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The Perfect Wedding

ARLENE JAMES

Arlene James

The Perfect Wedding

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EVERYDAY MIRACLESA BRIDE AT LAST?Bridal consultant Layne Harrington had been planning other people's weddings forever. But never her own. Then rugged cowboy Rod Corley walked into her shop, looking like the answer to a prayer.Rod was captivated by Layne's beauty and goodness. Yet he could never ask her to share the burden he carried. He'd long ago lost his faith in the future–his faith in everything.But Rod hadn't counted on Layne's strength and courage…or on the healing power of a perfect love.Everyday Miracles: Each day brings new tests for young Reverend Charles and his congregation. But with faith, they find miracles everywhere–even the miracle of love.Welcome to Love Inspired™–stories that will lift your spirits and gladden your heart. Meet men and women facing the challenges of today's world and learning important lessons about love, faith and love.

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Содержание

Table of Contents 6
But it was the fifth wedding gown and Layne's favorite that brought Rod slowly to his feet… 7
The Perfect Wedding 8
Chapter One 9
Chapter Two 17
Chapter Three 25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 28

Table of Contents

Cover Page
Excerpt
About the Author
Title Page
Epigraph
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Dear Reader
Preview
Copyright

But it was the fifth wedding gown and Layne's favorite that brought Rod slowly to his feet…

She posed for his perusal. His eyes smoky, mouth slightly ajar, he walked around her in a wide arc, halting at the edges of the train that swept across the floor behind her.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life," Rod said huskily. "Your own design?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "It looks like it was made just for you. Wouldn't you mind if someone else wore it?" he asked gently.

How had he known? Since the day she'd conceived the gown, she'd held a secret vision of herself gliding down the aisle in it…

"No one ever has wanted to wear it," she managed to reply.

He reached out, as if to touch her sleeve, then abruptly withdrew. "No one ever should—but you."

ARLENE JAMES

"Camp meetings, mission work and the church where my parents and grandparents were prominent members permeate my Oklahoma childhood memories. It was a golden time, which sustains me yet. However, only as a young, widowed mother did I truly begin growing in my personal relationship with the Lord. Through adversity, He blessed me in countless ways, one of which is a second marriage so loving and romantic, it still feels like courtship!"

The author of over forty novels, Arlene James now resides outside of Dallas, Texas, with her husband. As she sends her youngest child off to college, Arlene says, "The rewards of motherhood have indeed been extraordinary for me. Yet, I've looked forward to this new stage of my life." Her need to write is greater than ever, a fact that frankly amazes her as she's been at it since the eighth grade!

The Perfect Wedding
Arlene James

www.millsandboon.co.uk

"But now abides faith, hope, love; these three. But the greatest of these is love."
—*1 Corinthians* 13:13

Chapter One

Her business was weddings. Though she did a seasonal business in prom dresses and the occasional evening gown, bridal costumes and the myriad attendant details that occasioned the wearing of them were her stock in trade. And a very good trade it was, too; for in Duncan, Oklahoma, a community of some twenty-five thousand souls or thereabouts, Layne Harington was the one-and-only full-service wedding consultant. Her skills as a seamstress and designer of exclusive gowns made her stiff competition for any other like-minded businessperson in the whole of Stephens County. She was *it,* as far as professional wedding consultation went. Still and all, it was a rare day when a man set foot in her shop, especially a man such as the one who stood before her that September morning.

He was dressed for work in soft, faded jeans, scuffed boots with rounded toes and a white button-down shirt worn thin by washings and bleachings. He held a battered straw cowboy hat in his hands and bowed his head to look at it. Layne saw tiny streaks of gold and silver in his thick sandy brown hair; the former was proof that he often worked in the sun without his hat, and the latter was a testament to his age. He wouldn't see thirty again, that was certain, but when he lifted his head to look at her with smoky, gray-blue eyes bearing only a few shallow lines at the outer corners, she couldn't think him too near forty, either. She smiled and inclined her head.

"Hello, I'm Layne Harington. How can I help you?"

"Ma'am," he said. "I'm told you do weddings—and fine ones at that."

"Weddings are our specialty," she confirmed. "We make all the necessary arrangements and offer a wide variety of choices on everything from invitations to receptions, but it's the customer who makes the decisions."

He nodded and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Well," he said, "I'm the customer. Now where do we start?"

Layne tried and evidently failed to control the shock she felt. Men simply did not plan weddings, at least not in her experience. At the most they sat in on the early discussions, grew bored with the seemingly irrelevant details, then simply left it to the women, reserving only the right to complain about the cost, and contest the bills. This man, however, was frowning in a most determined manner.

The frown wrinkled his brow and narrowed his eyes, deepening the lines that fanned out from their corners. His mouth thinned, and his jaw set like concrete. It was surprising, given the intensity of that scowl, that his face remained exceptionally attractive, even handsome. Like the rest of him, his features were large but lean, the skin drawn tautly over prominent cheekbones and a squared chin. His nose was long and straight, his brows golden slashes above deeply set eyes, his mouth wide and finely sculpted with sharp peaks in the center of his upper lip. A lock of sandy brown hair fell over his forehead, golden at the very tip, a single strand of silver shot through it. Yes, a decidedly handsome man. Layne wondered what sort of woman would send a man like this into a shop like hers. Obviously he could not know what he was letting himself in for. She extended a hand, ushering him toward the gracious sitting area, where she preferred to stage her consultations.

"What sort of wedding are you interested in?" she asked as they seated themselves on padded wicker chairs situated around a table bearing flowers, a crystal lamp and a number of books and magazines.

He looked out of place and uncomfortable, his hat in his lap. He cleared his throat. "It has to be a proper wedding," he said.

Layne waited for further explanation, but none came. She straightened and smiled sympathetically. "Perhaps we should simply start at the beginning," she said. Reaching down into a box hidden by the tablecloth, she extracted a thin, vinyl-clad notebook embossed with flowers and banded with a strip of paper. A white pen was clipped to the paper band. She broke the band, slipped the pen from it, flipped open the notebook and poised the pen above it. "Your name?"

"Rod Corley."

She began to write in the proper space. "That's *C-o-r-l-y?*"

"L-e-y."

She penned in the final letters. "What size wedding are we talking about, Mr. Corley? How many guests do you expect will attend?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Quite a few."

She flipped the notebook pages until she came to the one she wanted, then she laid the pen in the fold of the book and turned the book to face him. "I suggest that you begin making a list, Mr. Corley. Take a few days to do it. Be sure to get the bride's input. It need not be complete at this point, but as nearly so as possible. Then we'll simply count, and that will give us a ballpark figure to begin planning with."

He nodded. "All right. What else?"

She sat back and folded her hands, elbows resting on the arms of the chair. "Actually, Mr. Corley, there is a great deal else. Weddings are complicated affairs customarily planned by the bride and her mother."

A spasm of irritation passed over his face. "Does it have to be the bride's mother?"

She lifted her hands in an expansive gesture. "No, of course not. But the bride certainly should be involved."

He nodded and slid his feet back, leaning forward. "Excuse me." Without another word he stood and walked out.

Layne closed her mouth and shook her head. Now she'd seen everything. After eight years in this business, which she had started right out of college, she'd encountered just about every kind of customer possible, those who knew what they wanted no matter how wild or silly, those who hadn't the vaguest idea, those who could afford just about anything, those who couldn't afford the license, those floating with excitement, those dismayed to the point of tears. But Rod Corley was a first. She didn't have a category in which she could fit him—yet. She pressed her hands together and lifted her eyes heavenward. "I don't know what's going on here, Lord, but I've the feeling it's nothing I've dealt with before, so I really need Your help this time. I'm trusting You to give me everything I need to serve Rod Corley and his bride. And thanks for the help. Amen."

Just when she had decided he wasn't going to return, the chime on the front door sounded, followed by the muted clump of booted feet on carpet. She swiveled to the side and put on a welcoming smile. Rod Corley stood in the arched doorway of the room, a girl with a baby in her arms at his side. Layne felt the smile dying on her face and quickly bolstered it, coming to her feet. This could not be his bride! She was hardly more than a child herself. Small, waiflike, delicate to the point of frailty. The young mother had a short, neat cap of fine, dark hair that swept in wisps toward a pixieish face overwhelmed by large, dark, frightened eyes. Layne's first reaction was dismay, her second sympathy. She extended her arm in an oddly protective gesture of greeting.

Rod Corley began the introductions. "Miss, or is it Mrs. Harington?"

"Miss."

"Miss Harington, this is Dedrah March."

March. The name sounded vaguely familiar. Oh, no. She remembered a snippet of gossip she had overheard many months earlier. Before she could check them, her eyes went to the little one perched on Dedrah March's hip. The child gazed back at her with her mother's large, dark eyes, but her hair was both lighter and thicker, very nearly the color of Rod Corley's. Layne felt a sharp sense of disappointment. What kind of man would allow a teenaged girl to bear his child out of wedlock, then show up here wanting to plan a "proper" wedding? It didn't make sense. But it wasn't her job to make sense of such things. She forced the smile back onto her face and decided how she would address the girl.

"Dedrah, I'm Layne. Won't you have a seat?"

The girl nodded and hitched the baby up higher on her hip before crossing to the chair recently vacated by Rod Corley. Layne pulled her own chair around for Rod and another away from the wall for herself, noting that he waited until both women were seated before folding his tall frame into the center chair. Layne pushed the notebook resting on the table closer toward Dedrah. Immediately the baby reached for the ink pen. Dedrah gently pushed her hand away, saying, "No, Heather, you don't need that."

Heather put her hand in her mouth and shrank against her mother, her cheek pressed to the swell of Dedrah's small breast. Dedrah stroked the baby's silky hair and began to rock gently. Layne felt a stab of envy. She was at least a decade older than this girl, and weddings were her business, but somehow marriage and motherhood had eluded her. Reminding herself that God had a purpose for everything, she forced her mind to form the necessary question and began.

"Now then, Dedrah, what sort of wedding did you have in mind?"

The girl shrugged. "I don't know."

She certainly didn't sound very excited about the pending marriage, which made this situation all the more unlikely. Layne tried another approach. "Mr. Corley said something about a 'proper' wedding. Does that mean a church wedding with all the trimmings?"

"I suppose," Dedrah mumbled.

Layne glanced at Rod Corley, who nodded. She then took a deep breath. "All right, a church wedding. Did you have a church in mind?"

"No," Dedrah said carefully. "There's this little church in Davis where I used to go, but I suppose that's too far away."

Rod agreed. "Something here in Duncan would be better. I've attended a local church, but it's too small."

"I don't see why," Dedrah said. "My whole family can't add up to more than twenty, and there's just you on the other side."

"There's just me and a couple hundred other people on the other side," he said. "They may not be family, Dedrah, but they're important."

Dedrah sighed and dropped her gaze. Obviously there was some disagreement on the subject. In fact, they seemed to have decided virtually nothing. Layne swallowed the question already on her tongue, reminding herself that their relationship was none of her business, and formed another.

"What date did you have in mind?"

Dedrah looked at Rod, and Rod looked at Layne. "How soon could you get it together?"

Layne pressed both hands against the tabletop as if pressing down her exasperation. "Mr. Corley, I have to know *what* I'm putting together before I can answer that."

He shifted in his seat, irritation flashing across his face again. "Well, figure a couple hundred people," he said flatly, "and a church big enough to hold them."

She decided she was due some irritation of her own. "Two hundred people constitute a fairly large wedding, Mr. Corley," she pointed out. "Will all two hundred be expected at the reception, and what sort of reception are you planning? Will you be serving finger sandwiches or five courses, punch or champagne? Are you expecting out-of-town guests? Will you need special transportation? How many will be in the wedding party? A wedding of that size is usually formal, but how formal depends on a number of things. For instance, will there be a theme? What colors were you thinking of? Have you discussed music, readings, traditions? Who will sing, play, conduct? And what about lighting?"

He held up a hand to silence her. "If I knew what was involved, Miss Harington, I wouldn't be here."

"I'm just trying to give you an idea of what goes into some people's version of a 'proper' wedding."

"All right. OK," Rod said. "We have to start somewhere. So where would you advise?"

Layne got a grip on herself. “We could start,” she said thoughtfully, “with the wedding gown. That would give me some idea of how formal an affair you want and how much money you expect to spend.”

“Money’s no object,” he said quickly, but she had to wonder if he really knew what kind of money they could be talking about. The gown alone could command thousands, but somehow she didn’t think that was Dedrah March’s style—or Rod Corley’s, for that matter.

“Let me show you a few things,” she suggested, looking pointedly at Dedrah to let the girl know that she was interested in *her* opinion. The girl nodded, and Corley pushed his chair around to her side, so that both of them faced Layne. She walked to a pair of wide, mirrored doors and opened them to reveal a large room lined with hanging gowns and a spacious freestanding changing booth.

Quickly she went from one rack to another, extracting half a dozen dresses in various styles and price ranges. These she placed on a rolling rack, which she wheeled into the consultation area. There, she took them down one by one and held them out for the couple’s inspection, beginning with a simply tailored street-length sheath costing less than two hundred dollars. Rod shook his head sternly at this, and she smiled to herself. Well, it was progress, however slight. The next dress, tea length with a tulip skirt sewn onto a fitted, dropped-waist bodice received the same reception from him, as did the ankle-length princess-style with a demure sweetheart neckline and a sweep train. Dedrah March simply stared, saying nothing, her expression unreadable. When Layne produced the fourth dress, a floor-length traditional gown with a wedding ring collar and fitted bodice trimmed with lace, its full skirt elongated into a court train, Rod Corley nodded with satisfaction.

“That’s more like it.”

Dedrah glanced down at the little one in her lap, who was mumbling quietly around her fingers. She said nothing about the dress, but her frown indicated displeasure. Layne bit back another inappropriate question and looked to Rod Corley for guidance. His glance followed her own, and his mouth turned down at the corners. When he once again met her gaze, his irritation was evident, but he nodded for her to go on. Reluctantly Layne took another dress from the rack and presented it with a flourish.

“This one is a good deal more formal,” she said. “The fitted bodice with portrait neckline and Basque waist is appliquéd in lace with seed pearls scattered throughout, as is the hem of the bouffant skirt. The chapel train is separate and extends about four feet from the waist. The cuffs of the Gibson sleeve are four inches long and also appliquéd. The dress runs about twelve hundred dollars, plus alterations.”

Both she and Rod looked to Dedrah, whose frown was firmly fixed. Layne rehung the gown and took down the final one. It was considerably more ornate, satin and organza literally encrusted in lace, pearls and frosted sequins. There were bows, some small and others enormous enough to serve as a bustle, a keyhole back, a skirt so full it was both gathered and pleated at the natural waist, leg-of-mutton sleeves, jewel neckline and a detachable cathedral train some three yards in length. At five thousand dollars, it was the most expensive gown in the house. Yet Dedrah’s gaze was almost bland.

“It’s very pretty,” she said, then shook her head. Rod Corley pitched forward in irritation, causing Layne to hastily intercede.

“These are just examples of the different types of gowns,” she explained. “There are many, many styles to choose from. If I could just get an idea of what type of dress you’re interested in…”

Again Dedrah turned those big, bland eyes up at her and shrugged. Rod Corley smacked his hat against his thigh in frustration, grinding his teeth.

“She won’t choose,” he said. “I knew I should’ve made Sammy come!”

At that Dedrah clamped her teeth down onto her bottom lip, bowed her head and began to cry. The baby, sensing her mother’s distress, squirmed and babbled loudly. Layne realized that soon they would both be in tears, thanks to Rod Corley, if she didn’t do something quickly. She shot him a look that told him just who she blamed for the whole situation and watched his mouth drop open, but

she had other things to think about at the moment. Taking a deep breath, she sent up a quick, silent prayer for patience and guidance, then threw the dress over the rack, stepped forward and lifted the baby off Dedrah March's lap.

"It's all right," the girl protested, but she said nothing more as Layne thrust the baby at Corley.

"Of course it is," Layne said soothingly, "but perhaps you'd like a drink of water. Why don't you come with me?"

Dedrah nodded and let Layne help her to her feet. Layne ushered the girl through a louvered door set in the corner by the window, down a narrow hallway and through a second door into the workroom, where she pointed out the watercooler. While Dedrah filled a paper cone with water, Layne weighed the wisdom of what she was about to say. It mattered not that it might cost her a customer. She simply didn't want to reduce the girl to tears again, but Dedrah appeared firmly in control now. Layne took a deep breath, whispered a quick prayer and folded her arms across her middle.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" she asked.

Dedrah looked up in surprise. "The wedding, you mean?" Layne nodded, and Dedrah smiled wistfully. "I do want to get married," the girl said. "I just don't know how it got so complicated."

"I'd say that was Mr. Corley's doing," Layne commented archly.

Dedrah nodded glumly. "Yeah, I suppose it is, but he's such a great guy, you know? He's been really good to us, Heather and me, and he's *so* generous. It's just that he's kind of a take-charge guy, and I guess he's pretty hardheaded, too. Boy, once he's made up his mind to something…" She let the sentence trail off and shook her head. "You know he's just trying to do what's best, but that doesn't always make it any easier. It's just so difficult to tell him to back off once he's got something in his head."

Layne didn't know quite what to make of that description. A great guy, was he? She didn't know if she'd have put that label to him. Generous, maybe, but no doubt the hardheaded part was most apt. "Still," she said, "you shouldn't let him force you into anything."

Dedrah lifted her hands in a gesture of futility. "It's just so complicated," she said softly, "the whole thing, and I suppose it's mostly my fault to begin with. It just seemed so simple once. You're in love, you do what seems natural and too late you realize what a mistake it was. But you live with it, because you love him." She bowed her head, then added hopefully, "We'll work it out."

Layne nodded. "Often those things that seem simple and natural are the ones that get us in the most trouble," Layne said gently. "Just remember that God always loves us and that He's always ready to help us find our way."

She'd embarrassed the girl, and obviously Dedrah had been embarrassed plenty already. Her situation had to be a difficult one, and Layne knew she'd interfered in something that really wasn't any of her business. Enough was enough. She forced herself to relax. "Let's return to the consultation room," she said, "if you're ready."

"Sure. I'm sorry to put you to so much trouble."

"No trouble," Layne replied lightly. "Weddings are very emotional. I'm used to clients who dissolve in tears." It was too true, but Dedrah smiled doubtfully.

"Well, thanks, anyway," the girl said, then she tossed her paper cone into the trash can beside the cooler and moved past Layne back the way they'd come.

When they entered the consultation room, giggles greeted them. Dedrah stopped in her tracks and put her hands together, laughing gently. Curious, Layne stepped around her to see what had wrought this transformation. To her surprise, Rod Corley was holding up baby Heather and blowing against her tummy, making the baby giggle and thrash her limbs wildly. Rod dangled her above him, his face wreathed in smiles.

"Whose girl are you?" he cooed, rubbing his face against the baby's. "Whose sweet girl are you? Are you Mommy's girl? Are you Daddy's girl? Or are you Uncle's girl?"

Uncle's? Layne shook her head. Well, he certainly seemed to adore the child. He couldn't be too bad and care that deeply for his baby. She liked him immensely at that moment, and it took all her self-control not to join in the play. She was really a pretty baby and so sweet-tempered. Dedrah was very blessed in many ways.

Once again envy assailed Layne. *One day,* she thought. *Please, Lord, let it happen for me one day. It isn't too late. Twenty-nine isn't too old.* She tried not to think that thirty was just around the corner and that it had been years, literally, since she'd had a real date. She tried not to think, too, how often during the early years, when she'd worked so hard to establish her business, her family had warned her that this was going to happen. "You don't want to spend your life alone," her mother had said. "That shop won't kiss you goodnight or give you babies." Involuntarily Layne's eyes went to Rod Corley.

Was this his first marriage? she wondered. It seemed so. He was pretty long in the tooth to be starting off, but she noticed that he'd chosen a very young woman with whom to begin. She only hoped Dedrah was up to a man as intense as Rod Corley seemed to be, not that any of it was her business. Weddings were her business, and it was time she got back to it.

Layne put an end to the play by walking to the table and picking up the notebook. Behind her, Rod handed over the baby to Dedrah, who immediately took up the cooing.

"You're Mommy's darlin', aren't you? Mommy's sweet, sweet baby."

Layne carried the book to Rod. Evidently he was the one who would be doing the planning, provided any planning was done. "I suggest you take this home and look it over very carefully," she said, "then speak frankly with the bride. If you still want a formal wedding after that, get back to me."

He stood, and for the first time she realized how very tall he was, a good six inches taller than her five feet and seven inches. He was tall and built like a brick wall, rather imposing taken as a whole, and she took a step backward.

He reached for the notebook as if fearing she would deny it to him, and his hand grazed her wrist. She jerked back, releasing the book abruptly, and he grabbed it in midair.

"Ex-excuse me," she mumbled, wondering what on earth had gotten into her.

"My fault," he replied softly, his aura enveloping her like a cloud, fogging her brain.

"Ah, as I—I said…" She took a deep, cleansing breath. "You can get back to me anytime that suits you."

He nodded and gripped the notebook. "Thank you for your time," he said, and his voice sounded oddly deep and bell-like to her ears, as if he had to pull the words up out of the pit of his belly. It made her uneasy. Everything about this man made her uneasy. She managed a smile and turned away, fixing her attention on Dedrah.

"Goodbye. You have a lovely baby."

"Thanks." Dedrah kissed the baby, smiled and walked into the front showroom and out the door, as if she couldn't wait to be shed of the place, while Rod Corley just stood there like a great lump, hat in one hand, notebook in the other, radiating a kind of danger Layne could sense but not identify.

"Mr. Corley," she said, swallowing, "was there something else?"

He looked down at the notebook and up again almost shyly. "You're very nice," he said, adding, "I'm no good when someone cries, and Dedrah's had a pretty tough time of it. I appreciate your kindness."

A strange sensation swept over her, as if a wisp of tulle had brushed the skin all over her body at once. She swallowed convulsively. "I—I understand."

"I thought so," he said quietly. "She's really a timid little thing, too young, but a good mother for all that, and very brave to do it like she has. I want her to have the best."

Layne folded her arms almost defensively. "I see."

"Good." His smile warmed her and dissipated the fog, leaving her with a sense of well-being. "Thanks again." He turned and moved away, but she found she couldn't let him go without speaking her mind.

"Mr. Corley," she called, and he stopped, turning back to face her. Layne licked her lips, then raised her chin. "You'd better have a frank talk with Miss March. In fact, if you like, I could suggest a minister who would gladly counsel the two of you."

His eyebrows rose. "That's not necessary."

She gulped. "Well, you're obviously at odds about this wedding."

He cocked his head as if wondering why she would say such a thing, then looked at the notebook in his hand. "I don't think so," he said, "but we'll talk." He tipped his hat. "So long, Miss Harington."

Layne followed him silently into the front showroom and watched as he opened the door, the chimes pealing, and walked through it. She watched through the glass as he went down the steps and turned onto the sidewalk. He was a good-looking man, but not the type she would have expected to attract or be attracted to the timid, childlike Dedrah. Something wasn't right here, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. She studied his fluid motions and straight posture as he strode around the front end of a brandnew pickup truck, climbed into the cab and settled himself behind the wheel. He spoke to Dedrah, who was strapping Heather into a car seat between them, but whether the girl replied or not, Layne couldn't tell. Still speaking, he started the engine, put the transmission in gear and twisted to spread his long arm across the back of the seat as he steered the truck out into the street. Layne turned away from the window before he started the truck forward and drove away.

They won't come back, she told herself. Dedrah said he was a good man, trying to do what he thought best. For some reason, Layne could almost believe that now. Maybe it was the way he had played with the baby or what Dedrah had said about being in love, as if that defined her very existence. Rod Corley seemed the sort of man in whom a woman could lose herself. He would speak to Dedrah about the wedding, find that she didn't want to make a production of it and elope. Or maybe they wouldn't marry at all. Maybe he would look at Dedrah and know that they were a mismatch and such a mismatch was doomed to failure anyway. He could always be Heather's father without marrying her mother. Why compound one mistake with another? She shook her head, trying to derail the train of her thoughts, but it was a curious thing, a man like that with a girl like that, when he could probably have his choice of the women around here.

She remembered the soft warmth of those grayblue eyes and the rumbling depth of his voice when he had thanked her for her kindness, and a curious sensation swept her again. Yes, a man like that could have almost any woman on whom he set his sights. He must love Dedrah with an allconsuming passion that had overwhelmed his better judgment. All-consuming passion? She laughed at herself, glad her two full-time employees were taking an extended break. Outside, a vehicle pulled into a parking space in front of the shop, and Layne welcomed the intrusion into her thoughts. She had work to do. Moving quickly, she rehung the dress she had draped over the portable rack, pushed it into the fitting room, closed the doors and was replacing the chairs at the table when the chimes sounded and a valued customer swept in with her second daughter.

"Mrs. Ogilvy," Layne said, striding forward. "Jennifer. Did we decide on the ribbons?"

"And the shoes!" Mrs. Ogilvy announced proudly, as if they'd made great strides.

Layne suppressed a smile and invited them both to the table. "I'll just get my books," she said, moving toward the desk in the far corner behind the potted ferns.

Only 2001 more details to go, she mused silently.

No, Rod Corley wouldn't be back. He'd take a good look at that planner she'd given him, listen to Dedrah and opt for a simpler process. Either way, she couldn't believe they'd be back. She was almost sorry about that, for she'd like to know what was to become of them. On the other hand, maybe it was for the best. She was entirely too intrigued by that man.

She turned back to Mrs. Ogilvy and Jennifer, offering them her brightest smile. “Well,” she said, “let’s get down to business.” In the end, it was always business for her. God seemed to have ordained it so. And yet, she would like to marry and have children of her own one day. She had asked God for a husband and children so many times, but who was she to question the Almighty? He had already blessed her with family and friends and a thriving business that she very much enjoyed. That should be enough. For a child of God, living in His will should be enough.

Why suddenly, after meeting Rod Corley, should she feel such dissatisfaction?

Chapter Two

She was going through a floral design book for the third time with poor, harried Mrs. Stapleton and her petulant daughter, Leslie, when he walked through the door with Dedrah, hat in one hand, notebook in the other, exactly as she'd last seen him some forty-eight hours earlier.

The thrill the sight of him brought her was entirely out of proportion with the circumstance, especially since Dedrah March stood beside and slightly behind him, but thrill her he did. She perversely noted that his hair had been carefully parted and combed, that his shirt was fine and crisply pressed, its blue reflected in the starry depth of his eyes, and that his jeans were new and stiff and anchored about his narrow hips with a wide leather belt and palm-size silver buckle bearing the initial C on a bed of black onyx. Moreover, his boots were black and smooth and freshly polished, and the black felt hat in his hand had a narrow brown band sporting a tiny blue-andyellow feather. Without a doubt, this was Rod Corley turned out in his Sunday best, and if she hadn't known better, Layne would have thought it was for her.

Hastily she tucked that notion into a small, private compartment in her mind and closed the door on it. Rod Corley was here for one reason and one reason only—to plan a wedding, and weddings were her business. She shifted the look of surprise and pleasure on her face, though she couldn't know how much of the latter she had given away in that first unguarded moment. Composed and professional, she excused herself from the Stapleton pair and rose to greet the newcomers with outstretched hands.

"Well, hello."

"Hello."

Rod reached out with both hands, but as his were filled with hat and notebook, she could do little but lay hers gently atop them before quickly taking hers away again. He smiled at her with something very like relief, a reaction she found wholly incongruous. Her cocked head must have said so, for he cleared his throat and injected a businesslike tone to his voice.

"Have we come at a bad time? You did say—"

She cut him off. "No, no, it's fine. If you'ii just excuse me a moment, I'll get some help." Smiling benignly, she stepped into the front showroom, where a clerk was ringing up a purchase of lace gloves for a couple of teenagers. "Frankie," Layne said, "could you see to the Stapletons for me?"

The tall, painfully thin Frankie nodded smartly. "Of course."

"Thank you. Call Angie to come up front, please."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And bring coffee for Mrs. Stapleton. Leslie may prefer a soft drink."

"I'll take care of it right away."

Satisfied, Layne turned back to the couple waiting in the arched doorway of the consultation room. "Right this way, please." She led them quickly and swiftly past the Stapletons, who occupied the bamboo table, to the far corner of the room. Screened by a grouping of large ferns in enormous baskets, the area around her desk was suitable for consultation. She used it often when payment was to be made or in the event that two clients were in the shop at the same time for consultation. She indicated two comfortable armchairs beside the small, rolltop desk where she did her accounts. Dedrah chose the farthest one, leaving Rod to fold his long frame into the one situated right next to the desk. Layne sat down in the desk chair, swiveled it to face them and crossed her legs. "How may I help you?"

"We're ready to start," Rod said, placing the notebook on the desk and pushing it toward her.

Layne swiveled and opened the cover. Inside she discovered several pages had been filled out in a tight, cramped hand of decidedly masculine origin. She lifted a brow at Rod Corley's anxious expression. "Very good," she muttered, settling back to read. "Let's see what we have here."

Quickly she scanned the pages, some of it written in pencil, some in pen. In the space indicating the chosen date of the ceremony, he had written in pencil, "Soon as possible." The groom was evidently anxious. She bit her lip and went over everything again. He might be anxious to have it done, but he obviously wanted it done right, for the ceremony he had mapped out was both formal and elaborate, and there were more than two hundred names on his guest list. Some of the names were those of Duncan's most prominent citizens, from bank presidents to real estate agents, oilmen and restaurateurs. It was an impressive list, and she found herself murmuring, "Do you actually *know* all these people?"

"They're my friends," he said blankly, "and business associates. Mostly business associates."

She looked up and smiled, an oblique apology for an insensitive question. "Well, you'll likely add to it as time goes by," she said, then dropped her attention to a second list done in an entirely different hand, Dedrah's no doubt. Less than twenty names comprised Dedrah's list, and nearly all of them ended with March. There was something pathetic about that, and it just pointed out once more how very implausible this match was. It was on the tip of Layne's tongue to say so, and she realized with some panic that she must not. She pushed the book away from her, as if pushing away the words she wanted to say, and sent up a frantic prayer. *Dear God in heaven, what's wrong with me? Help me do and say the right things.* Her smile was strained when next she lifted her gaze to Rod Corley's, but it was absolutely the best she could do, and she almost hoped it was not good enough. In that case, he would surely get up and walk out, and she wouldn't have to help him marry a woman he shouldn't be marrying. But she was forgetting the child, *his* child, his and Dedrah's. She took a deep breath and reminded herself to remain professional.

"Now I have an idea where we're going," she said briskly. "The next step is to narrow in on a date. Let's see what's going on six to eight months from now." Leaning forward, she began to flip through her personal calendar, speaking to herself. "Let's see, the Canons are set for April, the Porters are the eighth, the Cliff/Bicknell nuptials on the fourteenth. The Harpstones have the first weekend in May…Oh, dear." She looked up at Dedrah and smiled. "How would you like to be a June bride?" The girl turned white beneath that cap of dark hair. Suddenly alarmed, Layne leaned forward. "Dedrah, are you all right?"

"June?" Rod Corley's voice claimed Layne's attention. "You've got to be kidding!"

"We can't wait till June!" Dedrah gasped.

"Absolutely not," Rod agreed implacably. "Eight months is too long. Six months is too long!"

Layne's mouth fell open. Didn't they understand how much time went into producing the kind of wedding they seemed to want? She slumped, feeling inexplicably weary, then took a deep breath and began carefully choosing her words. "I'm afraid six months is the minimum for the type of ceremony you've indicated here," she said gently. "You can't begin to imagine how much there is to do, how many choices there are to be made. Even the people who come in here confident that they know what they want begin to waffle when they-see the available options. It just takes time to work through them all. Weddings are supposed to be perfect, you see, and…" The words died away as Rod Corley passed a hand over his eyes. It was the gesture of a desperate man, and the sight of it did strange things to her patient resolve. She bit her lip. "It takes six months to produce a perfect wedding," she finished lamely.

Rod Corley sighed. "Then we'll have an imperfect wedding," he said quietly, and when he lifted his gaze to her face, his smoky eyes were imploring. "Six months is too long."

Layne found herself saying, "W-we might be able to work something out."

It was then that Dedrah grasped a small part of Rod's sleeve and tugged it, saying, "You'd better get Sammy."

Rod sent her an irritated look and turned back to Layne. "Does it have anything to do with money?" he asked bluntly.

Layne lifted both brows. “Not really. Cash as an incentive never hurts where suppliers are concerned, but the real problem is simply time. It takes time to decide specifics, to make arrangements, to order materials, to create designs…” She shook her head. How could she make him understand the myriads of details to be addressed? “I’ve been doing this a long time now,” she said. “Trust me.”

“I do,” he told her flatly. “That’s why I’m asking you to help me make it happen sooner.”

It was not an appeal she could ignore. The tone, the look, the posture, everything about it was totally sincere. He needed her help. It was as simple as that. She swallowed. “I hope you’re prepared to spend a lot of time on this,” she said.

He reached out and laid his hand over her wrist, squeezing gently. “Thank you,” he said, relief softening his voice to a near whisper.

It was almost her undoing. She fought the impulse to cover his hand with her own, to answer his soft look with her own. She edged away from him, breathing deeply and forcing her focus back to business. She made a decision. “Four months,” she said, “and that’s really pushing it.”

“That’s the best you can do?”

“The very best, and you’re going to have to put yourself completely in my hands at that. We won’t have time for second choices.”

He nodded. “All right.”

To Layne’s surprise, Dedrah leaped to her feet. “I’m going after Sammy!” she announced. “You promised him!”

Sammy? Layne looked to Rod for an answer, but he turned his gaze to Dedrah. “I said it’d be done as quickly as possible,” he told her patiently, “and that’s what I’m doing.”

“But four months!” the girl cried.

Rod jerked a thumb in Layne’s direction. “You heard what she said,” he argued reasonably. “Four months is the best she can do, and I think we ought to be grateful that she’s willing to do it for us.”

Dedrah glared down at him with very large, very liquid eyes. “You promised Sammy,” she whispered.

“So I did,” Rod admitted.

“Who—” Layne began, but Rod suddenly stood up and strode away. Impulsively, she went after him. “—is Sammy?”

“My nephew,” he snapped without slowing a bit.

Layne threw a smile at the Stapletons as she passed. This was impossible. This whole thing with Rod Corley was just impossible, and she made up her mind to tell him so. They hadn’t the foggiest idea really what they were doing, and she certainly didn’t need this kind of aggravation. Four months was in all likelihood not enough time, and probably after she’d knocked herself out for them, they’d decide they were making a mistake and cancel! Suddenly she didn’t know which would be worse, if they canceled or if they didn’t. All she really knew was that she didn’t feel up to the task of seeing Rod Corley and Dedrah March “properly” married. Surely God intended her to say no to this. As soon as they emerged into the front showroom, she lifted a hand to halt his progress, only to watch him stride out of reach and through the door.

“Oh, Lord,” she muttered frantically, “what’s going on here? What do you expect of me?” She’d just have to tell Dedrah that she didn’t want to handle this affair after all. She nodded in satisfaction, then walked to the window and boldly spied on Rod Corley as he stood at the passenger window of the pickup truck, obviously arguing with someone. After a moment, he backed up, and a tall, lean, young man got out and gestured toward the shop. Both turned in that direction, sending Layne scurrying back into the showroom. Angie, she noticed, sent her a curious glance, which she ignored.

Momentarily, the door opened amidst chimes, and Rod Corley stepped inside, the young man at his elbow. “Miss Harington,” he said, “this is my nephew, Sammy Corley. Sam, this is Miss Harington. If you won’t believe me, then maybe you’ll believe an expert.” He glanced at Layne. “Tell him.”

Tell him what? And why tell him? She opened her mouth and closed it again, forced a smile and said to Sammy, “What is it you’d like to know?”

He pushed a hand through his close-cropped hair, allowing her a few seconds to look him over. The family resemblance was strong, from the color of their hair—though Sammy’s was lacking the streaks of silver—to the planes of their faces and the color of their eyes. Sammy was simply a younger, slimmer version of his uncle. Even the timbre of their voices were alike.

Sammy struck a cryptic pose, jerking a thumb at his uncle. “He says it can’t be done in less than four months.”

He had to be talking about the wedding, of course, but she still didn’t understand what he had to do with it. She wondered if she ever would, but nodded and gave him his answer. “Yes. Four months.”

“We don’t want to wait that long!” he said urgently.

We? Her jaw descended slowly. He couldn’t mean him and Dedrah! Could he?

“It’s just the best that can be done,” Rod was saying. “You understand why, don’t you?”

“I understand,” Sammy replied, “and we appreciate what you’re trying to do, but we don’t want to wait.”

“I thought you said you wanted it done properly,” Rod countered.

“We do!” Sammy said. “We just don’t want to wait.”

“Well, four months is the best that can be done,” Rod said impatiently. “She wanted eight!” He pointed at Layne, who was listening with her mouth hanging open.

“Eight!” Sammy erupted. “No way!”

“Then be grateful she’s agreed to do it in four!”

Sammy opened his mouth to make a retort to that, but Layne had had enough. She forestalled him by stepping quickly forward and raising a hand. “Wait a minute!” she commanded, employing a tone usually reserved for the hired help, and Sammy snapped his mouth shut. In the ensuing silence, she tried to decide how to proceed, but there was only one question that really needed answering. She pinned Sammy with a stern look and addressed him. “*Who* are you?” she said, enunciating clearly.

Sammy passed a look to his uncle, who was clearly as befuddled as his nephew. The young man shrugged his shoulders. “Well, I’m—”

“In regard to this wedding,” she clarified. “I mean, who are you in regard to this wedding?”

Again, uncle and nephew traded looks, then it was Rod who answered. “Why, he’s the groom,” he said. “Who’d you think?”

The groom? The *groom!* Layne stepped back and lifted a hand to her mouth. The wave of relief that hit her nearly buckled her knees. “Oh, my,” she said, looking at Rod Corley with fresh eyes. A generous uncle. He was nothing more than a generous uncle. This *boy* was going to marry that girl in there. *He* had fathered her child. *Whose sweet girl are you? Are you Mommy’s girl? Are you Daddy’s girl? Or are you Uncle’s girl?* Layne laughed aloud. If that child had any sense at all, she was her uncle’s girl and blessed at that. Layne composed herself and offered her hand to Sammy Corley, ignoring the tremor in her voice. “Pleased to meet you,” she said, thinking, *Thank you, Lord.* “Miss March is waiting in the next room.”

“Thank you,” he muttered, then with a speculative look that he shared between them, he slowly turned and started into the consultation room. Layne stood as if rooted to the spot, wondering what to say to the man at her side.

“You didn’t really think…”

The sound of his voice prompted her to turn to face him. “What?”

Those smoky blue eyes literally plumbed hers, then he shook his head, a lopsided smile quirking one corner of his lips. “You thought Dedrah…and I…?”

It did seem absurd, always had, and the smile wiggling on her mouth said so, but it was understandable. She dropped her gaze. “What else could I think?”

He chuckled softly, bringing her gaze right back up. Those smoky eyes were as warm as summer skies. “And here I am trying to impress you,” he said, his voice low and silky.

She caught her breath. It *was* for her, the new jeans, the blue shirt, the desperately straight part in his sand-and-platinum hair. *Oh, Lord, could it be that* he! *was for her?* She was trembling suddenly, aware that something momentous had just occurred, something incredible. And hadn’t it? No, not yet, but unless she missed her guess it was about to. She was intensely attracted to this man, and he was apparently attracted to her, enough to want to impress her. Wasn’t she right to think that something might begin between them if she let him know the attraction was mutual? She hoped so. She surprised herself with how fervently she hoped. She was thinking like a schoolgirl, but she wasn’t about to act like one. God had given her this opportunity, and she wasn’t about to blow it.

She straightened her spine and lifted her chin, adopting her best business tone. “Try no more,” she said. “I was impressed to begin with.” She strode forward, reveling in the rich laughter that followed her.

It was that laughter, augmented with smiles, that bolstered her during what was to be a difficult consultation, for if Dedrah was uncertain, her intended was not. He didn’t want this wedding. He didn’t say so in words, but he didn’t have to; Layne had become adept over the years at reading the silent body language of her clients. A stony face, and she had seldom seen one stonier, was a sure sign of dislike. When she added a fist that reflexively clenched, then deliberately relaxed, a leg that jiggled uncontrollably and a frown that turned too quickly to a iusteriess smile, she came up with a fellow trying to appear accepting of something he did not truly want.

The question was why he was playing the game—for Dedrah’s sake or for Rod’s? The latter seemed unlikely. Sam could save his uncle a bundle by expressing a preference for a simple service, so he had to be keeping quiet for Dedrah’s sake. He wouldn’t be the first groom to indulge his bride, and yet something about this whole arrangement didn’t quite add up. Rod had said he wanted Dedrah to have the best, and apparently Sammy did, too, so why wasn’t Dedrah enthusiastically embracing everything Layne had to offer? Maybe the girl didn’t know what she wanted. Maybe she didn’t know what a “proper” wedding actually entailed, and maybe she felt guilty about the amount of money Rod would have to spend in order to provide her with one. Whatever the problem, Layne concentrated on making Dedrah feel relaxed and included, while actually leaving her very few decisions. Time dictated the leeway Layne could allow in this case, and everyone seemed to accept her “suggestions” until they came to the matter of guest lists again.

“I think we should plan for no fewer than three hundred guests,” Layne contended. “Dedrah, you’re bound to think of a few names you’ll want to add to your list before the invitations go out, and both sets of parents will likely want their friends included.”

“I don’t think so,” Dedrah replied in a small voice.

At the same moment Sammy shook his head. “Me, neither. Till we’re married, Rod’s all I’ve got in the way of family.”

Layne could not prevent her gaze going up to Rod’s face. He was leaning against the wall, arms folded, the toe of one boot hooked around the heel of the other. Those smoky eyes were trained on Layne’s face, and she had the distinct impression that they had been there all along. Despite the little thrill that swept through her, she forced herself back to business.

“I know you think that now,” she told the pair confidently, “but experience tells me that you *will* add to the list. Don’t worry, we’ll eventually cut back, but the time for that is after the RSVPs come in. I’m guessing we’ll wind up around two hundred and fifty, but in the meantime we plan for three hundred. That leaves us a comfortable cushion. It also means that any surprises at the end will be pleasant ones in terms of expense. Now, are we agreed here?”

"We're agreed," Rod said flatly. After a hesitation, during which he reached over and clasped Dedrah's hand, Sammy nodded his acquiescence. Only then did Dedrah give hers. Layne breathed a quiet sigh of relief. The matter was settled, and Sammy did seem to be holding back for Dedrah's sake. However, if Rod Corley had his way, no one would be holding back for very long. He was an amazingly generous man, and family seemed to mean a great deal to him. She smiled to herself, remembering the way he'd cooed to Sam and Dedrah's baby. *Are you Uncle's girl?* A man like that should have had babies of his own. She wondered why he hadn't, then wondered if maybe he had. But no, a family of Rod's would have been family of Sammy's, and Sammy had made it plain that he had only Rod—for now. When Sammy married, both he and Rod would expand their family. Maybe that explained Rod's generosity. "I want her to have the best," he had said of Dedrah. Yes, family meant a lot to Rod Corley. Layne was impressed, but again she made herself turn her thoughts to business. Producing a wedding of this magnitude in only four months time left no room for dillydallying.

"Location," she said. "I'll call around to the local churches that can accommodate a wedding of this size and find out which ones have open dates about four months from now. Let's schedule another meeting. Oh…" She flipped through her calendar again. "How's Friday?"

"Fine," Rod said, and nobody else bothered to argue.

"About four-thirty?"

"We'll be here."

Not *they* but *we.* Because of her? Layne wondered. Did he want to see her again, or was he just that rare man who actually enjoyed planning weddings? She could easily believe that God would chose such a man for her. She smiled to herself as Dedrah and Sammy got to their feet, then quickly composed herself and rose also.

"We'll see you, Miss Harington," Sammy said, his hand resting in the small of Dedrah's back.

"You're kind to do this for us in so short a time," Dedrah added, but Sammy snorted.

"Four months looks like four years just now, if you ask me."

"Well, nobody did," Rod said, a hand falling on Sammy's shoulder. "Now scoot. I need a word with Miss Harington."

Layne took pains to smile at Dedrah. "I look forward to seeing you again. Good day."

"So long, ma'am." Dedrah and Sam turned and left them, their arms linked about each other's waists.

Layne stood beside Rod and looked up at him. Was he really for her? Somehow she believed that he was and she couldn't help thinking that God was being very generous. "Walk me out?"

"My pleasure," she said, and he gave her a smile that warmed her from the inside out.

"I, um, just wanted to thank you again," he said, "and, ah, explain about Sam."

She cocked her head to one side. "What about him?"

He reached out a hand and cupped her elbow, turning her smoothly, and they began to stroll after Sam and Dedrah. "Actually, it's about Heather," he said haltingly. "Sammy didn't know Dedrah was pregnant when he went to Saudi Arabia."

"He's military, then?" That explained the haircut.

"Was. He just got out. If I'd had my way, he'd never have enlisted, but it was done by the time I found out about it. Anyway, apparently they had some kind of fight—and that's another thing. I didn't even know they were seeing each other. I mean, I knew he was going out when he was home on leave, but I didn't know who with. I figured he was seeing lots of girls, but instead he was seeing just one, and obviously things got pretty serious. But then they had this fight, and they broke up. I don't think he was very happy about it, because he did write her from Saudi Arabia. I guess she had her reasons for not telling him about the baby."

"I can understand that," Layne said quietly. They had walked past Frankie and the Stapletons, and she was anxious to keep the conversation private, considering the delicate nature of the subject. That being the case, she stopped right beneath the arch that led out into the front showroom, keeping

as much distance as possible between the two of them and the Stapletons. “I would imagine Dedrah didn’t want him to feel pressured,” she said. “They had broken up. He’d gone off to war. It wasn’t as if he could do anything about it from Saudi Arabia.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Rod agreed, “especially as he didn’t know. But like I said, I think he cared about her all along, because when he got stationed over at Ft. Sill, he didn’t waste any time looking her up, and apparently as soon as he laid eyes on Heather he knew she was his.”

“And naturally he claimed her.”

“Not yet,” Rod said uneasily. “I mean, not legally. The wedding will pretty much take care of that, but we haven’t figured out exactly how to handle the rest of it. The wedding’s the important thing, though. If we do that right, that’s half the battle. It took him some time to convince Dedrah that he really wanted to marry her.” Rod went on. “He was back in this area a couple of weeks before I even found out any of this.”

“And when you did, you offered them the wedding of their dreams,” Layne supplied helpfully.

Rod grinned. “Something like that. The point is, Sam’s a good kid who’s made a mistake, and now I’m trying to help him overcome it, not that any of us consider Heather a mistake, mind you. It’s just that they did kind of get the cart before the horse, and now they’ve got to…well, hold their heads up and fix it. They’re doing the right thing by getting married, but I personally think *how* they do it is important, too. I mean, if they slink off and do it in some shabby little office somewhere, that’s the same as saying they’re ashamed, don’t you think?”

Layne shrugged uncomfortably; this really wasn’t any of her business. But he had asked. “I don’t know. I suppose some people might think so.”

“Right, and I just don’t see why those kids ought to have to deal with that. Besides, they have every right to a fancy wedding. You understand what I’m saying?”

“I think I do,” Layne said. “You don’t want them to miss out on anything.”

“Them or that little girl,” he said, then a pained expression flitted across his face. “I know this wedding’s liable to cause some gossip,” he went on, “and goodness knows Dedrah’s had plenty of that already. If people only knew, when they started whispering tales, how much hurt they were causing, there wouldn’t be any such thing as gossip. But nobody seems to consider that, and I’ve no reason to think they will now. But I think it’ll all turn out for the best if we just keep our heads up and go on as we would have if they hadn’t made that one mistake.”

Layne smiled and was bold enough to reach out and squeeze his shoulder. “I think they’re very blessed to have you,” she told him.

His head bowed, and he started working his way around the brim of his hat with both hands. She took her hand away, and he said softly, “I think we’re all blessed for having found you to help us,” he said.

Layne put her head back and laughed. “Mr. Corley,” she said, “you could hardly have missed me. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m the only game in town.”

“And most any other woman in that position would be a real snooty sort,” he said, “but you’re not like that at all.”

She actually felt herself blush. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

“Kindness deserves kindness,” he said softly, and for just a moment Layne had the crazy notion that they were somehow set apart from the others in the building. She could see and hear the others around them, and yet the spot where they stood had the most amazingly intimate aura about it. Then everything snapped back into perspective, and she saw clearly that they enjoyed no privacy whatsoever.

She lifted her chin, swallowed and wrapped her arms about herself as casually as she could manage. “You know, you really don’t owe me any explanations,” she pointed out. “I’m hired help, and because my services aren’t free, it pays to be on my best behavior with all my clients. If some are easier to be kind to than others, well, that’s a blessing.”

"I just thought it'd help if you understood the circumstances fully," he said, and she nodded.

"It does. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now would you do me a favor?" he asked, his voice husky and low.

Anything, she thought, but wisely she said only, "If I can."

He lifted his hat and fitted it carefully onto his head, saying, "Now don't agree too fast. This is a biggie."

Somehow she doubted it. The gleam in his smoky blue eyes seemed to say that he was teasing. "What?" she urged, her face perfectly blank.

He tugged his hat brim down over his eyebrows and leaned forward, whispering, "Call me Rod."

The corners of her mouth quirked upward. "My name is Layne, in case you've forgotten," she said, and those blue-gray eyes twinkled brightly.

"I haven't forgotten."

She nodded, feeling terribly conspicuous, where moments before she'd felt set apart, and said, "See you Friday, Rod."

He shot her a smile like white lightning. "I'll be looking forward to it, Layne."

He tipped his hat and left her. Her heart was beating a slow, steady, but very pronounced staccato. *Not the groom at all,* she thought. *Thank you, God.* She smiled to herself. Only four months, but this was going to be a wedding to really make Rod Corley proud. It was going to take lots of her personal attention, she decided, more so than any wedding she'd ever handled. But something told her it was going to be worth it. Something told her she had just met the man intended for her, the man of her dreams, the answer to her prayers. Cherishing that secret, she turned back to Mrs. Stapleton and Leslie, and this time her smile was the real thing. Never mind that it wasn't for them.

Chapter Three

Layne had plenty of time to think and pray before Friday, and yet, by the time that last appointment of the day drew near, she was painfully conscious of a fluttering in her stomach. It was not unlike the moment when all her efforts seemed to culminate: the church was filled, the music ceased, the mother of the bride and both of the groom's parents were seated, the wedding party in all its finery poised on the brink of movement, and then began the processional. Step, pause, step. Step, pause, step. Maids in beautiful dresses, their faces composed with serenity and joy, moved down the aisle on the arms of tuxedoed young men, grave and solicitous. Then came "Here Comes the Bride," those first familiar notes ringing out with the authority of trumpet blows, and the crowd rose expectantly to its feet. Poised in the doorway was the bride in all her elegant finery, clutching the arm of a nervous father. She was always extraordinarily beautiful, and it never failed to thrill Layne that all the old pundits were right. The groom took one look and his chest swelled with pride, his eyes sparkled, and a smile touched his lips.

This was love, sacred and ordained, the very height of it, when commitment was made and reveled in. Everything after that moment was anticlimactic to Layne, though she knew it was not so for the couple involved. For them, the pageant had only begun, while her part in it was all but finished. Sometimes she wondered if she didn't stay in this business just for the satisfaction of that one moment when she recognized love reflected in the eyes of the groom as he saw his bride as the most beautiful creature on earth. Just once she wanted a groom's eyes on her.

It was the foolish thought of a natural-born romantic, and she thrust it away as soon as it formed, but it came flooding back to her when she heard chimes and turned to find Rod Corley staring at her, an appreciative gleam in the dusky blue depths of his eyes. Immediately, the butterflies in her stomach took flight, shivering throughout her body, and she was immensely grateful that she had dressed that morning with particular care. She rejected the impulse to smooth the deep coral bouclé knit of her slim skirt and tug at the ribbed hem of the soft matching sweater. Instead, confident that the color of the suit picked up the auburn highlights in her nut brown hair while its soft, slender shape made the most of her figure, she brought her hands together and smiled.

Heather was riding high in the crook of his arm, one chubby fist grasping his ear. Sammy and Dedrah stood at his back. The off-white sweater he wore with his jeans and boots made his hair seem darker by contrast and more of a single color. His hat was in his free hand.

"Hello."

Just the sound of his voice warmed her almost uncomfortably, and she had the odd sensation that she was swaying dizzily; yet her mind was clear, her senses sharp. She let her eyes meet his and made her smile briefly personal. "Hello."

"Hope you don't mind that we brought Heather along again, but I thought it important that we all be here, and Dedrah's mother had a doctor's appointment. We don't much like to leave her with anyone else. She's used to her grandma."

We? She wondered if he realized how much he revealed about his feelings for that child. "No, I don't mind at all."

"I didn't think you would. Besides, she's no trouble." He turned his attention to the baby. "You're no trouble, are you, sweetcakes?"

In reply, the little one put her arms about his head and squeezed, planting a sloppy kiss on his forehead. Everyone laughed, and Heather gave them a drooling smile, then suddenly began climbing over Rod's shoulder to reach for her father. Sammy swung her down and settled her on his hip, while Dedrah chased the drools back up her little chin with a tissue.

"No!" Heather said, throwing back her head. "No…no."

"Yes," Dedrah reprimanded quietly, wiping her chin dry.

Rebelliously, Heather lunged for "Uncle," catching her tiny hands in his sweater. Calmly, he turned and took her up again, saying, "Are you trying to make a liar out of me, shorty?" With perfect comic timing, she nodded emphatically, and everyone laughed again. "Well, you're succeeding," Rod told her, the very picture of patience.

Layne decided it was time to get everyone settled. She lifted an arm invitingly. "I have coffee and soft drinks in the other room, and I think I can find a can of fruit juice for the munchkin."

"That's all right," Dedrah said, extracting a bottle from her purse. "We came prepared."

Heather promptly snatched the bottle from her mother's hand and popped the nipple in her mouth. Rod rocked her back in his arm, cuddling her against him, and she crossed one little ankle over the other little knee, looking for all the world as if she were kicking back on a chaise longue. Amazing, the way he handled her. Layne started toward the consultation area, and Rod fell in at her side, the others following.

"I'll get another chair," she said, skirting the table and heading toward the workroom.

"Let me help," he insisted, tossing his hat onto the table, and though she opened her mouth to tell him not to bother, she found herself smiling instead of talking. Heather in tow, he followed her down the corridor to that place where she felt most at home, the workroom, the creative heart of her whole operation. It was here that every young woman's dream gown was "sculpted" to fit her personal form or, better yet, designed and sewn especially for her, a true one-of-a-kind garment.

Layne knew all too well that she was very small potatoes indeed compared to the world-famous couturiers of New York, London or Rome, but she still took pride in her designs and special adaptations. Ethics forbade her "knocking off" another's dress, but she had found over the years that she could take a basic pattern or a significant feature and build a garment around it that was both unique and pleasing to the client. It was very satisfying to see the joy in the eyes of a happy bride when her own special wedding gown met her hopeful expectations. There were disappointments, of course, such as clients who couldn't be pleased or didn't know their own minds, but one of the other kind was worth two such as these, and so Layne considered herself blessed to be doing what she did. Some of that pride must have communicated itself to Rod, for he took one look around the room when they got there and lifted his free hand to the back of his neck.

"Wow. I didn't know. I mean, I thought you only *sold* dresses and bows and stuff." He walked over to a fitting double and looked at the unfinished dress pinned to the carefully measured contours of the adjustable mannequin. "You start from scratch, don't you?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you begin with? A bolt of material and…"

"An idea," she said. "It always starts with an idea." She went to the drawing table and carefully peeled up a large sheet of paper.

Rod joined her, holding Heather to one side so that her tiny feet had no opportunity to kick at the drawing, and peered down over Layne's shoulder to study the detailed rendition of an elaborate gown of medieval design. She heard the slow intake of his breath and the low whistle that followed it. He turned his head to look again at the mannequin. "Is that this?"

"No. We haven't cut this one yet. That dress goes with the drawing pinned to the bulletin board over there."

He strolled over to take a look, capturing Heather's little hand in time to prevent her ripping down a bright pink invoice of some sort. He studied the drawing that hung beside it, then backed away, shaking his head. "You're a woman of extraordinary talents, Layne," he said, turning a look of more than mere approval upon her.

"Thank you." She felt as if she were glowing. Her heart tripped like a jackhammer in double time, and the pleasure was almost too wonderful to bear. She dropped her head and angled it to the side, spying the chair for which they'd come. At the same moment, Heather popped the bottle nipple

out of her mouth and filled the room with a soft gurgling sound, lending a touch of her own brand of baby normalcy to the situation. “We ought to get back,” Layne said with a smile.

“Oh, right. Is that the chair you want, the folding one?”

“Yes, but as you see, it’s very light. I can get it.”

“No, no. I’ll manage.”

Their hands collided against the smooth, cool metal of the chair back. Her immediate impulse was to withdraw, but his hand settled warmly over hers, his palm replacing the two smallest fingers that had initially made contact. Warmth spread up her arm and into her chest. Her heart swelled to the point of pain. For a moment she could neither speak nor breathe, but she looked away and the moment passed.

“This is silly,” she said, willing her hand to remain still beneath his. “You have the baby. I should carry the chair.”

“Or…” he suggested, and her gaze zipped up to the baby cradled in the crook of his arm.

Her own eagerness surprised and amused her. Sensing that she was suddenly the center of attention again, Heather snapped her bottle free and gave off a broad, wet smile that displayed all ten of her tiny teeth. Rod chuckled and wiped her mouth with the flat of his hand, drying his hand on his pants leg.

“She might get apple juice on that pretty outfit of yours,” he said.

Layne didn’t even bother to tell him how little that mattered. Instead, she asked, “Do you think she’d let me hold her?” Heather stuck the nipple back in her mouth and drew on it strongly.

“This kid is so secure,” Rod said, smoothing down her hair, “that she isn’t afraid of anyone, and we can credit her mama with that.” Suddenly Heather decided to change positions. Her bottle dangling from her mouth, she used her little hands to claw her way upright. Laughing, Rod allowed her momentum to carry her into Layne’s waiting arms.

The baby was surprisingly heavy, but it was love at first cuddle. “Hi, peach,” Layne said softly, using her father’s pet name for all three of his daughters. Heather dug a chubby finger into the center of a tiny crocheted flower on the tip of Layne’s collar. “You like my rose?” Layne crooned. “Pretty rose.”

To her surprise, Heather reached up a hand to unplug the bottle from her mouth and said, “Roe.”

Layne laughed with delight. Rod grinned, folding up the chair. “Another day, another conquest,” he said, sighing. “Must be nice to have all that charm.”

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