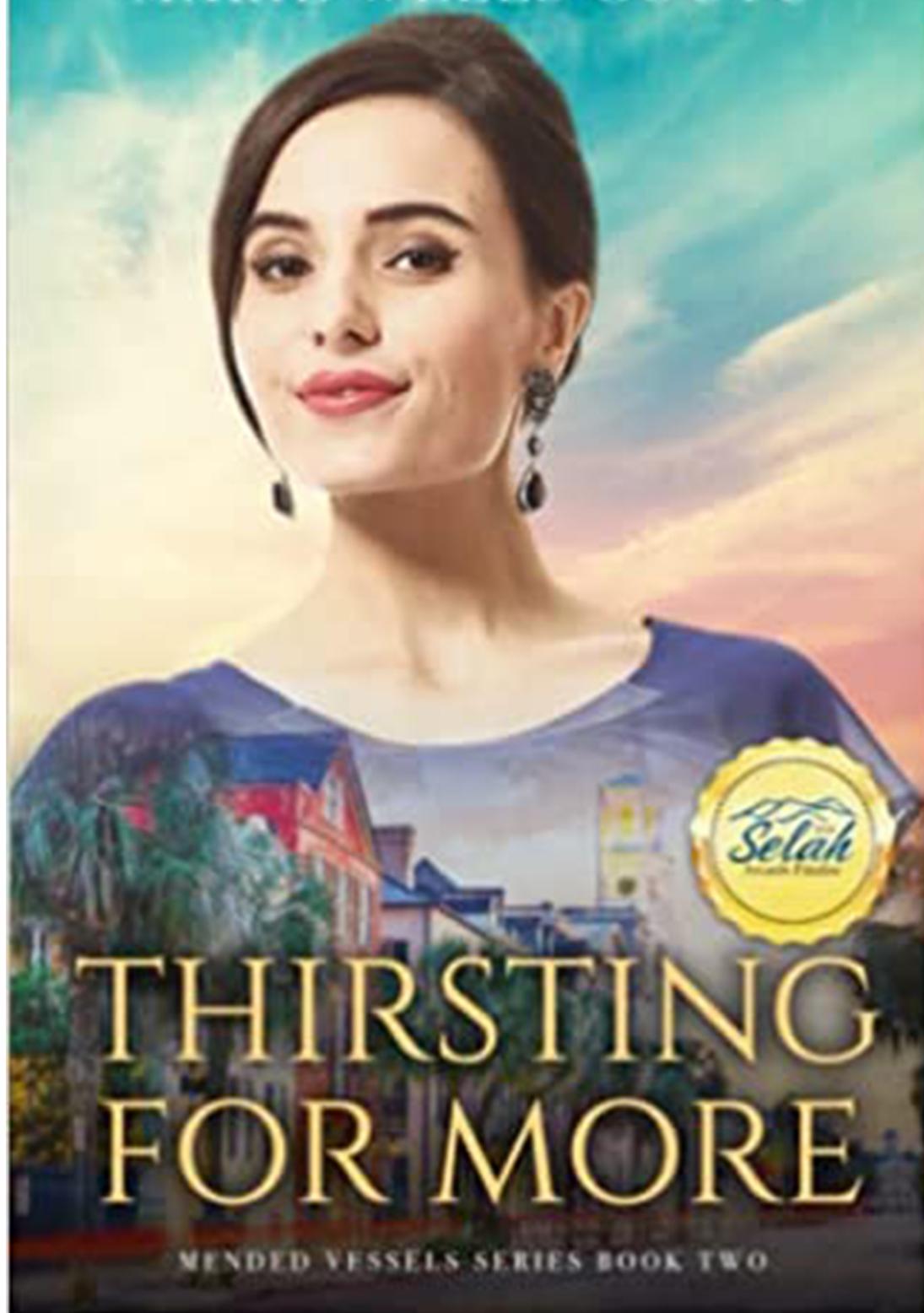


BY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
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THIRSTING FOR MORE

MENDED VESSELS SERIES BOOK TWO

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Thirsting for More

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Chapter One

If words could wound, could they also heal?

Victoria Russo had enough word arrows pierce her heart in the last fifteen years to kill an Amazon warrior. At an even five feet, she didn't compare in stature to those tall, powerful women, but on her first work day in South Carolina, she felt as out of place as they would.

Not that anyone would ever know. She would be as sugary as Scarlett O'Hara flirting with Ashley Wilkes. Her employees would have no reason to whisper behind her back this time.

She inhaled the history permeating the vast brick concourse of what had once been a railroad station but now housed the Charleston Tourism Bureau. The early February sun streamed through massive windows and threw its warmth across the various displays and brochure racks.

Victoria checked her watch. 7:45. Despite the fact that the building would open to visitors in fifteen minutes, none of the workers seemed to be in a hurry, a sharp contrast to the energetic culture she'd grown up with. Just as the mild temperatures here in the South contrasted with the frosty Connecticut weather she had last seen in her rear view mirror three days ago.

Her four-inch heels echoing on the brick floor, Victoria forced her short legs to keep pace with Lauren Redmond's long stride as they headed across the concourse. The other woman, pale and naturally blond, oozed a model-like quality that she, with her Mediterranean coloring and jet black hair, could only envy. Victoria had liked Lauren from their first meeting when Lauren had been one of three people that interviewed her for the director's position.

They passed a nook where three wrinkle-faced black women were spreading out supplies for their all-day basket-weaving demonstration. Lauren led the way beyond them to the information counter that stretched across one side of the room. In the employees-only area behind the high counter, several of the staff—her staff—waited.

Lauren pushed through the wooden gate and the knot of employees grew silent. Victoria joined her, and Lauren introduced her to the group. As Victoria shook hands with each one, Lauren called off their first names.

Victoria struggled to understand their drawled greetings. But more than that, what had happened to that famous southern hospitality? The interview committee had wanted an outsider, but half of these people seemed as cold as the New England winter she had escaped.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Russo." The voice of one of the customer service representatives—was her name Mary Beth or Marylou or Mari Lynn?—sang of southern breezes and honeysuckle. At least not everyone resented her being here.

Lauren introduced the last person as Amelia Wilson, the assistant director. The woman

extended her hand to Victoria in slow motion but when their fingers brushed, she pulled away as if she had touched hot coals.

“Nice to meet you. Welcome to Charleston.” Amelia’s tone failed to match her words, and no smile cracked her heavy makeup. She stood a head taller than Victoria, and her brown hair with its blond highlights was arranged in a style that added several inches to her height. Did she always wear it piled high, or had she intended to make Victoria feel smaller?

The employees seemed to be waiting for her to make a speech, something she hadn’t anticipated. But she could handle it. She drew her shoulders back. “I’m really glad to be here. Charleston is a beautiful city, and you guys have a very important job. You represent the city to every visitor who comes through here. I look forward to working with all you guys as we make Charleston a favorite travel destination.”

Trite, perhaps, but it would do. A couple of the women began to clap, and most of the others joined in. The spotty applause ended abruptly when the wall clock began to chime. By the end of the eight chimes, the customer service representatives had taken their positions at the counter. A skinny man in his mid-twenties—his name might have been Jeff—hustled to unlock the heavy wood-and-glass doors.

Victoria swallowed hard. Despite his familiar eagerness, she reminded herself that he was not her ex-husband, Michael, and this was not Waterbury. She must not allow herself to find fault with an employee she didn’t even know.

The electronic displays started up, sharing the history of the city’s slave-holding era and Civil War heritage, and a few waiting visitors entered the building.

“Amelia, let’s show Victoria to her office.” Lauren led the way out of the information corral and headed toward the far end of the concourse. A gift shop and restrooms nestled under a lower ceiling. Next to the gift shop, worn oak beams created a massive staircase leading to a balcony and the second floor.

Lauren waited for Victoria and Amelia at the landing midway up. She indicated the room below with what almost seemed like a parade wave. “This stairway and the balcony give you a wonderful overlook of the activity down there.” She smiled at Amelia. “Amelia’s done a good job of holding down the fort, but I’m sure she’s glad that you’re here now.”

Amelia appeared to be studying the ceiling far above them. At the mention of her name, she turned and stared at Victoria with the same frozen mask she’d worn downstairs.

Victoria had barely spoken four words to her, but the woman’s angry vibes made her want to spit. She forced herself to smile. She had to be nice, to show that she would be the best boss anyone could hope for. “Amelia, I will really need your help as I learn how things are done here in Charleston.”

Still no reaction.

Lauren pointed above them to the offices that fronted on the balcony. “The business offices are upstairs. You’ve got your office at the end, then Amelia’s office, and a conference room. Down that hall are offices for the business manager, human resources, and a workroom.” She proceeded up the stairs. “The HR manager will have some paperwork for you to do this morning. I’ll introduce you to Tom, the business manager. Then I’ll leave you with Amelia.”

“Sure, I’ll take care of her.” Amelia nodded. Exactly how she would take care of her, Victoria didn’t want to ask.

Below them, a family with four small children joined several other visitors waiting in line, and the hum of activity rose to follow the three women down the hallway. They entered the first office on the right.

An older man, whose stooped shoulders and receding hairline brought back images of her late father, rose and came out from behind his desk. He grasped Victoria’s hand. His fingers were soft and smooth, and so was his voice. “Tom Peyton. Nice to meet you, Victoria.”

The same words. This time, they dripped with a welcoming syrup that tasted like home. She blinked at the unexpected lump in her throat. In thirty-four years and three marriages, she had never before lived more than twenty minutes from her family.

He still held her hand in his. “If there’s anything you need, you know where to find me.”

She looked up at Tom Peyton. There was no going home. “Thank you. I’ll want to review the budget with you in a few days, but I need to get my bearings first.”

Back in the hallway, Lauren turned to her. “Sorry to leave you now, but I have to go open my store. Amelia can answer any questions but if something comes up that we haven’t covered, feel free to call me.”

Victoria wanted to grab her arm and handcuff her to keep her close. She inhaled Lauren’s musky perfume, storing away the memory of it for later, when she might need a reminder that some people in Charleston did want her here.

“I’ll be fine. I’m sure I’ll have plenty to keep me busy.” Like figuring out how to make friends with the employees. And break down Amelia’s hostility.

Victoria followed Amelia along the balcony to the director’s office. A metal bracket on the door held square wood blocks that spelled out her name—her former name. “V. Russo-Martinez.” Not what she’d asked for. She didn’t need that daily reminder of another failure.

Amelia unlocked the door and held out the key. “You might wanta keep it locked, even when you’re in it.” She nodded toward the concourse. “Sometimes visitors find their way up here, and you probably won’t want to be disturbed. Here ya go.” She pushed the wooden door wide open, causing it to bang against the wall.

Victoria crossed the threshold and gazed around the room, turning slowly to absorb the unexpected sight. Two waist-high windows stretched nearly to the ten-foot-high ceiling, providing at least daylight to the large, nearly empty space. White powder dusted the bare walls, and heavy paper covered the wood floor. The room was almost bare, furnished with only a green card table and a metal folding chair. A well-used beige telephone and an open laptop computer sat on the table, and cables snaked across the floor to a wall outlet.

So much for a welcoming, productive work environment. She'd gotten the call from Lauren offering her the position six weeks ago, just before Christmas. No way redecorating the office should have taken that long, holidays or not. Had she been wrong to believe the committee really wanted her?

"The painters didn't quite finish up yet but I figured you'd still want to use the office. They won't be back until the weekend." Amelia crossed to the window and pulled down a semi-transparent shade. "If it gets too hot for you, you might want to use this to block the light."

At least the shade worked. Victoria sat in the folding chair, which bore scars from years of abuse. Not quite the throne of power she had expected. She might as well be Cinderella, with the towering hairdo stepsister laughing at her. "What happened to the furniture?"

"It was in pretty bad shape. You can order some new stuff." Amelia didn't look at her.

Lack of eye contact had crushed her during the last six months at her previous job. She couldn't endure that kind of isolation again. Like her former co-workers, Amelia must be hiding something, although it couldn't be as bad as the secret that everyone in Waterbury had known except her. Whatever it was, she'd have to overcome Amelia's animosity with kindness.

She scooted the chair closer to the table, and the chair leg ripped the paper on the floor. Getting furniture purchased and delivered could take weeks. But complaining wouldn't do any good; she could see that.

Victoria eyed the blue cable trailing from the laptop, hoping it connected to a network. She adjusted the computer screen then tapped the space bar. "Is there a password?"

"Oh, shucks. The IT guys have to set you up with access to the network. Guess I'd better call and ask 'em to stop over." She moved to the table and punched a number into the phone, waited for the ring over the speaker, then lifted the receiver. "Hey, girlfriend. The new director started today. Can you send Jim Bob over to fix her up?"

Considering the way Amelia had treated her, Victoria couldn't help wondering if the name "Jim Bob" was a joke aimed at her.

Amelia paused, listening. "Yeah ... You got that right." She eyed Victoria. "Sure, that should work. I'll tell her."

She plopped the receiver down, jostling the unsteady table. She leaned against the table,

pushing the edge into Victoria's midriff. "Jim Bob will come by this afternoon."

"This afternoon? I won't be able to use my computer until this afternoon?" Already the hard metal seat of the chair hurt her bottom. She pushed the chair back and stood, leaning over the table to look the other woman in the eye. Amelia might have height and hair, but Victoria had position. She'd been hired as the director, Amelia's boss. "What am I supposed to do until then?"

Amelia shrugged and started for the door.

Victoria sighed. Not even an hour had passed, and she'd almost lost her temper. She hadn't thought being nice would be so hard. "I don't suppose there's a cushion around here somewhere, is there? I can't sit on that chair very long."

Amelia scrunched her face into a thoughtful look, obviously fake. "Nope, not that I know of. You might find one over at the market."

Great. Her assistant director had shown a lack of respect from the minute they'd met. No doubt Amelia had planned this office of indignity and had intentionally failed to set up the computer network. Now she'd probably laugh about the situation with the other employees over lunch. No matter how far away Victoria moved, people would still be cruel. But this time, in this place, she would handle it differently.

She glanced at her black pumps, wishing she'd put comfortable shoes in her car. She couldn't even remember if Market Street was close enough to walk there and back. But apparently she would find out during her lunch hour.

A black woman wearing a flowered tent dress filled the doorway. She was as tall as Amelia but with a balloon face on top of an inflated body. "Morning." She squeezed through the door. "I guess you're Ms. Russo. I'm Jennetta, the admin assistant."

Victoria had begun to wonder if she would have any clerical help. She glanced at her watch. Nearly nine. She hoped Jennetta's office skills were an improvement over her punctuality.

"She's not late." Amelia crossed her arms. "Jennetta works reduced hours, nine to four."

"I see." Victoria offered her hand. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"That's okay. You didn't know." Jennetta gave her a limp handshake, while resting her other hand on her ample hip. Her mottled skin glistened with sweat where her bent elbow creased her fleshy rolls.

In spite of her first impression, Victoria wanted to like Jennetta. The woman accepted her apology without hesitation. Would she be an ally, or did her loyalty belong to Amelia?

Jennetta nodded to the door that Victoria had assumed to be a closet, on the side wall

opposite the window. “I’m in there, in the office between you and Amelia, since I work for both of ya. I think you’ve got a couple appointments this morning. I’ll just check.” She waddled across the room and disappeared behind the paneled door.

Victoria hoped this wasn’t the only entrance to that office. Had there been another door in the hallway? Surely the admin would be located so she could screen visitors.

Without another word, Amelia left, closing the door behind her.

Victoria shook her head then realized how strained every muscle of her body had become. She rolled her shoulders and her head to relieve the tension. Wanting to get started in her new role, she scanned the office, but she had nothing to do since she couldn’t even use her computer. She strode to the window, hoping for a view of downtown.

No. She looked down at a parking lot and the blue-and-white top of the covered area where tour buses picked up and discharged their passengers. If she didn’t have any appointments, she could spend her morning taking one of the two-hour tours. That would give her a chance to learn more about her adopted city. And would pass the time until she had computer access.

The door from Jennetta’s office opened. “Ms. Russo, you got an appointment with Human Resources at ten thirty. And there’s an owner of a carriage company here now to talk about his licenses.”

Apparently Jennetta did have a door directly to her office. But carriage licenses, already? Victoria knew nothing about that process. And she had no one she could trust to advise her. Other than Amelia, who was clearly hostile, her staff seemed indifferent at best.

She looked around her bare office. Just what she needed—to meet with a prominent business owner in these conditions. “I need another chair.”

“I put him in the conference room. Thought you’d be more comfortable there.” Jennetta gave her a broad wink.

Maybe Victoria did have one person on her side. She nodded, smoothed her skirt and adjusted her matching blue jacket. “All right. What’s his name?”

“Randy Lee Johnson. He owns Two Rivers Carriages.” The way she spit out the words hinted at a dislike for the man or the company. Or both.

Victoria studied Jennetta, searching for a clue to her meaning.

But her assistant merely plodded to the main door and opened it, pointing along the balcony. “You know where it is?”

“I think so. Thanks.”

Victoria found the conference room door open. Not much larger than her office, the room

seemed like an afterthought. A massive wooden table surrounded by black chairs left little space to maneuver.

When she entered, the sole occupant rose and flashed her a smile that could have melted all of Connecticut. He wore Western-style boots and a bolo tie with his checked shirt and black jeans. A vague scent of saddle soap and straw reached her. He held a Stetson in one hand and smoothed his sandy-colored hair with the other before reaching out to shake her hand.

“Well, sugar,” he drawled. “Nobody told me the new director of tourism was such a purty little thing.”

Victoria had learned years ago to ignore compliments on her appearance, especially from a man who wanted something. So why did his words feel like aloe on the irritations she had already endured this morning?

To read the rest of Victoria's story, you can order *Thirsting for More* by Marie Wells Coutu from any bookstore or from Amazon:

- Print: **ISBN-13:** 978-1938092800
- Kindle: **ASIN:** B00VVSRO3Q

*****2016 Selah Awards Finalist*****

*****2016 Royal Palm Literary Awards Semi-Finalist*****

... she closed her eyes to this real-life nightmare.

The whole city of Charleston seems to be watching, waiting for Northern transplant and recently hired director of tourism, Victoria Russo, to either work a miracle or to stumble and fall. But she hadn't expected the cold reception and the deception she's experiencing, especially from her assistant director.

The change of geography is a chance for multi-divorced Victoria to start a new life. Hoping to gain acceptance, she purchases and tackles the renovation of an historic home, but soon falls back into her old ways.

In this modern-day version of the woman at the well, will Victoria find the one friendship that can change her world or will she return to the place where her past failures lurk around every turn and keep her thirsting for something--or Someone--she cannot find?

Marie Wells Coutu began making up stories soon after she learned to talk. At age seven, she convinced neighborhood kids to perform a play she had written. After a career writing for newspapers, magazines, state and local governments, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, she returned to her first love—writing fiction—at the age of fifty-five

Her newest novel, *The Secret Heart*, released in February from Write Integrity Press. Loosely based on the lives of Bathsheba and David, *The Secret Heart* is the third book in the *Mended Vessels* series. A prequel novelette of the heroine's journal called *The Divided Heart* is available for the Kindle.

Books in the series are contemporary re-imaginings of the stories of biblical women, including Queen Esther and the woman at the well.

Her debut novel, *For Such a Moment*, won the Books of Hope Contest. *Thirsting for More*, the second book in the series was a finalist in the 2016 Selah Awards Contest and a semi-finalist in the Royal Palm Literary Awards sponsored by Florida Writers Association. An unpublished historical novel has also placed in five contests.

She and her husband divide their time between Florida and Iowa. You can find more about Marie and her novels on her Facebook page (Author Marie Wells Coutu), at her website (MarieWellsCoutu.com), or follow her on Twitter (@mwcoutu) or on Amazon.com.