

“Crystal Caudill has done it again. With crisp, compelling prose and the perfect blend of suspense, romance, and faith, *Painted in Suspicion* kept me eagerly turning pages late into the night. Flossie’s journey challenged my assumptions about strength and independence, ultimately revealing the beauty of a God-centered partnership where our gifts can flourish alongside love, marriage, and family.”

—Heather Tabers, Selah Award-winning author of
Their Burden to Bear

“Friends to enemies to lovers? Yes, please! With a spunky heroine who is determined not to marry and a devoted, protective so-called enemy who proves himself time and again to be her worthy hero with a heart of gold, what could go wrong? *Painted in Suspicion* is a faith-filled, heartfelt tale of healing and true love. Fans of Karen Witemeyer and Elizabeth Camden will devour this latest must-read mystery from the talented Crystal Caudill!”

—Grace Hitchcock, award-winning author of
To Win a Wager and *The Finding of Miss Fairfield*

“Crystal Caudill delivers another great story rich in historical detail, page-turning suspense, and sigh-worthy romance. Her spunky heroine and steady, faithful hero balance each other out perfectly, and the spiritual truths woven throughout are both a challenge and a reminder as we live out our faith in Christ.”

—D’Ann Mateer, author of *Playing by Heart*

“A charming blend of romance, mystery, and history has free rein in this installment of Crystal Caudill’s *The Art of Love & Danger* series. Caudill’s award-winning storytelling draws readers in and doesn’t let them go until the last page is turned. *Painted in Suspicion* offers a glimpse into Gilded Age Cincinnati—both the virtuous and the villainous. Be prepared to enjoy the ride, but pay attention, because you won’t want to miss a clue.”

—T. Elizabeth Renich, author of *A Worthy Risk*

“Rich in history, romance, and suspense, Crystal Caudill’s latest release snags readers from its first line and holds them until its last. With faith woven throughout as effortlessly as clay is wielded by a potter, this story beautifully depicts how God shapes us, loves us, and speaks truth over us. *Painted in Suspicion* will delight readers and leave them with a happy sigh.”

—Susan L. Tuttle, author of the
Treasures of Halstead Manor series

PAINTED IN
SUSPICION



BOOKS BY CRYSTAL CAUDILL

Hidden Hearts of the Gilded Age

Counterfeit Love

Counterfeit Hope

Counterfeit Faith

The Art of Love & Danger

Written in Secret

Sung in the Shadows

Painted in Suspicion

PAINTED IN SUSPICION



The Art of Love & Danger

BOOK THREE



CRYSTAL CAUDILL



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

Painted in Suspicion

© 2026 by Crystal Caudill

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505. www.kregel.com.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced; stored in a retrieval system, including but not limited to generative AI training systems; or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the publisher’s prior written permission or by license agreement. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Crystal Caudill is represented by and *Painted in Suspicion* is published in association with The Steve Laube Agency, LLC. www.stevelaube.com.

The persons and events portrayed in this work are the creations of the author or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible, public domain.

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4913-0, print

ISBN 978-0-8254-4915-4, epub

ISBN 978-0-8254-4914-7, Kindle

Printed in the United States of America

26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 / 5 4 3 2 1

To Mom:

*The commitment you and Dad have shared with each other
throughout your marriage, no matter what you faced,
instilled in me a commitment to my own.
Thank you for being the example I needed.*

*Love always,
the daughter who said she'd never marry*

The vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

—JEREMIAH 18:4

CHAPTER ONE

Cincinnati, Ohio
August 1882

GEOFFREY RANSOM WAS A BRAZEN, thieving, chauvinistic pig if he thought he could get away with this . . . this hogwash! Flossie Gibson tossed the letter threatening to sue Gibson Pottery for its use of the Cincinnati faience method onto her already paper-cluttered desk. Faience had been around for centuries, but even so, this newest variant wasn't his to claim. How he even got the patent for an artistic method that Miss M. Louise McLaughlin developed and published in a book years before he applied was beyond comprehension. Well, no. Not beyond comprehension. Men were forever claiming women too delicate and weak-minded for creative inventiveness, much less for something like running a commercial pottery.

"Only a man has the stamina and intellect for such a strenuous and challenging venture," she scoffed aloud, disrupting her Cavalier spaniel's snoring slumber. "Sorry, Harold. I'm just vexed with the men of this world, as usual."

When she scratched his ear, he let loose a contented rumble.

Oh, to be a dog. Harold didn't have to worry about a former friend turned enemy threatening a lawsuit with no grounds or the even bigger problem of a failing business. Flossie glared at the mess

of a ledger that lay open beneath Geoffrey's latest intimidation tactic. Father might have happily supported and invested in the second-ever female-led Cincinnati pottery, but his tolerance for an unprofitable business was at its limits. She had until the end of the fiscal year in September to make the pottery viable, or he'd sell the building out from under her and demand she stay home like a proper lady until he found her an acceptable suitor.

Ha! He'd be more likely to find and tame a unicorn to pull her pony cart than find a man she'd willingly marry.

Someone knocked on the door that led to the factory floor. Dorothy Tabers, her head potter and sometimes office assistant, didn't wait for permission to enter. "Mr. Valentine has forced his way beyond the public foyer and demands to see you. Clarence has stalled him and sent me to ask what you want us to do."

How about you tell that pompous walrus he belongs at the zoological gardens and not in my office. Not that Flossie could actually say that to the man. "Give me a minute to clear my desk, then you may send him in." The last thing she wanted was for him to glimpse Geoffrey's threat or the troubling sums in her ledger.

"What about the rest of the room?" Dorothy asked. "Surely you don't want him seeing it this way."

Flossie glanced around the small space where piles of papers, books, and half-filled journals cluttered nearly every surface. Even the painting of Gibson Pottery created by her friend Theresa Plane had scraps of sketched design ideas tucked haphazardly into the gilded frame. Flossie's brother, Joseph, had long chided her for her lack of organization, but what did it matter if no one else knew where things were, so long as she did?

She crossed her arms. "If a little paperwork would scare Mr. Valentine off, I'd find every piece of paper in this place and throw them like confetti."

Dorothy arched a brow. "I didn't think men scared you."

Given Flossie and Dorothy had been friends since childhood—even after Dorothy's marriage to a man well beneath her station led

to society's snubbing her—Flossie's view of men shouldn't need to be questioned.

"They don't. They annoy me." Especially the ones who wouldn't take no for an answer.

She collected the papers from atop her desk and tapped them into a stack before shoving them into an overfull drawer. Oh pickles! She must have forgotten to empty it the last time she'd done a quick clean-up of her desk. Oh well. She jammed the drawer closed as far as she could, then nodded for Dorothy to admit Valentine.

The overdressed businessman waddled in, his dripping rain slicker leaving a trail of water behind. "Good afternoon, Miss Gibson. Miserable weather we're having, isn't it?"

"Really? I would have thought you'd like a wet environment." She kept her tone icy and prayed it would send chills down his spine and encourage him to leave.

Unfortunately, the pompous walrus must have enough blubber on him to not feel her frosty welcome.

"I see you are still struggling with your paperwork." His droopy mustache couldn't hide his smug pleasure.

"No struggle to it. Although it does appear your toupee is struggling to stay atop your head."

"I don't have a—" His hand found the askew rat's nest and slid it back into place. He coughed and averted his gaze.

Good. Maybe a little embarrassment would humble the man. "I'm busy. Get to your point, please."

"We both know why I'm here, *Florence*." The impertinent man swiped the stack of papers off the only other chair in the office and sat down without a care that his boot heels and drips of water were ruining the papers.

Flossie refused to scurry to his feet and clean up the mess. She'd recreate the receipts later. "Then you also know that my answer is still no. This pottery is my business, and I have no intention of selling it. Ever."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news"—Flossie doubted that very

much—"but it won't be yours for much longer. Not that you can rightly call this pottery a business. It's more akin to a charity, and a badly run one at that."

Had the man never heard the concept of enticing a potential sale with honey instead of vinegar? Gibson Pottery might have its roots in charity work, but the thirteen widows who served as decorators and a nanny worked hard for their wages. Their value was no less than any man or other woman Flossie might have hired instead.

The patter of little feet running across the ceiling, accompanied by the joy-filled squeals of toddlers up from their naps, prevented her from parrying his barb.

His eyes rounded. "Are those children I hear?"

"Yes. The entire upper floor is living quarters for my clay manager. During the day, I have a nanny who watches the children too young for school. This allows the widows to support their families without the need of a husband."

"Without the need of a—" He blinked a few times before shaking his head. "Your suffragist nonsense is a detriment to all, but especially those women. It is best they remarry and become someone else's burden."

Flossie clenched her jaw at the remark and, by God's grace, kept back the angry words she longed to spear him with. Those women were not burdens, and they shouldn't be forced to marry the first man who asked just because they were in a precarious position. If a woman chose to marry, it should be for love and a mutual respect.

"And they had better do it soon," Valentine continued, "for they won't work here much longer. As soon as I have the deed, I'll have the building demolished."

"You will never own this property. Be content with the surrounding three you already have."

"This property has the best access to the railroad, and I need the land to build my new factory."

"It's too bad I outbid you, then. You should have taken me seriously."

His certainty that the previous owner would never sell to a woman

had cost him greatly. Of course, had he known Father's name would be on the deed, he would have raised his bid above what Father had agreed to spend. Although she and Father continually refused to sell, Valentine had yet to stop badgering them on a regular basis.

"Leave. You're wasting your time. Gibson Pottery will never be yours."

He reclined and rested his hands on his overlarge middle. "On the contrary, I have a meeting with your father on Monday to discuss the purchase terms."

"You meet with Father every month. Monday will be no different." The real danger would come at the end of next month. It would take a miracle to become profitable by then.

"Don't be so sure of that. I've heard the rumors of his labor union troubles. Your father will be in dire financial straits if his employees strike, and he has a duty to protect the interests of his entire family, not just you."

Father was among the richest men in Cincinnati. One little strike would not topple him. Not that one was likely. With her brother, Joseph, and his best friend, Morty Stephens, involved in the negotiations, any conflict would be resolved without such drastic measures. Morty's temperament alone would ensure all parties left the table amicably.

Valentine tugged on his lapels. "But I am a kind and generous gentleman."

Flossie almost snorted. She'd met criminals more gentlemanly than him.

"I have an offer that will provide everything a woman in your position could want."

If he proposed marriage, she'd march the man right out of her pottery at letter-opener point.

He retrieved a stack of papers from his still dripping slicker and laid them on her desk. "If you agree to sell to me before my meeting with Mr. Gibson, I can offer you a considerable price, which would include an agreement with Mr. Brockmann of Tempest, Brockmann

& Sampson Co. for a permanent space in his pottery. He'd even provide a weekly allotment of clay, reserved space in the kilns, and include your pieces in his stores to be sold on consignment. The demands of commerce and the harm being done to your status as a marriageable woman will no longer be a problem."

"How magnanimous of you."

His slimy smile declared he thought he'd won. Apparently the man didn't recognize sarcasm.

"However, despite your insistence that I am unable to withstand the strains of commerce and that my suitability for marriage is damaged, I must decline your offer."

Valentine dropped all pretense of a rescue and sneered. "You will lose Gibson Pottery whether you want to or not. My offer is generous. If you fail to sign the contract before I meet with your father, you won't like what follows."

Flossie leaned over her desk, discreetly slipping the sharp letter opener into her hand. "Is that a threat?"

One side of Valentine's face ticked. "Threats are for low-bred cads. I'm warning you of consequences that could be avoided. Surely a private space and some pin money is better than nothing, because nothing is what you will get if you don't sell to me before I convince your father."

"I'll take my chances." She collected the contract and dropped it into her wastebasket. "Mrs. Tabers!"

Dorothy stepped inside immediately, along with Clarence, the clay manager.

Thank You, Lord. If Valentine put up a fuss, Clarence would force him out. "Please escort Mr. Valentine to his carriage. Clarence will assist if necessary . . . but that won't *be* necessary, will it, Mr. Valentine?"

The corner of Valentine's mouth twisted into a snarl. "I need no escort." He rose, then retrieved the contract and thwacked it back onto her desk. "You have until Sunday. Otherwise, I assure you that Gibson Pottery will be finished."