

RSVP TO MURDER by Carol Pouliot

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

December 31, 1902

New York City, New York

She was marrying the wrong man.

With a silk-gloved hand, Margery Belleville lifted the bottom of her wedding gown and peeked around the heavy, carved doors into the nave of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Several hundred guests—ladies in expensive finery, wool coats trimmed with ermine and fancy hats with brims reaching out over their shoulders, and tuxedoed men in black silk top hats—awaited the wedding of the decade. St. Patrick's reminded Margery of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris with its Gothic-style pointed arches and rich stained-glass windows set in lacey webs. The soaring, vaulted ceiling, lit by crystal chandeliers suspended on long rope-like cables, rose hundreds of feet in the air. Light from the chandeliers reached into the far corners of the church and mingled with the glow of candles twinkling in wrought-iron stands. Inhaling the scent of balsam fir from the many holiday decorations, Margery gazed down the long center aisle, where she would soon walk with her father.

Margery stepped back into the vestibule, her pure-white gown rustling softly as she moved. She was, at least, happy her parents had allowed her the choice of her wedding dress, if not the groom. Margery and her mother had searched in several shops, nearly deciding to have the dress custom made when they came upon this elegant, sleek gown. The moment Margery laid eyes on it, she knew it was the one. The high neckline draped in soft folds beneath her chin, flattering her face. The form-fitting bodice hugged her curves, yet avoided the dreaded hourglass silhouette, with its yards of smooth satin skirt billowing around her. Margery's unadorned veil revealed topaz eyes and soft lips, but covered her rich auburn hair and cascaded down her back. This was the gown of a modern, independent woman. If only her life matched the dress.

His conversation with the bishop finished, Anthony Belleville joined his daughter. “Are you ready, my dear?”

The organ began Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March,” and a rumble echoed throughout the nave as the guests stood and turned toward the back of the cathedral. Trembling, Margery took her father’s arm.

He must have felt her shaking because her father leaned over and, to Margery’s astonishment, whispered, “I know he’s not your first choice. But you will be well cared for and you know Gil adores you. I don’t know which man has captured your heart, but you won’t lack for anything with Gilbert Racine. The publishing empire he’s going to inherit will provide a comfortable, even pampered, life. He’s the best choice to keep you in the style your mother and I have provided. I can’t bear the thought that you would ever lack for anything, my dearest daughter.”

Margery was further shocked when her father wiped a tear from his eye.

It was at that moment when Margery Belleville, soon to be Margery Racine, accepted her fate. She would be a good wife for her successful businessman husband. She would provide him with children and a well-run home. She’d bury her feelings deep inside, lock them away in a cupboard, and throw away the key. She could not marry the man she loved. But she might grow to love the man she married.

Margery forced a smile and reached up to give her father a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be alright, Papa. Gil will be a good husband.” She patted his hand. Straightening her spine, Margery gave a sharp nod of her head. “I’m ready.”