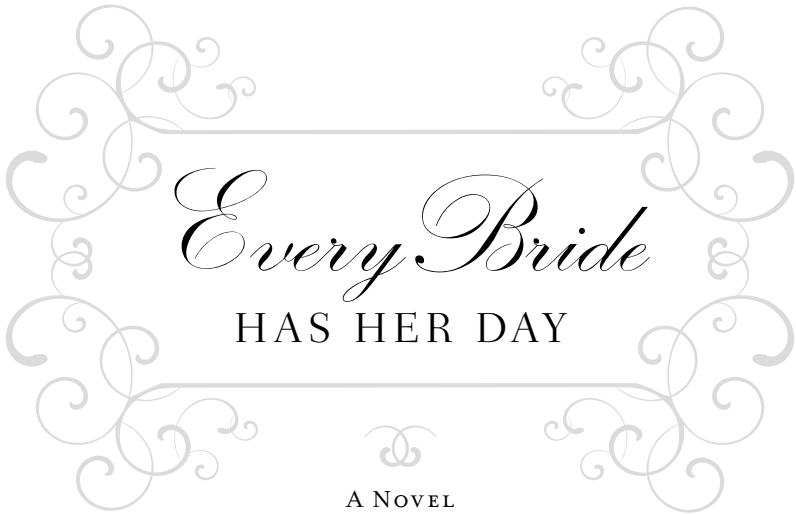


BRIDES *with* STYLE • 3



JANICE
THOMPSON

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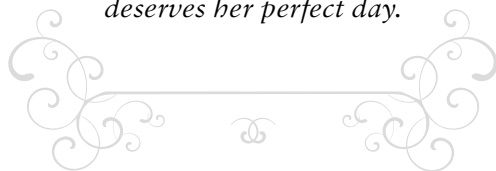
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*To Michella and Josh:
your outdoor wedding served as a great
inspiration for this book and proved,
once and for all, that every bride
deserves her perfect day.*



1



Happy Girl

I believe in pink. I believe that laughing is the best calorie burner. I believe in kissing, kissing a lot. I believe in being strong when everything seems to be going wrong.

Audrey Hepburn

You. Are. An. Engaged. Woman.” I spoke to my reflection in the mirror on the Monday morning after the love of my life popped the question. “Engaged!”

A little giggle followed as I thought back on the moment when my sweetie had slipped that gorgeous, perfect-for-me ring on my finger. The flawless princess-cut diamond was almost as amazing as the fella who’d given it to me. Almost. Then again, Brady James was in a class of his own. Comparing

him to anything—even something as precious as a diamond—just felt wrong. What I’d ever done to deserve such a guy, I could not say, but he was mine all the same.

Mine.

Engaged!

I needed to get busy planning a wedding. Oh, but right now I just wanted to dance down the hallway to the kitchen, eat breakfast with Aunt Alva, then head off to work at Cosmopolitan Bridal, where I would see my fiancé in person. A few sweet kisses would start my workday off right.

I did a happy little Texas two-step all the way from my bedroom to the Formica table in the kitchen, where I greeted my elderly great-aunt with a kiss on the cheek. “G’morning, Auntie!” I sang, my words coming out like a Disney musical in the making. “How are *you* today?”

“Well, aren’t we happy this morning, Katie Sue.” Aunt Alva’s soft wrinkles seemed even more pronounced than usual as her lips curled up in a smile. “Love is in the air, I see.”

“Indeed, it is!” I trilled, my melodic words filling the tiny kitchen. “Birds are singing, flowers are blooming, and all’s right with the world! I’m engaged!”

“Love does make you feel young, doesn’t it?” She attempted to stand, but her arthritis slowed things down a bit. “Never mind getting up. I guess you’ll just have to fix your own plate. I’m so worn out from taking care of Lori-Lou’s kids all week I can hardly move.”

“No doubt.”

“Feels good to be home, even if it’s just for the weekend. And nice to cook in my own kitchen again. I made pancakes, honey. I know how much you love them and figured they’d hit the spot.”

“Yum!” I turned my attention to my aunt, noticing how weary she looked. “And don’t fret, Auntie. I’ll fix my own.”

“Before long you’ll be fixing breakfast for two.” A look of concern clouded her face. “In your own house. On the other side of town. Far away from me. Not that I’m complaining about you and Brady getting hitched. I’m just worried about living on my own again after having someone as sweet as you share my home.”

I slipped my arms around her shoulders and leaned in close. “Think about it, Aunt Alva. I’m not the only one with a beau. I think we both know that Eduardo is planning to pop the question soon, and his house is near Brady’s. We’ll be neighbors.”

Auntie brightened at this notion. “I do hope he’ll hurry up. I’m eighty-plus years old. I don’t have time to dawdle.” She tried again to stand, this time managing the feat. “But if I move into that ridiculously large house of his, you’ll probably have to send in a search party to find me. At least here I know the way to the bathroom.” She toddled off down the hallway as if to prove her point.

As I filled my plate with food, I thought about all of the changes in our lives of late. Moving from Fairfield to Dallas. Meeting Brady. Landing a dream job at his mother’s bridal salon. Moving in with my aunt. Falling head over heels for the greatest guy in the world. Had I really only been away from my hometown of Fairfield less than a year? Seemed like forever. Oh, but what a joy to start my life over again in a place with endless possibilities!

My happily-ever-after attitude continued to propel me as I drove to work later that morning. I entered Cosmopolitan Bridal, my home away from home, and was greeted by my co-worker Twiggy, who let out a deafening squeal the moment she clapped those overly made-up eyes of hers on me. “Katie! I still can’t believe you’re engaged! I mean, I *know* you are. I

was there. I saw it firsthand. But it seems like a dream. Ooh, speaking of dreams, let me see your ring again.”

I extended my left hand to show off the diamond, and she gasped. “Wowza! Is it heavy? Have you set a date? Are you guys getting married at your church here in Dallas or back home in Fairfield? Where are you going on your honeymoon? Don’t go on a cruise. I’ve heard terrible stories about those tiny cabins. Not good for honeymooning. Have you chosen your bridesmaids?” A hopeful look sparked in her eyes at that last question.

Before I could say, “We haven’t had time to think about all of that,” the store manager approached. “So, Brady finally popped the question.” Madge gave me a motherly look as she crossed her arms. “It’s about stinkin’ time. I’ve been laying on some pretty thick hints over the past few weeks, but he didn’t seem to be taking them. I was starting to think Brady James planned to stay single the rest of his life, just like that stubborn agent of his.” A hint of pain clouded Madge’s eyes. “Some fellas are confirmed bachelors, I guess.”

“I was just waiting for the perfect moment, Madge.” Brady’s voice sounded from behind me. I turned, finding it difficult to stop smiling as I gazed into my handsome fiancé’s face. “And I’m pretty sure Stan isn’t a confirmed bachelor. Time will prove that.”

Madge rolled her eyes. “Whatever. And who was talking about Stan anyway? What does your agent have to do with this conversation?”

“You brought him up,” I reminded her.

“Maybe that’s a discussion for another day.” Brady gave me a knowing look.

“Enough about confirmed bachelors. We have a wedding shower to plan!” Twiggy seemed delighted at this possibility. “What themes do you like, Katie?”

“Themes?” I gave a little shrug. “No idea. What do you mean?”

“Oh, bridal showers these days are all themed. Tiffany. Shabby chic. Chevron. Everything’s built on the theme. So what’s it going to be? We’ve got to start planning.”

“In Fairfield all of the bridal showers are just alike. We meet at the Baptist church, drink punch, eat cake, and open presents. There’s always a toaster. And a blender. And my grandmother always puts together a basket of cleaning products, though I’ve never understood why you would give cleaning products as a gift. I guess she’s just trying to send some sort of message to the bride to keep a clean house?”

“Humph. Maybe that’s how they do it in a small town, but it’s not going to happen on my watch.” Twiggy waggled her finger in the air. “We can do a sure sight better than that.”

“We sure can.” My boss, Nadia, sashayed next to Brady. “My boy deserves a top-notch wedding. And his fans will expect it to be grand. What about the Gaylord, honey? You’ve loved that place since you were a kid.”

“It’s a great hotel, Mom.” Brady pursed his lips, and I tried to read his thoughts. “But this is really more about making the bride happy. You know?”

“Katie will be happy as long as you’re happy.” Nadia stared at me so intently that I felt beads of sweat pop out on my neck. “Right, honey?”

Before I could say, “But I’ve never even been inside the Gaylord,” Nadia headed off to her office, muttering something about how she would pull a few strings to get us the grand ballroom for a midsummer wedding. Lovely.

Twiggy clasped her hands together in obvious glee. “Ooh, the Gaylord! Perfection! I’m going to throw you the bridal shower of the century. It’s totally going to be Texas-themed, cowboys

and horses and the whole works. Perfect, since you guys got engaged at the stockyards. And I know the other girls will help me. Dahlia loves to design things. Hibiscus too. Crystal's probably a little too busy planning her own wedding right now to get very involved, but I could ask Jane." Her nose wrinkled. "No, on second thought, I doubt Jane would be terribly interested."

"I think it's a little early to be worrying about all of that," I said.

"Oh, it's never too early. Now, the first order of business is to look for ideas for the actual wedding, not just the shower. Fresh. New. Hip. Cool. Nothing too overdone." Twiggy swept her hair back with her hand. "We want something fashion-forward, not something from a magazine. By the time that magazine goes to print, the trend is already passing. We want something original, something perfect for Katie."

"Well, I'm a small-town girl, so—"

"Everything has to jive with the theme for the wedding. And if you're getting married at the Gaylord, then the whole cowboy-meets-cowgirl, riding-off-into-the-sunset thing will be perfect."

"Are you saying my wedding has to be themed too?" I slapped my palm against my forehead. "Really? Can't we just call it 'typical wedding theme' and leave it at that? I've been planning my big day since I was a girl, and I don't remember any theme at all."

"*Typical* wedding theme?" Twiggy stared at me as if I'd lost my mind. "I guess some girls still do that. But don't you worry, Katie. I'll start a wedding board for you on Pinterest, and I'll pin all sorts of ideas to share with you."

"Wait." I shook my head. "You're coming up with ideas for the shower or the actual wedding? Because I really want to do that my—"

“Both! It’s going to be great.” She sauntered down the hallway toward the design studio with Madge on her heels. I could hear them talking about my wedding as they disappeared from view.

Brady slipped his arms around my waist. “You don’t have to listen to a word they say. They’re just trying to be helpful, in their own intrusive way.”

“It’s not that, Brady.” I leaned my head against his shoulder and sighed. “I’m just so embarrassingly small-town that I don’t know much about how to do things in a big way. And if that’s really what you want, what you expect, then . . .”

“All I expect is for you to be there, ready to take my hand in yours. Other than that, I couldn’t care less. Just tell the planning committee that you want to go simple.”

“Right. Is there such a thing as simple chic? Something that doesn’t involve pictures from the internet? Or big hotels? Or cowboys and horses?”

“Yep. But you’d better tell them quickly. I have a feeling Mama’s already mapping out the reception hall, and I’m guessing Twiggy is back in the studio by now, involving Dahlia and Hibiscus.”

I shook my head and pinched my eyes shut. Maybe I should let them enjoy the moment. And perhaps I should look at whatever plans they came up with. They might just surprise me with something that felt right, after all. Just because we always did things the simple way in my small town didn’t mean I wasn’t open to change.

“I’ve already got my dress, anyway.” I offered Brady a delighted smile. “Thanks to you.”

“No, thanks to *you* and that prize-winning essay you wrote.”

“Yes, the essay.” I pursed my lips as I remembered the emotions I’d felt as I’d penned the winning essay. Felt like a lifetime

ago. “But I guess my point is this: the dress is a Loretta Lynn style, which is simple. Country. Sweet.”

“I like simple. Country. Sweet.”

“Which explains why you fell for me, I suppose.” I gave him a kiss on the cheek. “But I’m trying to say that the theme of our wedding could be just that. Simple. Country. Sweet.”

“Yep.” His word came out with a slow Texas drawl. Brady then tipped his imaginary hat, gave me a wink, and headed off to his office. I decided I’d better get to my office as well. In spite of my enthusiasm for the wedding, there was still work to be done. Cosmopolitan Bridal wasn’t paying me to plan my wedding, they were paying me to do marketing and PR for the store.

Several minutes later, as I was comfortably seated at my desk, my phone rang. I answered on the second ring. “Cosmopolitan Bridal, home of the Loretta Lynn gown. How can I help you?”

“You can help me by taking a break from your work and talking to me about your wedding.” I recognized my mother’s voice. “Pop and I are so excited about your big day. I’m sorry we couldn’t stick around and help you plan it, but you know how he is. He wanted to get back on the road again, headed west. But we’ll be there when you need us to help get things ready for the wedding, honey. I promise.”

“Oh, no problem. I’ve hardly had time to think about it since Brady popped the question. It’s been a whirlwind week-end, for sure.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but I took it upon myself to see when the church is available. I figured you’d want to do an early summer wedding, though that wouldn’t give you much time, this being February and all. If that’s too short notice, then late summer would be nice too.”

“Actually, we—”

“I called the church, and they’ve got VBS taking place the second week of June, so you can’t use the fellowship hall that weekend. And there’s the annual Peach Festival. You’ll have to work around that. But I understand every weekend in July is open. Of course, it’s hot as blue blazes in July and the AC isn’t great in the fellowship hall, but maybe we could bring in a couple of window units? Those are loud, though. Might be kind of hard to celebrate with all that racket. What do you think?”

“I think Brady and I haven’t even talked about dates yet. Plus we attend a great church here in Dallas, Mama. And just so you know, Brady’s mom has her heart set on—”

“Dallas?” She spoke the word as if it brought her great pain. “Please tell me you’re not thinking about getting married in Dallas. The people you love live in Fairfield.”

“Half of them.” I sighed. “The other half—the people I see every day at work—live here. And the girls at the bridal shop are already very invested, trust me. They’re making plans as we speak.”

“You’re letting total strangers plan your wedding?” Mama sounded flabbergasted at this idea.

“They’re not strangers, they’re good friends. And they’re not planning the wedding for me. They’re just working on ideas. On Pinterest.”

“Pinterest?” Mama groaned. “You don’t need the internet to plan a lovely home-grown wedding, honey. And you certainly don’t need to tie the knot in the big city. Dallas is just so far away from home.” Her voice grew tense. “Don’t you want the people you grew up with to attend your wedding?”

“Mama, Dallas is an hour away from Fairfield, not halfway across the country. If people really care about me, they would

probably travel here. Not that I'm asking them to—at least not yet. Please don't fret. I'm sure Brady will agree that getting married in Fairfield is the best plan. And I'm pretty sure Queenie would kill me if I didn't get married at the Baptist church where I grew up.”

“Maybe not. Queenie's a Presbyterian now. Did you forget?” Mama's voice held that crisp edge of disapproval she'd become known for.

The phone grew warm against my ear, so I shifted it to the other one. “I know she is, but her heart is still at the Baptist church.”

“That's what getting hitched to a man of the cloth will do to you, I guess. You marry him and the next thing you know, everything's changing.” Mama sniffled. “Kind of like what's happening to you, now that you're engaged.”

“Brady's not a man of the cloth, Mama. He's a basketball player.” Even as I spoke the words, I wished I could take them back. With his post-surgery knee still bothering him, my sweetie's professional basketball career was taking a backseat to helping out at the bridal shop. “He's not a Presbyterian either,” I added. “We both attend a community church now.”

Mama released an exaggerated groan. “I guess that proves my point. Everything's changing. The signs are all there. I've been trying to ignore them, but it's getting harder every day. You've left home for good.”

“Left home?” I did my best not to laugh out loud. “Where are you calling me from, Mama?”

A short pause followed before she finally said, “We're headed to the Texas Panhandle, Palo Duro Canyon area. We plan to see that wonderful outdoor musical I've heard so much about.”

“Yep. And where will you be next week?”

“Ruidoso, New Mexico.”

“After that?”

“I believe we’re headed to Colorado. Or maybe Arizona. You know how your father is, Katie. He’s got the wanderlust.”

“And wherever he wanders, you happily follow.”

“He’s my husband.”

“Exactly.” I did my best to punctuate the word.

There was a lengthy pause on my mother’s end. “I suppose, when you say it like that . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“I’m just saying that when two people become one, they start carving their own path. Doing their own thing.”

“Could you carve your path a little closer to Fairfield? At least for the wedding day?”

“I’m sure we’ll get married in Fairfield, as I said. And I’ll be calling the church myself to talk to Joni about setting a date.”

“Joni’s not at the Baptist church anymore, honey. Remember? Now that she’s dating your ex-fiancé, she’s changed churches too.”

“Casey was never my fiancé, Mama, but thanks for the reminder about Joni switching churches. I guess I’ll have to call Bessie May then. She’s still Baptist, isn’t she?”

“Yes, but stop avoiding the obvious. You and Casey were very nearly engaged once upon a time, before he started dating Joni. And I suppose it could be argued that he’s the one responsible for nudging you off to Dallas. I still haven’t quite forgiven him for that, you know.”

“It’s time you did. He and Joni are happily matched, and so are Brady and me. It will all work out in the end. So you and Pop enjoy yourself in New Mex—”

“The Texas Panhandle.”

“The Texas Panhandle. And don’t take any wooden nickels.”

“I’ve never understood that expression.” My mother laughed. “But if I’ve heard your father use it once, I’ve heard him use it a thousand times. ‘Don’t take any wooden nickels, Marie.’” She laughed a little louder. “Every time old man Harrison would come into the hardware store, your father would say it loud enough for everyone in the place to hear.”

“I remember.”

“I . . .” She seemed to drift away for a moment. “I miss our days at the hardware store. Do you, Katie Sue?”

“Mama, you and Pop just passed off the store to Jasper and Crystal a few months back. And from what Jasper tells me, Pop is still trying to manage things, even from the RV.”

“It’s not technically an RV, honey. It’s a fifth wheel.”

“You get my point. You haven’t lost ties with the hardware store, and I don’t see that happening . . . ever. It’ll always be a part of us, as will the wooden nickel phrase.”

“Okay, okay.” Mama disappeared for a minute, then returned, breathless. “Hate to run, honey, but your father is about to drive us off the road and into a canyon. I have to help him with the GPS.”

“Dumb thing gets it wrong every time!” my father hollered.

“Pretty sure he’s talking about the GPS, not me,” Mama said. “But I can’t be sure.”

“Be safe and have fun, Mama. And don’t worry about a thing. I will get married in Fairfield and you will be in the center of the plans, I promise. I won’t leave you out.”

“Thank you, honey.” My mother ended the call.

I put the phone down and laid my head on my desk, my thoughts in a whirl.

“Things are that bad already?” Brady’s voice roused me from my ponderings. I sat up straight and released an exaggerated sigh as I saw him standing in the open doorway.

In that moment, as I focused on him, I was reminded of the very first time I'd ever walked into Cosmopolitan Bridal and looked his way. That first day I'd felt sure I was looking at Adonis. The solid build. The height. The broad shoulders. The five o'clock shadow. The swatch of wavy dark hair that fell across his forehead. The compelling, magnetic smile. The mesmerizing blue eyes. These things had worked their magic on me then, just as they did in this very moment.

"Katie?" Those beautiful blue eyes now reflected his concern. "Have I lost you?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. Just more people trying to plan our big day. That's all."

"I see." He moved toward my desk, favoring his injured knee. "Well then, let's just run off and elope. What do you think of that idea?"

"I think they would all kill us. We'd be murdered in our sleep."

"But at least we'd be in each other's arms."

"True, that." Still, I couldn't help but fret. Wedding planning wasn't supposed to be stressful, was it? I mean, all of the bridal magazines made it look like so much fun. Our engagement was just one day old and we were already talking about running off to elope? What would the next few months hold?

I rose and took a few steps in Brady's direction. He slipped his arms around me and I nestled against him, all of my woes about the wedding slipping away. There, in that safe place, there were no cares, no anxieties.

Until Madge popped her head in the door and hollered, "I've got it, you two! Let's do a Hawaiian-themed wedding, luau and all! I'll bring the roasted pig!"

The groan I gave was pretty loud, but it was drowned out

by the sound of Brady's laughter. "Now *there's* an idea," he whispered in my ear, his breath sending tingles all the way down my spine. "We'll elope . . . in Hawaii!"

Funny. That idea sounded better to me than all of the others put together.