

The Color of Frost

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To the Beans. You inspire me every day to try and be a better person.



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To connect with Vicki Lowery see her website <https://thecozyeditor.com>

The cover of this book was brilliantly designed by author and designer K.J. Harrowick <https://authorkjharrowick.com>

Chapter One



August 1974

NINA SPENT her last twenty dollars selecting the perfect ingredients to make her favorite childhood meal. Of course, that didn't include the Chateau le Tuquet. A wry smile crossed her face as she thought of her papa. He never would have approved of spending as much as she had on a single bottle of Bordeaux. She reasoned it would be a fitting tribute to her life as the final meal she would prepare in her beloved kitchen.

She arranged the sliced veal, prosciutto, and asparagus in the fridge next to the large pan of tiramisu she'd made the night before. Nina removed the fresh pack of Newports and a Bic lighter from the sack and put them in the back pocket of her shorts. The shopping bag was now empty except for a large bottle of Tylenol. She placed that between the toaster and a small transistor radio that was now her only link to the outside world.

She considered listening to some music but had discovered on her drive home that most stations were broadcasting special coverage of Nixon's resignation.

"Richard Milhous Nixon announced last night that he will

resign as the 37th president of the United States. Today at noon Vice President Gerald R. Ford of Michigan will take the oath as the new president of the United States and complete the remaining two and a half years of Mr. Nixon's term," the reporter stated. Every radio station she tuned into had echoed the same news. She had no more interest in hearing about the disgraced, soon-to-be ex-president than she had in thinking about her ex-husband, who shared the same first name. She thought about the irony that it had taken months of hearings to unravel Nixon's secrets, while her ex-husband Richard had openly confessed his. She left the radio alone and instead poured herself a glass of wine.

Not ready to cook quite yet, she wandered into the living room. As she surveyed the empty room, her eyes fell on the mantel above the fireplace. The ghost of an outline remained from a large framed portrait of herself posing with Richard on their wedding day. It was now packed away. Vacation snapshots, framed cards, and assorted memorabilia, all the things that represented the life she once thought was hers—the one that no longer existed—were shoved into boxes, which she had struggled to haul to the basement. She'd been moving most of it into a storage room next to the laundry area since much of what she owned wouldn't fit into the tiny apartment on the third floor where she was moving.

The room where she stood was almost as large as the entire apartment where she lived as a child. Yet she'd grown accustomed to the abundance of space of this first-floor apartment. She and Richard had carved it out of the former mansion that had belonged to his great aunt and uncle long ago. She'd bought into the notion that her life with Richard and his colossal dreams was about them as a couple. But now, Nina knew otherwise. She stood in silence, wondering how her life had come to this. Dismantling her life had reinforced the futility of it all.

Sinking to the floor, Nina sat with her back against the wall. The pack of Newport and lighter dug into her hip. She reached in to take them out of her pocket. Her hands shook as she placed the cylinder of tobacco between her waiting lips, letting it dangle

with anticipation as she aimed the lighter at the tip. It had been years since she'd watched a spark envelope the white paper that held it all together—that held her together in moments like this. She pulled the warmth of its flame inside her. The hot acidic taste traveled around her mouth and expanded through her lungs. She savored the rush of dizziness as the smoke escaped from her nose and swirled around her.

She closed her eyes, forcing back the tears that threatened to spill. Until March, she would have described her marriage as happy. Yes, she had been happily married to Richard King, who claimed he adored her. He'd become everything to her. His family, his dreams, his ambitions were all she'd focused on in the almost five years they'd been married. But what she thought was real was merely a reflection of her willingness to push aside the questions that gnawed at her when he was vague or dismissive about her concerns. She let her mind careen toward all the painful memories, knowing it would help her keep her resolve.

She'd met him on a day she'd taken off from work to sit shiva for her old neighbor Mr. Blau, who had passed away. She'd traveled east from Worcester in central Massachusetts to Wellesley, an affluent town west of Boston. Nina brought along a variety of pastries and confections for Mr. Blau's family. She rubbed her sweaty palms against her dress and hoped no one noticed. She hovered near the table where there was an enormous spread of food but turned to leave as someone approached. The man that approached was Richard, who was also a friend of the family. She was entangled before she could retreat. He eyed the last cannoli before he noticed Nina standing close by. He smiled at her.

“Damn! There's only one cannoli left. Would you like it?”

“No, you go ahead,” she told him and started to leave.

“Are you sure? I've already had two,” he said, with a hint of embarrassment.

“Absolutely sure.”

“Hey, do you know where these came from?” Richard asked. Nina turned back. “Let me tell you,” he continued, “if I knew who made these, I'd get down on my hands and knees and

propose. Well, maybe not if it was a dude. But these are just so good!" He wiped a smudge of ricotta from his chin. "Have you tried one?"

"On multiple occasions," Nina said, as her face flushed.

"I just have to find out and bring some back to my folks in Maine. Do you know where the Blaus got them?" Richard questioned.

"They're from a restaurant in Worcester called Angelo's. Their pastry chef made them."

"Worcester?" Richard said. "That's a haul. How do you know where they come from?"

Nina blushed. "Because I'm their pastry chef."

"You made these?" he said with surprise. "Well, I guess I better make good on my promise. First off, what's your name?"

"Nina. Nina DeMarco."

"You certainly don't look like a Nina DeMarco, but okay." Richard knelt before her with a flourish. "Nina DeMarco, will you marry me?" he teased.

"Could you tell me your name first?" she said, trying to play along.

"Silly me. I should at least have introduced myself before I proposed. I'm Richard King."

"Well, you certainly do look like a Richard King, and while that's an interesting offer, I'll have to turn you down. I only accept proposals from men I've dated at least twice."

"You're tough! Well, I suppose I'll have to ask you out a few times before you say yes?" he continued the banter.

Nina turned away, unable to meet his gaze. His curly brown hair and lanky body gave him a rather professorial look. He was classically handsome, with a square jaw and a broad, Cary Grant smile. But what she found most appealing was his absolute confidence. She tugged on her hair, wishing she could muster even a hint of that.

They dated for almost a year before Richard proposed for real. The couple agreed that they would move into his parents' guest house on their property in York, Maine after they married.

Richard planned to apply to dental school, and Nina wanted to continue her culinary career. Her dream was to open a small bistro or a bakery. Nina was hoped that, one day, she would be the one who benefitted from her knowledge and years of experience in creating exquisite meals or desserts, rather than the various restaurant owners she'd worked for in the past. But Richard told her he was eager for them to be on their own, and he was adamant that she take a job his parents offered her as the bakery department manager in their grocery store in Kittery.

"Nina, opening a new business would take time to establish. Why don't we wait a while until you get acclimated to the area. You can pursue your heart's desire when the timing is right. I promise." Nina went along, since at the time it made sense.

While they were dating, however, Richard peppered all their conversations with the idea of buying his late great aunt's estate. The enormous property included not just a stately mansion but an old carriage house and other outbuildings on five acres of land.

"Honey, it's so close to the ocean, we could even walk there. Just think of what we could do with the carriage house. You could use it for a catering business or maybe that's where I set up my dental practice when I graduate. Really, it would be great."

"Isn't it too big for us, even if we used it for a business? It would cost a fortune to heat in the winter," Nina reminded him.

"Well, maybe we could have plans drawn up to use the second and third floors for apartments. That way, we'd have some rental income too. Do you know how hard it is to find an apartment in that area? I bet we could ask top dollar even for the tiny apartment on the third floor."

Eventually, Nina gave in, and they moved forward.

Years passed, and as Richard came closer to graduating from dental school, any time they discussed how to use the carriage house, it turned into an argument. He seemed to have forgotten his promises and even had an architect draw up plans to convert the space into his dental practice without discussing it with her.

Then, in March, Richard had completely shattered her dreams when he had told her the devastating truth about their

marriage. The night was etched in her memory. She was dressed in her floral pink nightgown and a terry-cloth robe. She had sat on the couch that night reading the latest novel by Jacqueline Susann, *Once is Not Enough*. She smelled like her favorite lavender-scented soap, and her hair was still damp from her bath. She recalled being sleepy, but she had always waited up for her husband to arrive home from school when he had classes in Boston. She'd gotten off the sofa and turned on the radio, hoping the music would keep her awake. Turning the dial, she heard a few bars of music playing. Rod Argent and his band sang, "*Hold your head up*." She dialed away and found another station playing Helen Reddy's *I am Woman* over the airwaves. The sound was crystal clear.

She heard Richard's car in the driveway but settled back onto the sofa and picked up her book. When he came into the living room, he was quiet and walked straight over to the liquor cabinet in the corner. He'd poured himself a scotch neat and crossed to a chair opposite the sofa where Nina sat. She looked up to say hello and noticed he was pale. She put down her book and studied him.

"Are you okay?" she'd asked him. "You look like you might be coming down with something."

Richard had remained silent for several minutes. "I'm moving out," he finally said.

"What?" She thought she must have misunderstood, and she sat up.

"Our marriage is over."

"Why?"

"I wasn't trying to hurt you, Nina—it just happened."

It took Richard less than ten minutes to strip away the facade of their life together. He confessed that night that he'd been seeing another student at school. The words "our marriage is over" had penetrated Nina's every waking thought for the last few months. Apparently, he was actually with his girlfriend Holly on the nights he claimed to be staying in Boston because of bad weather. He wouldn't tell Nina how long they'd been involved, but she imagined it wasn't something new. Richard moved out the next day

and into his parents' guest house. Nothing had been the same since.

At first he acted civil. She assumed it was because Nina still worked for his parents who knew she was an asset to their business. But about a month later, she came home from work and found Richard on a ladder by the window in their apartment.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him.

"Holly wants to redecorate and order some new curtains. Damask isn't quite her style, so I'm taking measurements. I'll be out of your hair in a minute."

Nina shook. "Are you telling me you're planning on living here?"

"That's the only thing that makes sense, Nina," he said, looking at her incredulously. "You don't need this kind of space. It's just you. And this place has been in my family for generations."

"Yes, and it sat empty for years. That's how much it meant to your folks. And have you forgotten, Richard, this is my house, too?" she shouted at him.

The bewildered look on Richard's face told Nina everything she needed to know. He assumed she would just give in to whatever he demanded. He underestimated her desire to keep the one thing that now mattered to her, the place she called home. Shaking his head, Richard left, saying nothing more. But the next day, his father came to her office and fired her from her job at the grocery store. The moment Nina got home, she began searching for a lawyer.

AFTER A FEW PHONE CALLS, she chose a local lawyer named Andrea Goodwin. At their first meeting, she asked Nina, "Where did the money come from that purchased the property?"

Nina's mind raced, recalling the very day she sat in an office at a bank in Worcester, waiting to deposit the check she was holding in her hand. It was for her share of an insurance settlement with her mother's former landlord for negligence. The piece of paper

was a horrible reminder of a day years ago that had destroyed so many lives.

When the bank manager came back to his office with an application, he said, "You're so lucky to have this much money at such a young age!" Her hands trembled, and she wanted to tear it up into a million tiny bits. No matter how many zeros there were in the figure, it wasn't enough to erase what had happened to her mother.

"Nina?" Andrea called to her.

"Sorry. It was from an insurance settlement. That money was used to buy the place and pay for all the repairs and renovations while he was off at school."

"Who paid for that? His tuition, I mean," Andrea asked.

"I did," Nina told her, feeling duped.

"Well," Andrea said, "under the laws of the state of Maine, those factors will weigh heavily in the judge's decision over who would be awarded the property. So this won't be a cake walk. Assuming you can document what you're telling me, most likely you will be awarded the property."

Nina barely knew where to begin since Richard guarded their financial records closely. She scoured the apartment searching for them, fearing Richard had already retrieved them. But eventually she found everything buried deep in a closet in his study, a room she rarely entered. In reviewing their bank statements and records of bills and receipts for expenses, she saw transactions that told the story of her husband's infidelity. No wonder he guarded these papers, convincing her this was his contribution to their household chores. Nina wondered why he didn't take these with him and realized he most likely assumed he would only be moving temporarily, so he didn't bother. Soon however, her lawyer had copies of all the records she requested.

On the day they went to court, the judge awarded her the property. Nina was thankful that Andrea's predictions had come true. But as she walked out of the courtroom, Richard grabbed her by the arm and spun her around.

"That house should have been mine, and you know it. You'll

never make it all work without me, Nina,” he told her, then sauntered over to Holly, and they hurried down the street. The memory made her blood boil. Nina took another swig of her wine, stubbed out her cigarette on the bottom of her shoe, and lit another.

Initially, her anger had fueled her reaction and made her determined to prove him wrong. When she'd had a few days to think about how to resolve her dilemma, she'd decided to offer her first-floor apartment to Keith Peterson, the tenant who lived on the third floor. He was getting married and had told her he would be moving out. When Nina suggested they swap apartments instead, he readily agreed. With arrangements made, Nina began moving to the third floor while he and his new wife were on their honeymoon. The looming deadline prompted her to pack and begin bringing things to either the storage room in the basement or her new apartment upstairs.

The troublesome move between apartments in the summer heat overwhelmed her. There was little room in the apartment that had once been the maid's quarters. The things she'd accumulated throughout her marriage simply wouldn't fit even though Richard had been awarded all their furniture. The apartment was too small even for the double bed in their guest room that Richard decided not to take with him. Before Keith left for his honeymoon, she'd offered it to him in exchange for his futon couch and the twin bed he used, in hopes of accommodating her new arrangement. He graciously obliged. The only piece of furniture she brought upstairs with her was a rocking chair she'd had since childhood.

She began to wonder why any of it mattered since she couldn't imagine needing any of these things ever again. The future was bleak and she grew more despondent trying to figure out how she would even survive.

That was when Nina began making a mental list of why ending it all made the most sense. First, she'd depleted her money on legal fees over her divorce. She had no job, and no one would hire her because her ex-husband's family had completely sullied

her reputation. Both her parents were long gone, and she'd lost touch with just about all of her friends from high school and college when she moved to Maine as a newlywed. The final straw was being forced to give up her home. She realized how much it embodied her life and had become a place of refuge. Now however, it was a place of entrapment, with months of emotional pain and isolation finally pushing Nina over the edge.

It wasn't the first time she'd made this sort of mental list. For years after her mother died, the only thing that kept her going was her job as a pastry chef at a popular Italian restaurant in her hometown of Worcester. There, Nina could shut out the images of her elderly mother trapped by a fire and instead focus on the day ahead.

Each morning, she would get up at five a.m. and let herself into the kitchen. Tucked away from the world she would develop new recipes, order ingredients, manage her inventory, and create. The flakiness of her crust on the sbrisolona and the tart cherries that balanced with the sweetness of her crostata ricotta e visciole tempted the fullest stomachs. Customers ordered her sfogliatelle in advance just to be assured it would finish off their meal. But nothing delighted Angelo's clientele more than Nina's tiramisu. There were multiple secrets to her recipe. She used espresso to soak the spongy savoiardi biscuits and added a tiny drop of Coin-treau to the mascarpone cheese. The owner of Angelo's told her that Nina's desserts had become the reason for the restaurant's increase in sales, making her blush.

Nina worked at Angelo's for almost three years before she met and married Richard. She'd hoped to pass along her secrets to the children she would now never have with him. Now all her knowledge would die with her when she ended the despair from which she suffered.

Surveying the living room again, Nina took the last drag of her cigarette and heard a pathetic sizzle as she extinguished it in her wineglass turned ashtray. Her stomach growled. Glancing at her watch, she realized why she was so hungry. It was almost seven, and she hadn't eaten all day.

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Nina headed into the kitchen and at the sink, she rinsed her glass. The blood-red wine and ashes fought the current of the tap water. Then she refilled the glass. Opening the fridge, she took out the sliced veal, prosciutto, and asparagus she'd bought earlier, and placed them on the counter. The refrigerator was now almost empty. All that remained was half a bottle of white wine she needed for the saltimbocca, and the large pan of tiramisu. Nina stood there with the door open to allow chilled air to refresh her for a moment against the August humidity. The aromatic scent of espresso wafted up to her nose, making her think of the hundreds of times she'd made tiramisu in her lifetime.

She opened the window, hoping to invite a salty ocean breeze into the muggy apartment. Instead, glancing out the window over the kitchen sink, she noted the shadows encroaching upon the front of the carriage house. It had stood vacant for years at the rear of the property, revealing few of its secrets.

Opening the door to the pantry, Nina took out her most prized possessions, a set of Mauviel cookware Richard had purchased for her twenty-fifth birthday a few years ago. The gift had shocked her because she would have been thrilled with a less expensive set of All-Clad. Eventually, she acknowledged to herself that his extravagance was most likely because she frequently cooked for his family.

Nina preheated the oven and brought the asparagus over to the sink. She remembered the delight it gave her father every time her mother served it. She washed the stalks, breaking off the tough ends before placing them in a bowl. She drizzled olive oil on top and tossed them to ensure they were evenly coated, then spread them in a single layer on a baking sheet. She added a sprinkle of salt and pepper, placed them in the oven, and set the timer.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping her wine, and thought about how disappointed her mother would be. It had never occurred to Nina until that moment how genuinely rebellious her mother, Rose DeMarco, was when, in her thirties, she'd pushed to adopt Nina though her large Italian family had discour-

aged her. When Nina's father suddenly died when she was eleven, her mother would walk to her job cleaning rooms at a hotel nearby, her feet aching by the time she arrived home at night. Nina would rub them and draw a warm bath to soothe her mother's aging body.

Maybe that was why her mother always told her, "*Devi ottenere un'istruzione.*" *You need to get an education.* She insisted Nina apply to Johnson and Wales for a culinary degree since she wanted Nina to be more independent and be able to support herself.

The earthy smell of the asparagus roasting reminded Nina it was time to fix the saltimbocca. Nina took the veal cutlets and laid them side by side on a sheet of plastic wrap. Then she took a generous piece of prosciutto and placed it on top of each piece. Using her meat mallet, Nina flattened them until they were about a quarter-inch thick. Next, she picked up several pieces of fresh sage and placed them on the veal, securing them with a toothpick.

She dredged the veal in seasoned flour before placing it in the pan. She let it sauté for several minutes then flipped it over before adding white wine to the pan, stirring occasionally to release all the exquisite flavors. As the wine cooked down and burned off some of the alcohol, Nina added the chicken broth and the remaining tablespoon of butter, swirling it around in the pan. When it was done to perfection, she reached for the only plate that remained in the cupboard. She was ready to eat.

Pulling a barstool up to the kitchen island, Nina sat there trying to relish her last meal. But she was too hungry to savor it, and she ate with abandon. The saltimbocca and asparagus quickly disappeared followed by half a pan of tiramisu.

When she was done, she laid her head on the counter and began to cry. Her stomach hurt but it no longer mattered. The fullness in her stomach would never restore the emptiness of her heart. Nina thought back to all the times before when she'd made the list of reasons to end it all. Even before her mother had died, Nina had struggled with destructive thoughts. But in the past, she could often work through them by distracting herself or acknowl-

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edging how hurting herself would affect someone she loved or even an innocent bystander. She'd always been able to convince herself to stick around. But this was different. There was no one left in the world that she needed to protect from the loss and grief of her death. There was no one she could reach out to anymore—no one who loved her.

Her love for Richard once kept those thoughts at bay. The belief that he shared her future kept her tethered to the world she often wanted to exit. Nina had resisted overwhelming moments before, but in recent days she found herself making that list and she had no reason to resist her impulses anymore.

Nina looked down at what remained of the tiramisu. It seemed like such a waste to dispose of it. Still, she walked to the sink and scraped the remains into the garbage disposal. She shuddered as the grinding noise reverberated throughout the empty apartment.

After she washed and dried the dishes, she set them on the rack out of habit, even though it no longer mattered what happened to anything that remained behind.

She took the bottle of Tylenol off the counter and placed it in her pocket before filling a glass with the last of the wine. She took one last look around, shut off the lights, and left by the back door. She walked to her VW Beetle that sat alone in the driveway. She climbed into the backseat, opened the bottle, and swallowed as many pills as she could force down, finally feeling the calm she longed for and hoping whoever found her would forgive her.

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About the Author

KASEY ROGERS spent much of her earlier career working in the commercial film industry in New York City by day and writing a musical in between film projects. After the birth of her twins, she switched gears to follow another passion, cooking. That passion led her and her late husband to turn a vacation property in Alexandria, Ontario, into a restaurant. For several years she owned and operated The 2Beans Café and Tearoom in Ontario before moving back to the U.S. Since then, she has written the memoir *Our Better Selves: From Secrets and Lies to Healing and Forgiveness*, along with a work of literary fiction, *The Color of Frost*. Along with writing, Kasey is an outspoken advocate for women and speaks about the connection between domestic and financial abuse. Learn more about the *I Know Why She Stayed Initiative* on her website, kaseyrogers.com.