

A March Bride
A YEAR OF WEDDINGS NOVELLA

RACHEL HAUCK

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A March Bride
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To Susie May





Acknowledgments



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KING NATHANIEL II AND AMERICAN
SUSANNA TRUITT ENGAGED!

KING NATHANIEL: "I'M MARRYING THE LOVE OF MY LIFE"

BRIGHTON KINGDOM

The Liberty Press

2 JUNE

King Nathaniel will achieve what few of his ancestors have been able to: the right to marry the love of his life, American Susanna Truitt.

Less than a day after he convinced Parliament to amend the Marriage Act of 1792 forbidding marriage between foreigners and royals in line to the throne, he winged his way to St. Simons Island, Georgia, and proposed.

Was it romantic?

According to Truitt, "Very. He strung white lights from this old, old oak tree, got down on one knee, and even produced fake snow." Truitt blushed as she glanced at King Nathaniel. "I told him I wouldn't fall in love again until it snowed in Georgia."

"She never stipulated it must be real snow," the king said, his arm around his bride-to-be as they sat in the Crown Room of the King's Office, fielding questions from select reporters.

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The king never intended to fall in love eighteen months ago while on holiday in southern Georgia. But “God,” he said, “had other things in mind.”

Truitt, a landscape architect, designed the king’s American cottage garden. While she presented garden ideas, romance bloomed.

“I’d just ended a long relationship where I thought marriage was the end game,” Truitt said. “But instead of proposing, my boyfriend broke up with me. That very same day, a year-and-a-half ago, I met Nathaniel under this ancient tree, Lovers’ Oak.”

The king proposed under the same tree. The newly engaged couple plan a March wedding.

“Susanna needs time to adjust to Brighton as well as royal life.”

“It’s very different from slinging barbecue in my mama and daddy’s Rib Shack,” Truitt said, going on to say that joining the royal family is daunting and that the notion of being “a royal” has not completely sunk in.

From Stratton Palace, Dowager Queen Campbell declared she was “thrilled” for her son. “True love comes along so rarely these days.”

Prince Stephen, the king’s younger brother, issued a statement from his rugby club. “Susanna is quite the sport. She’s good fun and a solid match for Nathaniel. I’m profoundly jealous. But happy for my brother.”

Truitt will be the first foreigner to marry a Brighton ruler since Princess Paulette of Lorraine, the wife of Crown Prince Kenneth, nearly destroyed our military forces by

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urging her husband and father-in-law to aid her uncle, King Louis XVI, during the French Revolution.

What's the word on the street of this "American invasion"?

"I don't care who he marries," uttered a customer at a Cathedral City Starbucks.

Others exude more enthusiasm. One university student said, "My friends and I think it's grand. She's a lucky girl. We wish them joy."

Wedding plans are just beginning as Truitt transitions from America to Brighton Kingdom. Designers are frothing to be the Chosen One for the future queen's wedding gown.

But who knows what this American will choose for her dress or her wedding venue? Traditionally, all Stratton House royals have married at Watchman Abbey, where the king's coronation was held this past January.



"We don't know what Susanna will do," said Penny Pitworth, a royal reporter for B-TV. "She may not want to marry in Brighton at all."

Hold your collective gasps. The king and future queen of Brighton may not marry on our sapphire isle at all but on her home isle of St. Simons in Georgia.


"Either way," Pitworth said, "we've a royal wedding upcoming and all of Brighton should rejoice."

And so we shall.




One



*F*or the first time in her life, Susanna Truitt was uncomfortable in a garden. As a landscape architect, she viewed gardens as her sweet spot, her place of rest and peace, but standing among the esteemed guests of Lord and Lady Chadweth's seventeenth-century ivy-covered stone and glass atrium, she felt the arrow of doubt spear her heart.



Three weeks before her wedding, and anxiety rumbled in her soul.

She cut a glance toward her fiancé, King Nathaniel II of Brighton Kingdom, as he laughed with his old university mates.

What in the world was she doing here? Surely Nathaniel had changed his mind about marrying her.

Susanna breathed out, collected her fears, and shoved them aside as she tipped her face toward the bright rays of sun slicing through the glass pane ceiling. After a long Brighton winter, she was homesick for Georgia.

"You know you did, mate . . . We were there, eye-witnesses . . ."

Susanna tuned in to the conversation around her.

"No, no, you've got it all wrong, Nigel." Nathaniel's protest launched a jovial debate among his friends, an aristocratic group of eight who seemed to look to Nigel as their leader.

Susanna smiled, rocking from one high-heeled foot to the other, exhaling. She had no idea what they were going on about, but lately Nathaniel seemed to have many things in his life that excluded her.

Which led to her feeling a bit like an outsider, even among her garden "friends"—the potted palms, hydrangeas, lilies, and royal maples.

"So, Susanna, how is every little thing?" This from Winnie, Nigel's girlfriend.

"Every little thing is just fine." It was the bigger things that concerned her.

He's changed his mind. Of course. It would be on par for her love life. Adam had changed his mind. Why not Nathaniel?

"I can't imagine all you're going through for this wedding." Winnie chortled. "It's the wedding of the century."

"So they say." Susanna's legs wobbled a bit as she pushed her smile wider.

First lesson in being a royal? Smile. Be cordial. And stand a lot. Who knew royal life included so much standing? And handshaking. Lots and lots of handshaking.

And pulling out the hand sanitizer was considered ill form.

Susanna had rallied the King's Office to let her wear sneakers or flip-flops for long receiving lines, but the protocol officers flatly refused.

"Tell me, are you nervous?" Winnie pressed her hand on Susanna's arm. A move, she'd learned, that was acceptable for family and close friends, but not others. "I'd be a nervous wreck. The *Liberty Press* is reporting a telly audience of over a billion."

Susanna's smile faltered as a fresh wave of nerves washed ashore. "Well, then, we're going to need a bigger cake."

Winnie stared at her, then tee-hee'd. "You're quite droll, Susanna. I like that in a woman."

With that, Winnie returned to reminiscing with the men and Susanna was back to feeling alone and aching for home. For warmth. For unobstructed sunlight.

Aching for her own folks with whom to reminisce. She'd not been to Georgia since her best friend Gracie's wedding last October. She'd finally said yes to her boyfriend, Ethan.

But even then, it wasn't really like being home. Nathaniel couldn't get away, so Susanna traveled with a security officer and stayed in a hotel.

She returned to Brighton, a North Sea island gem, and enjoyed a lovely, mild October only to have November descend with gray days and an early snow.

For four long months, Susanna hibernated in palaces and castles, enduring the Brighton winter while being schooled on Brighton law, customs, traditions, and how to be the wife of a king.

So today as the sun crested the first pure blue, cloudless sky of March, she felt ready to burst with longing for south Georgia's heat and balmy breezes.

She missed the wind in the live oaks and the jaunty sway of Spanish moss, the fragrance of Daddy's barbecue sauce

simmering on the Rib Shack's stove tops, the feel of a surfboard under her arm, and above all, the ability to move about town without a gaggle of photographers on her heels.

She longed to hear Daddy's "Hello, kitten" and Mama's "Susanna Jean, need you to pull a shift at the Shack." She missed hearing her baby sister, Avery's, exuberance about . . . *everything*.

"Susanna—" Nigel leaned toward her. "Surely Nathaniel told you the story of the skiing bear." Nigel's laugh bent him backward and he seemed more like a frivolous playboy than the CEO of his own shipping company.

"A skiing bear?" She glanced at Nathaniel, who smiled, shaking his head and sipping from his champagne flute. He didn't care much for champagne, but he held a glass out of respect for his host and hostess. "No, he didn't."

"It's an old story, love." He peeked at her, then away, down the wide aisle of the warm, bright atrium, toward the open doors. A fresh breeze sauntered in and rustled a few maple branches, spraying the atrium with the saline fragrance of the bay. "I'd nearly forgotten all about it."

"Forgotten it?" Nigel's tone contained no reserve. "Please, Nathaniel, it was the most extraordinary thing I've ever seen. I can't remember when I laughed so hard, I'll tell you that, old chap."

There, she caught a hint of Nathaniel's laugh. Something he'd not done much of lately.

Susanna regarded him for a moment, trying to figure what bothered him. What bothered her.

As their wedding drew near, her man looked . . . sad.
He's changed his mind and he's afraid to tell me!

Her heart crashed and her lungs strained for a pure breath. It took every ounce of her will not to run out of the atrium.

"Susanna, you should've seen him." Nigel's story reeled in the rest of the circle—Winnie, Blythe and Morton, Lord Michael Dean and his wife, Lady Ruthie, and her sister, Lady Becky. "The lot of us went skiing on a spring holiday from university. Michael, Mortie, you were there, remember?"

Skiing on spring break? A luxury in Susanna's world. She'd spent every spring and summer break from the University of Georgia at her parents' barbecue place, waiting tables and running the back of the house just to earn enough of her living expenses for the following semester.

And if she ran out of money before the semester's end, she cut Friday classes, drove home, and worked nonstop all weekend.

". . . on our last day we determined to take in as much skiing as possible." Nigel geared up from storyteller to entertainer. "We'd spent all day on the slopes, you see. Our boy Nathaniel here was the most determined to ski the day away, like a man facing a life sentence or some such."

"He was set upon graduation to enter the Royal Fusiliers as an infantryman like all the crown princes before him," Michael said.

Susanna knew about his military days. Nathaniel was quite proud of serving his country. He'd even briefly served during the war with the Royal Fusiliers Intelligence Corps.

"So this holiday was his last as a free man."

"I was born a crown prince," Nathaniel said to his glass more than to his friends. "I've never been a free man."

Susanna leaned to see his expression. What happened to

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the man of confidence and security who'd come to embrace his divine destiny?

He'd been at great peace over his calling as a king. So why the snarky comment?

When his gaze met hers, she smiled, searching for the teasing glint he reserved just for her beneath his blue eyes.

He nodded to her and she waited for *that* tug to appear on the side of his lips when he wanted to kiss her in public but couldn't.

However, his eyes did not twinkle, nor did his lips twist.

She could live with his dull eyes and sober expression, but she could not live without his look of love. The one that sparked a warm twinge of lover's passion. The one that made her tremble with longing when he kissed her.

For well over a month now, she'd missed his tender glances and wooing warm words. Yes, he'd been busy, traveling, distracted and distant with his kingly duties. But when they were alone, he remained distant. Lost in a world she could not enter.

Their typically lively and deep conversations were now of mundane things like a late winter snow or the unusual prediction of sun and refreshing temperatures in early March.

Nathaniel no longer spoke about their dreams, hopes, and plans.

"So there he is, love. Susanna, are you getting this?" Nigel nudged her again, catching an eye from Nathaniel. "Pardon, I see your fiancé didn't take kindly to me calling you love or my elbow in your ribs. Anyway—"

"If you're going to tell the story, Nigel, tell it," Nathaniel said, gruff and irritated.

"Mate, you can't deny me the luxury of milking this fabulous story."

"Go on," Susanna said, reaching out to set her champagne flute on a tray carried by a black-tie server. "I'd like to hear this."

"So there we are, having a grand time. Nathaniel is flying down this slope, I mean *flying*." Nigel crouched down into a skiing position. "It's a fantastic hill and a fantastic run. There he is at jet speed when a bear—a big, blasted black bear—ambles out of the woods right onto the run."

"Hungry. Just out of hibernation." Nathaniel came a bit more alive. Nigel's storytelling had a way of turning off the silence and chasing away the blues. Even in Nathaniel. "He looked square at me like I'm his lunch, heaven sent."

"The lot of us are right behind him, pulling up, skiing off to the side," Michael said.

"In the meantime"—Morton's laugh was low and cool, the sound of a stuffy blueblood—"we're watching our friend and crown prince ski to his death."

"You should've seen it from my vantage point," Nathaniel said. "I've nowhere to go but into the trees, square into the beast, or off the side of the mountain."

"And people tell me surfing is dangerous," Susanna said, laughing, finally feeling a bit more at ease, realizing it wasn't the garden making her uncomfortable but Nathaniel's surly silence toward her.

He regrets his proposal. What else could it be? Enough. She'd confront him the moment they were alone.

Theirs had not been the easiest of engagements. Not only were they blending lives and hearts, getting to know

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one another as a couple, but they were blending cultures and expectations, all before the eyes of the world.

Most of the adjusting fell on her shoulders because she wasn't merely marrying a man, but a king. She wasn't getting to know just a new family but one with deep roots in ancient European history.

She wasn't just learning the ins and outs of her new country, but a whole different way of life.

And the press . . . nothing can prepare one for the press. Behind Duchess Kate in the United Kingdom, Susanna was now the most photographed woman in the world. She found it exhausting.

"We're yelling for him to stop, but he keeps plowing down the hill," Nigel said.

"I couldn't stop, ole chap."

"Then we start debating," Nigel went on. "Who's going to tell the king? And shall we say his son died bravely, doing what he loved?"

"Fine lot, that, having me dead before seeing my great plan of escape." Nathaniel broke out of his somberness with a heartfelt laugh.

"What's all the hilarity? I wasn't invited?" The raven-haired beauty, Lady Genevieve Hawthorne, boldly inserted herself into the group as a spark of jealousy ignited a prickly heat in Susanna.

"Ginny, love, where've you been?" Blythe leaned forward to air-kiss Lady Genevieve's cheeks.

"Bowling out of another engagement."

Lady Genevieve was everything a crown prince-turned-king would want in a wife. A former Miss Brighton *and*

Olympic lacrosse champion, she was stunning, sexy, and intelligent. Worse yet, she had once vied for Nathaniel's heart.

He'd refused her, choosing Susanna instead. But perhaps now, as the wedding neared and he had a chance to watch Susanna function in royal situations like this hoity-toity garden party, he wished he'd made a better choice.

Susanna flipped her gaze up at Nathaniel. Was he staring at Ginny with any longing or affection?

No, he was staring down at *her*. Susanna finally felt a bit of warmth in his expression. He smiled and her knees went weak.

"We're telling the story of the skiing bear," Nigel said.

"Oh my word." Lady Genevieve rolled her eyes. How did she make even *that* look alluring? "What a grand time we all had." She ha-ha'd like she ate diamonds for breakfast and flossed with spun gold. "Of course I knew you'd escape, darling. Naturally." Lady Genevieve fell against Nathaniel, caressing his arm. Then she shot Susanna a sly glance. "Susanna, darling, gorgeous dress. Love the orange flowers and vintage vibe. A Molly Turnwalt design or I'll turn in my fashionista card."

Susanna smoothed her hand over the ivory skirt with its splash of orange blossoms. "From her spring line, yes."

"In college, I only wore Molly Turnwalt." Lady Genevieve laughed with Winnie. "Remember her T-shirts and peg-leg jeans? Oh, to be twenty-two again."

Susanna burned with embarrassment, breathing deep, refusing her soul the sweetness of firing off a sour retort. Lady Genevieve was trying to make Susanna look out of touch and childish.

"Ginny, darling—" Nigel shoved her aside. "I'm telling a story."

"Oh right, Ni, I forgot it's all about you." Lady Genevieve rocked back, folding her arms, pulling a face. "Do go on."

A twittering laugh floated through the group with familiar, longtime-friend glances. Susanna hated feeling like a wallflower. She peeked up again at Nathaniel to discover he was watching Ginny, a slight smile on his lips.

Susanna felt sick. Weak. She'd been here before. Two years ago. On the beach at home with her longtime boyfriend, Adam Peters. She had expected him to propose, but instead he toiled with the words to end their relationship.

"I've found the right ring but not the right girl." Adam Peters's confession still pierced through her heart at the oddest times.

But she'd been so committed to her plan to marry him that Susanna had refused to see the truth. They were *not* right for each other.

Well, she refused to be so naive this time. If she and Nathaniel had wandered down a dark romantic dead end, then she'd be the one to turn on the light.

However, she'd not give up just yet. She joined the conversation, turning to face Nathaniel. "Since clearly you lived, I suppose you found a way out of this bear collision?" Susanna stepped closer to her fiancé, sending a signal to Lady Genevieve to back off. Susanna was the one wearing Nathaniel's ring.

"Yes, I managed to calculate an escape."

"Escape?" Nigel laughed. "Susanna, he performed a feat only Houdini would attempt. To the right there was a thick stand of trees. An option worse than running into the bear. Trees don't frighten and run off. To the left"—Nigel arched

his hand through the air—"was a tumble over the side of the mountain with a straight drop down to the rocks."

"I had no choice but to ski into the bear," Nathaniel said.

"You really skied *into* the bear?" Susanna smiled, searching his expression for truth. For hope.

"Not exactly. As I whisked closer and closer, going faster and faster, I started yelling for the bear to move, but he merely stared at me as if I annoyed his sleepy thoughts. I braced for impact when I hit one of nature's moguls and—" Nathaniel whistled, slicing his hand through the air.

"He went airborne," Nigel said.

"You jumped the bear?" Susanna liked the mental image of a young prince soaring through the air, his regal, chiseled features cutting through the icy breeze as he hurdled a sleepy, hungry winter bear.

"Cleared him by a good four feet," Nigel said.

"It was spectacular. You should've seen it." Genevieve's tone carried a subtle reminder. *I'm a part of Nathaniel's inner circle, and you, Susanna, are an interloper.* "We sat around the fire talking of it all night."

"Say, Nig, didn't Hampsted film it with his camera?" Morton snapped his fingers, remembering. "He was always sticking that thing in our faces."

"By George, I believe he did." Nigel stretched, searching over their heads. "He's round here somewhere with his new wife. Ah, there he is . . . Hammie."

Nigel and Lord Michael scurried off to hound Hammie about his home movie while the distinguished Henry Montgomery, Brighton's former prime minister, approached Nathaniel.

"Pardon, Your Majesty, might I have a word?" He bowed slightly, then smiled at Susanna. "You are looking lovely as ever, Susanna."

"Thank you, Henry."

"Excuse me, darling." Nathaniel turned to Susanna. "I'll return momentarily."

Susanna watched him walk off with Henry, their heads bent together. What could Henry want in private at a garden party honoring the king and his future bride?

The unease in Susanna's heart surfaced and burned. Did Henry want to discuss something about Brighton? About Nathaniel? Or maybe his upcoming marriage?

Perhaps it had to do with Nathaniel's mother. In public, Henry was the former prime minister. In private, he was Nathaniel's stepfather, married to his mum, the Dowager Queen Campbell. They wed last July after the one-year anniversary of King Leopold V's death.

Susanna scanned the atrium garden for Campbell, who was unmistakable in a bright yellow spring dress with a matching coat, shoes, and hat. Once she had taken off her mourning clothes, nothing but bright colors would do. The press was starting to notice, calling her Colorful Campbell.

"So," Lady Genevieve began, interrupting Susanna's thoughts. "Your wedding dress. We're all dying to see it." She wrinkled her nose. First at Susanna, then Winnie, Blythe, and Lady Ruthie. "Aren't we? I don't suppose I could get a sneak peek?"

Susanna marveled at the woman's boldness. Asking to see her gown like they were best friends. They hardly knew each other, and Susanna trusted her about as much as sticking her

hand into a dark hole in the ground. Never knew what might bite back.

"I'm afraid not." Susanna gazed past Lady Genevieve's slender shoulder, eyes fixed on Nathaniel's back, his dark suit accenting his wide shoulders. "The designer and I are bound by an agreement of mutual exclusivity."

"Really? Merry Collins made you sign an exclusivity?"

"I offered, if you must know. I wasn't going to require something of her I was not willing to take on myself."

Genevieve arched her brow. "She must love you."

"We have a mutual respect," Susanna said, irritated by this conversation. Irritated by the fact Nathaniel seemed to be in some sort of deep discussion with Henry—indicated by his pinched brow and squinting eyes. What was going on? This was supposed to be a party. A joyous celebration of their upcoming wedding.

Instead, Susanna felt a certain dread.

Nathaniel shoved back his jacket as he anchored his hands in his pockets. A sure sign he was frustrated. Annoyed. His signature move—hands in his pockets—was considered ill form in Parliament and at state events, so he'd broken the habit. Except in moments like now.

He nodded once. Then glanced back at Susanna.

Something was definitely wrong.

". . . do you think you'll work, Susanna?"

She switched her gaze to Winnie. "Work? Yes, as time allows. I've been consulting with AGH Partners, landscaping a new garden in tribute to King Leo."

"Fantastic. Good for you. I always think the wife of the king should have a job, you know, hold on to her own identity."

Hold on to her own identity? Winnie had no idea of what she spoke. Susanna had *long* given up on such an idea. She'd all but lost her identity the moment she said yes to Nathaniel and moved four thousand miles away to Brighton.

The only thing that remained of her was her American heritage. Which the press loved to point out.

A woman with a large pink hat stopped to talk to Lady Genevieve, but kept one eye on Susanna as they whispered and laughed.

Never mind. Nathaniel was coming her way, so Susanna excused herself.

"Nathaniel, what's going on?"

His gaze communicated a raw, vivid fear. As if he were about to do something he didn't want to but must.

Yep, she felt his cold glance all the way to her bone marrow. He was dumping her. Adam had the same look on his face that stormy afternoon on the beach.

"I've something to tell you." He hooked his hand around her elbow and steered her toward the open French doors.

"You're scaring me." She walked with him, her strength draining.

"Your Majesty!" The party director hurried toward them with determined strides, waving her clipboard in the air. "We're ready for the formal pictures now."

"Thank you, Mrs. Janis." Nathaniel sighed, looking down at Susanna. "We'll talk after this."

No, no, she couldn't take it anymore. "We'll talk right now. What is going on with you?"

"Susanna, please—" He smiled at Mrs. Janis, who waited

with a frozen smile. "Let's get the photograph. The Chadweths went to a great deal of effort to have this party for us."

"What's the point of this party or a photograph if you're breaking up with me?"

"We'll be right over here, Your Majesty." Mrs. Janis backed up, pointing to the corner of the atrium where marble fountains spewed crystal water from angel wings.

"Just say it." She became forthright when she was nervous. With Adam, she used their twelve-year history to launch an argument, but she only had eighteen months with Nathaniel. Ten of which they spent apart. "You regret proposing to me."

"I what?" Nathaniel reared back. "What are you talking about, Susanna?"

"Well, do you? You're distracted and distant. You've stopped talking to me about your life. You hardly smile or laugh when we're together."

"I realize that government business has gotten in the way a bit, yes."

"This is not about government business. Look, I've been dumped before, Nathaniel. I'm aware of the signs."

"Susanna, I am not Adam Peters."

"Then what?" She grabbed his arm. "Do you think it's not going to work with me as your wife? Are you sorry—"

"No, Susanna, no." He grabbed her shoulders as he peered down at her with blue sincerity, his chest rising and falling with each deep breath. "Quite the opposite. I fear *you* will regret saying yes to me."

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To Shiny. You know who you are! I love you. :)







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One

April showers bring May flowers.”

That old saying might hold true, but in this particular garden spring had already arrived. And just in time for the big event. A wedding. Her wedding to the man she'd loved since she was five years old. She and Marshall had met in kindergarten and gone all the way through school together and attended the same church. They'd been high school sweethearts who'd always planned to be married someday. So why was she so afraid today?

Stella Carson loved April. It was the one month when the Louisiana heat and humidity seemed bearable, the one month when the whole landscape turned into a blaze of riotous color that rivaled any Monet painting. She loved spring and the scent of the jasmine blossoms that covered the pergola her daddy had built in the backyard when she was only three years old. She loved the dazzle of the hot pink hibiscus bushes on her mother's back porch, and she especially loved



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the sassy salmon-colored azaleas that lined the white picket fence between the horse pasture and the front drive.

Right now, she stood admiring her mother's prize hydrangeas. The big, blue clustered blossoms would soon spill out of the old, hardy bushes that ran across the front porch line. She planned to have those colors in her wedding—blues and mauves, lavenders and delicate pinks, just like the colors in this yard each spring. And hopefully, some hydrangeas sprinkled here and there, even if they had to be ordered from a nursery.

Across the old country road, the Mississippi River gurgled and whirled as it flowed out to the Gulf of Mexico. Wishing her worries could flow away with the river, Stella leaned over the second-floor railing of Flower Bend—the house she'd grown up in—and marveled at God's beauty. The old moss-draped live oaks swayed and creaked in the late afternoon wind. She could hear the squirrels quarreling and playing as they rushed over the gray, wrinkled bark, could hear the blue jays fussing at each other as they fluttered from tree to tree.

Stella allowed the beauty of this old place to soothe her while she said yet another prayer, asking God to help her through the next month. She planned to get married at the church and have the reception here in the garden. She'd dreamed of this for most of her life.

But this spring was both special and confusing. Her fiancé, Marshall, was coming home today, and Stella was so thankful. Her soldier boy was returning from the Middle East to marry her in four weeks. He'd been back stateside for a while now, and she'd only seen him once. He'd been in the hospital in Germany for a month, then in Maryland for over



two months, recovering from injuries he'd received when an IED—a bomb—exploded near his Humvee.

Stella thought back on that awful time, remembering how worried she'd been after Marshall's parents had called her with the bad news. She'd immediately wanted to go to him, but his parents had asked her to wait. They'd rushed to his side in Germany and called Stella to let her know the extent of his injuries. Marshall had been in a coma when he'd arrived at the hospital in Germany. When he arrived back in the United States, she'd visited him but he'd been so groggy and disoriented, things didn't go very well. He didn't seem to know anyone, which only agitated him. So she'd come back home to wait and pray. When she'd finally been able to talk to him on the phone, he'd asked that she stay away. Asked that she give him time to heal and adjust. They'd talked on the phone once or twice a week, but something about those conversations bothered Stella. Marsh, as she'd always called him, just didn't sound the same. When she'd asked him about the wedding, he'd been vague.

"Should we postpone the wedding, Marsh? If you're not well enough . . ."

"Keep the date, Stella," he'd said. "I'll be better by April. I promise."

She'd waited. She'd prayed. She'd planned.

Now he was coming home.

And she was terrified.

"Stella, where are you?"

Stella whirled at the sound of her mother's singsong voice. "Coming, Mama." Her wedge sandals tapped their way back into her bedroom. "I'm almost ready."

Checking her reflection once more, she nervously smoothed her blue sundress and touched a hand to her dark blonde hair. What would he think when he saw her?

Her mother, Joyce, stood at the open door and grinned, her hands on her hips. "Are you excited?"

"I'm about to burst with pure joy," Stella admitted. "But I'm a little worried too."

"Worried? About what?" Her mother had dressed in her usual conservative manner in a white short-sleeved blouse and crisp, beige linen pants.

Stella finished checking her hair and makeup in the mirror of the antique vanity that had belonged to her maternal grandmother. "What if . . . what if Marsh doesn't feel the same about me anymore, about this marriage?"

Joyce shook her head and tugged Stella down on the puffy floral comforter covering the tester bed. "Honey, Marshall Henderson gave his heart to you twenty years ago when you hit him with a water balloon at the annual church picnic. Being gone for a year isn't going to change that one little bit."

"I love him too," Stella replied, doubt clouding her joy. "But . . . he's been to a place we can't even imagine. He's a hero, Mama. But he's also seen and done things that . . ."

Her mother frowned. "You're afraid serving his country might have changed him? Or that he's changed because of his injury?"

Stella nodded. "Yes. He seems so disoriented over the phone and . . . him not wanting me there with him really hurt me, but I had to do what was best for him. He used to be so strong and sure, but . . . he was wounded. I know his physical wounds will heal, but what about how he feels?"

What if his feelings for me have changed? I've researched post-traumatic stress disorder and head injuries enough to know that they can both be tough on relationships. He could suffer from bouts of depression and anger and possibly memory loss."

She'd practically memorized each Internet article and book chapter she'd found in spare moments at work. After all, running a bookstore with Internet access did have its perks.

She got up and went over to the mahogany armoire where her wedding dress had pride of place and unzipped the white protective garment bag. Then she touched one of the shimmering seed pearls scattered down the gathered satin skirt. "Even after he returned from Germany, he didn't want me to come up to Maryland to see him, so I honored that request. He just seems so distant on the phone, not like himself. I worry that he's not telling me everything." She pulled at her clothes. "I'm beginning to wonder if his mom and dad have been keeping something from me, maybe to honor his wishes."

Her mother got up and came to stand by her. "I'm sure he's gone through all kinds of emotions, darling. From what I've heard, too, head wounds can be mighty tricky. But he's much better now. Gerald and Kitten wouldn't keep anything bad from you unless Marshall requested it. His parents love you as much as they love him. He's healing now, and he's coming home to marry you."

Stella stared at the white satin wedding dress, her dreams caught in a net of doubt. "If he still loves me, he should have let me come to visit him in Maryland, Mama."



The New Orleans sun shot a golden path across the tarmac. Stella stood at the airport escalator waiting for Marshall to come down to the baggage claim area. Her heart roared a beat that rivaled the loud engines on the plane.

What would Marsh say? How would he act? Had he had second thoughts about marrying her? Did he want to stay single? Or did he just want to be away from her?

He told you he loved you.

Well, when she'd told him on the phone how much she loved him, he'd been silent for a moment, and then he'd replied, "Me too. I mean, I love you."

Why did he seem to think about that a moment too long?

"Stop fidgeting, honey."

Stella pivoted to see her daddy, Ralph, smiling down at her. "Sorry. I'm nervous. We haven't seen each other in almost a year, and when I'm on the phone with him, I do most of the talking. Things change, Daddy. People can change too."

He patted her on the arm. "Have faith, suga'. A soldier's life is always hard, but you know Marshall and you know his heart. He loves you. That won't change."

She smiled up at her daddy, but Stella had to wonder about his reassuring words. Love could change in a heartbeat. She'd never worried about that before. Her life along the Old River Road had been happy and idyllic, to say the least. She had good friends, a loving family, and a strong faith community. And she'd always had Marshall. He was more than the boy next door. He was the love of her life. But

if he didn't feel the same way, she'd be destroyed. She'd have to cancel the wedding.

She looked up to find Marshall's mother staring at her. Was that a look of pity or compassion? Kitten came over and took Stella's hands in hers. "It's gonna be all right, Stella. He loves you. Remember that, okay?"

Sure now that something was wrong, Stella held tight to her future mother-in-law's hands. "What's wrong, Miss Kitten?"

"Here they come," her mother called, motioning Stella toward the group of passengers coming toward them. "C'mon, Stella. You need to be the first person Marshall sees."

Stella glanced between her mother and Kitten Henderson, wishing she could be more confident. But right now, the tension moving through her made her want to run to the nearest exit. Kitten turned and pushed Stella toward the rush of people coming off the plane. And then Stella saw Marshall—tall, strong, his dark hair longer now. He was wearing civilian clothes but he looked gaunt and tired, and he had a scar near his left temple.

She had to wonder what other kinds of scars he might be hiding.

Then Marsh searched the area and his eyes met hers.

Stella started toward him, ready to rush into his arms.

But for some reason she stopped short and stood staring up at him, her heart racing with love—and panic. "Marsh?" she said, fear filling her heart. "Marsh, are you all right?"

He stood a foot away, his blue eyes as bright as ever. But something was missing. He almost didn't seem to know her.

"Marsh?"

"Stella?" It was more of a question than a statement.

Stella moved a step closer. "It's me. In the flesh."

Then, because she was so afraid, so concerned, she made the move toward him and lifted her arms to hug him close. "You're home. At last. I missed you so much. I was so worried."

He folded her into his arms and, after a moment, held tight. "I missed you too. We have a lot to talk about."

Relief poured through Stella. "We sure do. Just a month until our wedding."

He pulled back and gave her a long, confused stare. "The wedding. We . . . uh . . . we need to talk about that too."

Then Kitten was there, tugging him into her arms. Wiping at tears, she sent a helpless look toward her husband, Gerald. "We all want to catch up, but you're tired. Better get you home and all settled in."

Marsh hugged his mother but then slipped away from her. "I want to talk to Stella. Alone."

Stella's whole system went cold. "I brought my car. Mama and Daddy rode with your parents." She whirled to find Kitten and her mother staring at them. "Is that okay?"

Kitten looked up at Marshall. "Will you be all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, his voice threaded with fatigue. "I promise we'll be home soon." Then he grinned, and for a minute he looked like the old Marsh. "I can't wait to eat some gumbo."

"We'll have it ready," Gerald said, his tone cautious.

As they all walked out of the airport together and found their cars, Stella kept glancing at Marshall's parents then back to him. Something was wrong, so wrong.

This man wasn't the Marshall she'd always loved. Despite his hug, he was like a stranger. His words and actions seemed stilted and unsure, as if he'd rehearsed them over and over.

When they reached her red Miata convertible, he stopped and looked surprised. "I don't know if I can fit in that little thing."

She laughed at that. "You were with me the day I bought it. You got in on the passenger side and your knees went up against the dashboard. Remember?"

He turned to her then, and she saw it in his sweet eyes before he stated the obvious. "No, honestly, Stella, I don't remember."

A May Bride
A YEAR OF WEDDINGS NOVELLA

MEG MOSELEY

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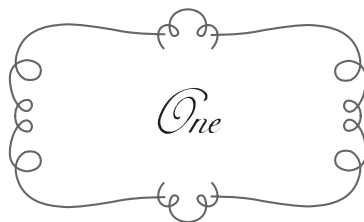


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To Jon, my one and only.



The activity that soothed my soul wasn't quite legitimate. Some people might have called it trespassing. I called it saving my sanity.

At daybreak, in jeans and a flannel shirt against the early February chill, I knelt to weed my secret garden. It wasn't impressive now, with only pansies and camellias in bloom, but it would be gorgeous again in the spring. I'd discovered it on a sultry day several years before when I'd stolen onto church property to snap a close-up of some amazingly blue hydrangeas—and there it was, a miniature Eden in all its summer glory. Hidden in a hollow of the rolling grounds, the flower bed was set well back from a busy road that must have been unpaved and narrow before Atlanta swallowed its suburbs.

Shaking soil from the roots of each handful of weeds, I stuffed them into a plastic bag. At first I had barely enough light to work by, but broad daylight would arrive soon, along

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with the clergyman who often roamed the grounds. In his baggy black suit and broad-brimmed hat, he looked like an old country parson lost in the heart of the city. If he ever caught me, I wasn't sure what I would say.

Still, my peace grew deeper with every weed I pulled. Too bad it wouldn't last. Even early on a Saturday morning, I couldn't escape traffic noises. Weeding helped me de-stress, though. This was the real Ellie Martin. Dirt under my nails. No makeup. No phone. No electronic tether to my desk.

The bag was half full when a car door thudded shut in the parking lot—and then another and another. Maybe the youth group was gathering for an early-morning event. Whoever they were, they'd have no business among the flowers. I kept working.

Over the next few minutes, I heard more thuds mixed with subdued laughter. I moved to the rear of the flower bed where tall camellia bushes provided cover.

Then I heard music. A car stereo? But it sounded like a single guitar—not on a stereo, but live. Coming closer.

Before I could squeeze further into hiding, fifteen or twenty people walked over the rise, led by three young children who gamboled across the lawn like puppies. Bringing up the rear, a man in a black suit walked arm in arm with a woman in an ankle-length white dress. She held a loose sheaf of bright red roses.

A guerrilla wedding. I'd heard of such things.

They were headed straight toward me. Naturally. The camellias were a perfect backdrop, and being down in the hollow, the site wasn't visible from the street.

I should have run when I'd had a chance. I hunkered

down among the bushes, wrapped my arms around my knees, and thanked God for the muted shades of my shirt and my camo baseball cap. Even my dark hair might blend in with the dark foliage of the camellias.

Now I saw where the music came from. A ponytailed man played a guitar as he strolled along, grinning at the bride and groom. Close up, I could see that she was a fresh-faced blonde—who must have been freezing in her short-sleeved gown. Her dapper groom wore a confident smile and a rosebud boutonniere. They slowed at their appointed spot with their guests making a loose semicircle behind them.

A stocky young man carrying a black book stepped forward and positioned himself not ten feet from my hiding place. He stood before the happy couple, blocking my view of their faces.

“Dearly beloved,” he began quietly.

I sighed. So romantic—and sneaky. I could just hear what Mom would say.

They’re trying to get out of paying a fee. That’s stealing—from a church!

They might have paid the fee, though. Maybe they’d only wanted an offbeat wedding at the crack of dawn.

“Yeah, right,” I mouthed silently, but then I had to smile. I was trespassing too. A guerrilla gardener, spying on a guerrilla wedding.

I tugged the bill of my cap lower. Several of the guests were using their phones to record the ceremony. Even if no one noticed me at the moment, I might show up in someone’s video, crouching in the bushes like a criminal. My boss asked me and my fellow agents to keep up our professional

appearance and behavior in public. I'd be in deep trouble if the whole thing went viral on YouTube and someone spotted me. And mentioned it to Betty.

Since I couldn't hear much of the preacher's address, I amused myself by imagining I was the bride. Wearing a lacy Jenny Packham gown. Carrying a lavish bouquet. I had no father to walk me down the grassy aisle, but I could walk with my groom, like my sister planned to do with Eric.

Mom was paying for Alexa's wedding, and boy, was it getting expensive. It was a good thing Mom had a steady paycheck from the school system as well as a nest egg from selling part of Grandpa's land. Alexa wanted all the fuss and feathers so she'd feel good and married. I wanted a traditional ceremony too, but I'd started a wedding fund years ago. If I paid for everything, Mom couldn't call the shots.

The first step, of course, was finding a groom. Didn't seem right that my kid sister had beat me to it. She was only twenty-two, four years younger than me.

Peering between the bushes, I studied the guests. They were a motley crew, most of them on the young side. Only a few of them had dressed up for the occasion.

I caught a glimpse of a tall man in jeans and cowboy boots. The people in front of him blocked my view of his face, but the rest of him reminded me of the hottie I often noticed at Java Town, a few blocks away. I was usually with Betty so I'd never said more than "Good morning" to him, but I always savored the scenery from across the room. I liked his voice too. It held a smile even when he was only ordering his coffee.

But was this the same man? I studied him more closely—what I could see of him. He was about the right height. His

hair was right. Medium brown, neatly shorn. His clothes were right. So was his footwear, and not many men in Atlanta wore cowboy boots.

A man in front of him shifted his position, giving me an unobstructed look. Yikes. It was him. Mr. Boots himself.

I scrunched myself into a tighter ball. Again and again, my eyes made the pleasant transit from shiny boots to long legs to a nice, solid chest. From there, my gaze crawled up his necktie to his face. Ah, that face. I wasn't close enough now to see the details, but I remembered them. A cleft chin. A friendly smile. Green eyes with a definite twinkle.

After about ten visual trips up and down the manly person of Mr. Boots, I was breathing pretty hard. Then I quit breathing altogether. His eyes had locked onto mine.

I froze. Maybe it was my imagination. He was only inspecting the camellias.

He drew his eyebrows together.

Nope. He was inspecting me. Maybe he didn't recognize me, though. He'd never be able to pull me out of a lineup. Not in my professional persona, anyway.

I looked away, straining my ears to hear the couple's vows just so I'd have something new to think about. Something besides being busted.

Within minutes, the young preacher pronounced them husband and wife. They kissed to a smattering of applause and laughter.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs.—"

The name was too complicated to catch. With half my heart, I wished them well. With the other half, I wished Mr. Boots would have the courtesy to pretend he hadn't seen me.

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The guests began to follow the giddy newlyweds back the way they'd come. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed. *Dear God, please make him go away.*

I had a crick in my neck and my legs were falling asleep from crouching so long, but I was afraid to move. Afraid to peek.

I listened for signs of movement beyond the flower bed. Nothing but street noises. The clunking sounds of car doors shutting again. Engines starting up. Driving away.

I opened one eye to boots and blue jeans, smack-dab in the pansies.

I'd fantasized about meeting Mr. Boots, but not when I was a mess. Smelling like dirt. Sports bra smooshing my assets. An ugly shirt, trashed jeans, a camo baseball cap. And trespassing.

Once again, my eyes made the trip that should have been quite pleasant. Boots, legs, shirt, tie—and somber face.

Clutching my bag of weeds, I creaked to my feet and held myself as tall as I could, but I wasn't even eye-level with that cute little indentation in his chin. It tempted me to reach up and touch it.

He smelled delicious, and his sage-green shirt was crisp and spotless, but his stern expression reminded me of the cop who'd pulled me over for driving with expired tags. I offered a smile, hoping to coax one out of him.

"Good morning," I said.

He frowned harder. "Good morning."

Small green azalea bushes hemmed me in on both sides. Camellias blocked the rear. A tower of stubborn masculinity stood in front of me.

I took a tentative step forward. "Excuse me."

He didn't budge. "You won't rat out my friends, will you?"

"You mean . . . for using the church grounds without permission?"

He nodded.

I couldn't resist. "And without paying the church its fee?"

"How do you know they didn't pay? Maybe they dropped the money into the offering last week."

"Why all the stealth, then? Do they go to church here?"

"No. Do you?"

I hesitated. If he knew I was an intruder too, I would lose any leverage I had. But I wouldn't lie. "No."

"Why are you here, then?"

I held up the bag of weeds. "I'm weeding."

"When it's not your church?"

I shrugged. "So I'm a guerrilla gardener."

A slow smile produced a single dimple as tantalizing as the tiny divot in his chin. "Let's call you a trespasser."

"Takes one to know one."

He squinted at me. "I know you, all right. From somewhere. I've seen you at . . . at . . ." He snapped his fingers, twice, as if that would make his brain kick into gear.

I waited, hoping it wouldn't.

"Java Town," he said. "With an older lady. All dressed up, and both of you poring over your computers. Right?"

I sighed. Maybe I could swear him to secrecy. "Yeah. She's my boss. My broker."

"Real estate?"

I nodded. "She's very particular about her agents being professional at all times. If we should run into each other while she's there, I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention—"

"That you moonlight as a trespassing gardener?" His twinkle was back.

"I'm serious. I'm new to the business, trying to prove I've got what it takes. She's the one person who really wouldn't understand this whole thing."

"I don't either. Enlighten me."

It was too personal. I couldn't tell a stranger this was my time to think and pray. My time to commune with the God who'd once planted a garden and who'd told stories about fig trees and lilies and seeds.

I could share the short version, though. "Gardening is my escape when life gets crazy. I don't have a garden, so I borrow this one. I pull weeds and tidy things up. That's all."

"That doesn't sound too criminal. Tell you what, I won't tell if you won't."

"Deal." Remembering Betty's admonition to see everyone as a potential client, I decided to introduce myself. "I'm Ellie Martin."

"Gray Whitby."

The name surprised me. There was nothing gray about him. He was life and color and fun.

"Hurry up if you want a ride, Graham," a man hollered from the direction of the parking lot.

"Hold your horses," he yelled back.

Graham? Graham Whitby. That sounded stuffy, like he was a duke or something. But my real name wasn't much better.

"I've got to run too." I edged closer. Another whiff of his yummy, masculine scent made me want to bury my nose in his neck or thereabouts, but I kept a respectable distance as I passed him.

He followed me out of the flower bed onto the lawn. We faced each other, and suddenly I was as tongue-tied as a seventh grader at a school dance.

He had no such issues. He smiled, his dimple showing its cute little self again. "Now I know who to call if I need a real estate agent."

Shoot. I'd broken one of Betty's inflexible rules: Never be without a supply of business cards. "I'd give you my card, but I don't have any on me. I'm online, though. Alioto Realty."

He opened a wallet as shiny as his boots, pulled out a card, and placed it in my grimy palm. "Here's mine. Call me sometime." He started walking backward across the grass. "By the way, you've got some real estate on your nose." He winked, turned around, and loped across the lawn toward his impatient friend.

I ran one finger down my nose. My finger came away smeared with orangey-red.

A shapeless trespasser with red dirt on her nose. So attractive.

Sighing, I tucked the card into my pocket without reading it. I wouldn't call him. He could track me down if he wanted to, but it wasn't likely.

Bracing myself for another day of fighting traffic and paperwork, I headed down the sidewalk toward my apartment and a shower.