I take your wrap and hang it with my coat?"

She lifted the shawl over her head, mindful of the cup in front of her, and handed it to him.

While he draped her wrap over a hook and then returned to the buffet, Ida lifted her cup from the desk and let the steam moisten her face. She carefully took a sip, enjoying the coffee's rich warmth on her throat.

"It's a Brazilian blend." Mr. Ditmer carried his cup over and sat down, but not behind his desk as she'd expected. Instead he perched on the chair beside her and took a big gulp of hot coffee.

She enjoyed another swallow of hers while wondering what direction this conversation would take, and how.

"So, what did you do this afternoon?" he asked.

She set her cup on the desk. “I interviewed a prospective student. A second didn’t show up. Most of my work involved typing and filing.”

An eyebrow raised, he set his cup back into the saucer. “Sounds like humdrum busywork to me. A mite mundane, I’d say, for someone with your sharp intellect.”

His candor surprised her, and a blush burned her cheeks. “It’s surely not what I aspire to do.” She paused, uncomfortable in the silence. Taking a deep breath, she continued. “And what about you? You have a successful retail chain in New York City, and yet you’re here in Portland, teaching.”

“Everyone needs a change now and again.” He glanced around the office. “Besides, I’m careful to employ people I can trust to run the operations in my absence. It’s good for them to have the opportunity.”

Sitting a little straighter, Ida forced herself not to squirm. Might she soon be one of his trusted employees?

“During our class discussions the past two weeks,” Mr. Ditmer said, “you’ve mentioned your father living and working in France.”

“As you said in your lecture earlier this week, sometimes it’s best not to set your roots too deep because it’s necessary to go where the opportunities are. That was the case with my father. His position overseeing locomotive engineers here in Portland was eliminated, but he was given the opportunity to instruct and oversee European design engineers in Paris.” Growing weary of the sound of her own voice, Ida lifted the cup to her mouth. She was doing all the talking. “I doubt you called this meeting to discuss my father.”

“No, but...” He leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “Do you intend to join him in France?”

“I have no plans to go to Paris, sir.” *New York, on the other hand...*

“*Sir* is a bit stuffy for business colleagues. And, speaking of stuffy—” He slid his vest off and laid it over the back of his chair. “Please call me Bradley. May I call you Ida?”

“That’d be fine.” Of course it was fine. Even though he was her instructor and would be for another two weeks, he did seem more of an associate right now.

“And what about Portland, Ida? Are you set on remaining here?”

“Not at all. I don’t expect to, or want to.” She kept the Cripple Creek family plan to herself.

“That’s good news.” He peered at her from over the brim of his cup. His gaze held a cordiality she hadn’t noticed earlier. “You’ll be finished with your course work in just a few weeks. I don’t know how you’d feel about moving to New York City—”

“I like New York City.” Never mind that she had never been there.

He smiled and set his cup in its saucer on the desk. “Good. I might have an opening in my buying division.”

He was offering her a job. Ida opened her mouth to say the buying division sounded like an interesting prospect, but quickly closed her mouth when her instructor took the cup and saucer from her hand. He set them on the desk, a little too close to his, dinging the sides of the plates.

They hadn’t finished their coffee. Or their conversation, had they? She expected to hear more about the opening in his company.

Ida’s throat went dry before she could question him. A thick silence layered the room as Mr. Ditmer clasped her hands and stood, pulling her up with him. Then his lips sealed hers shut and his hands began to travel her rigid frame.

Ida jerked her arms upward, dislodging his hands from her backside. She pulled away from him, her backward momentum stayed by the massive desk behind her. She swallowed hard against the acid burning her throat.

Ditmer shrugged. “You said you had your sights set on the business world.”

“I do.” She glanced past him, at the door.

“If that’s truly the case, then you should know the only way a young single woman would be able to achieve your goal is to become a companion to someone who can make it happen.”

“A *companion*?” The word soured her tongue and she swallowed hard.

“A mistress, if you will. I can answer all of your questions and pay you very well for your”—he raised a thick eyebrow—“personal services.” A smirk darkened his face and he raised a finger to her cheek.

Ida slapped him. The stinging in her hand travelled up her arm as she spun away from his reach, jamming her toe on the ornate desk leg.

“You’re wrong,” she spit, then scooped up her things and slammed the door shut behind her.

She would prove him wrong.



Twenty-five minutes later, Ida was yanking the pins from her hat when her youngest sister burst into the entryway.

Vivian’s five-foot, four-inch stature and brown doe eyes made her look much younger than her nearly eighteen years. Sandy blond curls dangled from a knot on the crown of her head and bounced above her slight shoulders as she pulled an envelope out of the pocket on her yellow gingham apron. “It’s a letter from Nell.”

Ida felt her spirits lift. News from Nell would help distract her.

“We’re glad you’re finally home.” Her aunt Alma glided into the entryway. Her braids, pinned in a circlet above her ears, formed a strawberry blond halo. “It’s parlor time.”

In the parlor, Ida sank into the oversized brocade chair. After positioning a velvet pillow behind her, she let her tired shoulders and back relax against the cushioned support. Sassy, Vivian's Siamese cat, stirred beneath a rosewood table in the corner, her slumber disrupted. The cat stretched and then sidled up against Ida's leg. When Ida bent over to give the feline a back rub, she noticed the scuff marks left on the pointed tip of her shoe, telltale signs of her run-in with Mr. Ditmer's desk—and Mr. Ditmer.

She'd been an eager idealist.

Not anymore.

Once Vivian and Aunt Alma were seated on the circular sofa, Sassy leapt onto Vivian's lap and curled into a ball. Vivian pulled a piece of onion-skin stationery from the envelope with dramatic flair and cleared her throat before she began reading.

Nell had written about a new claw-foot tub Judson had added to their modest house, along with electric lights. She told them more about the landlady at the boardinghouse, and then she spent at least two long paragraphs describing the new and improved face of Cripple Creek. She wrote about the brick-and-sandstone town beginning to bulge at its seams, filling most every lot in the center of town and sprawling far up into the foothills. The wealth of gold being discovered attracted people from all over the country. Investors. Stockbrokers. Attorneys. Bankers. Railroad men. Entrepreneurs of all sorts, including someone who had recently opened an opera house and a businesswoman named Mollie O'Bryan, who was causing quite a hullabaloo.

A thriving city that offered comforts and culture. A place where Ida could learn the underpinnings of business and prosper with the city. A city other than New York or Portland.

Vivian held up the letter, her pinky finger pointed outward.

Ida, as the result of Judson's work as an accountant, he knows many folks in business. Bankers. Investors. Brokers. He says you could have a solid job here in no time.

But Ida barely heard the last few sentences. Her mind had been racing from the moment she'd heard that there was a *businesswoman* in Cripple Creek. Ida knew she'd rather work for a woman. Working for a successful woman would be icing on the cake.

Ida rose from the chair. "Mollie O'Bryan," she said, garnering stares from her sister and her aunt.

Vivian dipped her chin and raised a brow. "I haven't finished reading yet." She motioned for Ida to sit back down, which she did.

I hope you are well and you enjoyed the summer.

I miss you terribly. I know Kat does also. She said she'll write again this week.

I'll close for now. Judson is due home from the mine, and I have oatmeal cookies baking in the oven.

Forever your sister, with love,

Nell

Vivian folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope on her lap, then glanced up at Ida as if she expected an explanation for Ida's outburst.

"I've finished school early," Ida said. "So it works out that I can leave for Cripple Creek this next week."

Unlike her sisters, she wasn't going to Colorado for love or marriage. She had no intention of letting anything or anyone stand in the way of her ambitions. And she would succeed without the kind of compromise that men like Bradley Ditmer expected from her.

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