

Mischief Makers

“When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal and exhausting condition until death do them part.”--George Bernard Shaw

What is a family without a little mischief?

Chapter One

Bewildered wedding guests staggered out of Morgan Manor into a brilliant June afternoon. Cori Morgan, the jilted bridegroom, guzzled an entire bottle of Chivas Regal in the side garden.

In their guesthouse, three hours later, Tom and Ruth Morgan stared at their eldest son snoring on the slipcovered couch. Even during this latest family drama, Tom imagined gathering birding gear in the early morning light of Midwater, Rhode Island to glimpse a black-throated blue warbler. His cell phone alerted him to a nearby sighting just before the nuptials disintegrated.

“Ruthie, let him sleep. Things will look brighter in the morning.”

“Your endless optimism just makes this dreadful day worse.” Ruth swaddled a sailboat afghan around her son. His thirty-four-year-old neck jiggled. “He snores like you.”

“After downing a fifth of whiskey he should be comatose. Snoring is a good sign.” Tom anchored Cori’s arm to his chest. “I thought only women got left at the altar.”

“I’ve said it before—”

“Then there’s no need to say it again.” Tom put fingers to Ruth’s lips.

She slapped his hand. “Morgan Manor is cursed!”

This time Tom agreed with her. He was so close to having all four kids out of the house. *Why had he allowed another wedding attempt at Morgan Manor?* “We should get back to our guests.”

“Only Basil and Cindi stayed. They said we need consoling.”

“They need to go to dress rehearsal. It’s fine if we miss because of the *almost* wedding. But four cast members is too many.” Tom offered Ruth his hand. “The show must go on.”

Ruth groaned. “Please, no cliché’s. Just for today.” She patted her blonde waves into place.

“I’ll avoid them like the plague.” Tom grabbed a classic panama from his collection of hats. He was bald except for a salt and pepper band of cropped hair across the base of his skull. Both his father and grandfather battled skin cancer and lost. He flattened the brim and led Ruth outside. A summer tanager sung a garbled tune.

“Hear that?” Tom wished for a glimpse of the red bird. He thought the harsh ‘pit-i-tuck, pit-i-tuck’ sounded like ‘peanut butter, peanut butter’.

“Hear what?” Ruth waved away the faraway look in Tom’s eyes.

“We tend to evaluate bird song for the appeal to our ears but there is so much more.”

Ruth pulled Tom's belt loop. "Come on, bird whisperer."

Tom continued. "Female birds are looking for stamina and fidelity in the repetitions—"

"My. How interesting."

The couple crossed the driveway to their three-story Gothic Victorian summer home.

At the end of every May, the population of Midwater doubled when families descended on the quaint Rhode Island town. They flowed in from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. With four young children, Tom and Ruth never missed a Thanksgiving, Christmas, or spring break. And their careers—professor of philosophy and fourth grade reading specialist—allowed for twelve full weeks of memory-making every summer.

Great-grandfather, Thomas Ray Morgan I, built the house. His will left financial resources for maintenance and repairs if the house remained in the family. A plaque over the front door read, Morgan Manor 1888. Thomas Ray envisioned future generations vacationing together on the five acres of prime waterfront land. It was not a grand Vanderbilt mansion, but Thomas took pride in bequeathing the legacy. Great-grandfather fathered one lone child, and his only son, the second Thomas Ray Morgan, delivered a single son. Tom Number Three and his wife Ruth chose not to burden their eldest son with the tired name of Thomas Ray. Now Tom wondered if the name helped to foster a love for the estate. That morning, before the wedding, Cori was only too happy to leave Morgan Manor.

In the kitchen, Tom poured a Chardonnay.

Ruth voiced an idea she and Tom had been discussing for days. "When do we tell the kids we're thinking of selling Morgan Manor?" When she worried, two vertical lines above her nose, her only visible wrinkles, deepened.

Tom handed the full glass and a cocktail napkin to his wife. "Not today." Through the window he viewed the mature red maple he helped plant with his grandfather.

Was the world just a grand illusion? He wrote this on the chalkboard at the start of every school year. Then he incited debates between the realists and the idealists. Tom implemented a realistic approach to selling the family summer home.

"They won't even miss this place." Ruth tapped the bead board cabinet doors.

"Maybe *they* won't," Tom whispered. He pulled on a non-existent mustache; the one Ruth insisted he shave before their wedding thirty-eight years earlier.

"We saw Ginger once in the last three summers and she wouldn't be here now if her brother wasn't getting married." Ruth stabbed her nail through the napkin and its printed turquoise wedding bells.

"Don't forget. Ginger came to Connecticut."

"So we could babysit Rusty after Warren took off." Ruth sipped the butter-colored liquid then spit into the sink. "Tea, please."

Cindi Potter entered the room. "You poor, sweet dear."

Three hours later, Cindi Potter brushed imaginary lint from her burgundy blouse with balloon sleeves. "We should go." An enormous bow obscured her aging neck.

Cindi, the imaginative seamstress for the local theater company, Mischief Makers, a.k.a M & M's, made her own clothes. Persimmon-colored hair added to her eclectic ensemble, making it hard to distinguish between her on and off-stage wardrobes. "Are you sure you can cope?"

Ten years before, Cindi and her husband Basil retired from the corporate world of New York City and became full-time residents of Midwater. The boredom showed in Cindi's bulging closets and Basil's collection of poorly stuffed critters. 'Learn the art of taxidermy', the latest accomplishment that poured from his post-retirement bucket list.

"If you show up at dress rehearsal you'll make us look good." Ruth's lips tightened. "It wasn't my choice to arrange the wedding for today. Invite the M & M's around after." Ruth pointed to the kitchen counter. "Tom and I can't eat this mountain of food. Not to mention the crates of wine and champagne."

Cindi grimaced. "I'm not superstitious, but the play is *Doctor Faustus*. That's grim enough, but do you think it's wise to kick-off our performance season with an abandoned banquet from a canceled wedding?"

"Cori was abandoned. Not the food."

When Ruth dismissed the catering company, they dismantled tables in seconds. They deposited everything not belonging to The Speckled Tomato into the Morgan's kitchen.

Cindi placed her wine glass in the sink. "If you insist. I'll only give the cast necessary details. No need for gossip. I won't invite Harry because he can't be trusted with free booze. Did you know Pastor John saw Harry's wife naked, trimming her rosebushes? She only wore garden gloves. If the town council gets wind of her naturist shenanigans they'll close her daycare . . ." Cindi segued from one unimportant topic to another.

It was impossible to cork the flow of Cindi's verbal stream. Ruth stacked a toppled pile of linen napkins. Tom rinsed wine glasses and wondered how many rosebushes Pastor John watched Harry's wife trim. This made him think of a limerick. *A rosebud is queen of the flowers, we watch her for hours and hours . . .*

After several minutes, Cindi's chain-of-thoughts linked. "We'll come."

"If you don't mind eating lukewarm, once-chilled asparagus." Ruth waved the limp stalk like a baton. "Do you know how many weeks that runaway bride, Cherry, agonized over the precise wine to go with this salad?"

Basil put an arm around Ruth. "Be thankful for Cherry's parents largess."

Ruth patted Basil's chest. "Deep word, shallow people. But it's true. It didn't cost us a dime. But who names their kid after a fruit?"

Tom plucked the asparagus stalk from his wife's hand and turned on the garbage disposal. "Herbs and spices make much more sense."

"I adore your children's names," said Basil. "Coriander, Ginger, Bay, and Sage. When I say them jointly, my mouth salivates for veal ragout from Alsace." He winked at Ruth. Basil was a vocabulary-loving bulldog, whose coarse hair needed constant combings.

"We can't thank you enough. Now run along. Don't miss rehearsal."

Basil grasped Tom's hand with both of his, affirming their thirty years of friendship. "We'll return at ten." Basil's thick fingers groped the back of Cindi's

voluminous blouse and led them toward the front door. “If you change your mind, dim your lights and we’ll keep driving.”

Ruth closed the door and looked at her shoes. In the boutique, they had pinched her baby toes and cut into her heel. Cherry, her almost daughter-in-law, also demanded that Ruth wear a floor-length gown, an unflattering shade of teal.

For weeks, Tom listened to Ruth’s idealistic pie-in-the-sky plans to coerce her brood into after wedding fun; hot dog and marshmallow roasts, singing round the ever-so-expensive refurbished fire pit. Sage’s college graduation, four years before, was the last time the Morgan family came together as a whole. Their children, and their only grandson, Rusty, Ginger’s boy, were again under one roof. Ruth hoped they would all stay at least three days.

“Where’s the crowbar?” Ruth offered her foot.

Tom struggled to remove the shoes. “For the donation box?”

Ruth grabbed hold of her dress. “This too. When I get the energy to tear it off.”

“I can help.” Tom wiggled his scant eyebrows.

Ruth walked upstairs. “Do shoes burn?”

“I suppose. Why?”

“The new fire pit needs christening.”

Tom caressed the fabric over her hip. “The dress will melt into a turquoise bubble-gum-glob.”

Ruth smiled.

