

The
WEDDING
DRESS

RACHEL HAUCK



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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To Jesus, the glorious bridegroom

Chapter One

Charlotte

April 14

It was the breeze, a change in the texture of the unseen that made her look up and walk around a stand of shading beech trees. Charlotte paused on the manicured green of the Ludlow Estate for a pure, deep breath, observing the elements of the day—blue sky, spring trees, sunlight bouncing off the parked-car windshields.

She'd woken up this morning with the need to think, to pray, to get closer to heaven. She'd tugged on her favorite pair of shorts and driven up to the ridge.

But instead of solitude, Charlotte found her piece of Red Mountain busy and burdened with shoppers, seekers, and bargain hunters. The annual Ludlow antiques auction to raise money for the poor was in full force on the estate's luscious grounds.

Charlotte raised her sunglasses to the top of her head, resenting the intrusion. This was her personal sanctuary, even if the rest of the world didn't know it. Mama used to bring her here for picnics, parking on a gravel service road and sneaking Charlotte along the Ludlows' perimeter, laughing and whispering, "Shh," as if they were getting away with something fun and juicy.

She'd find a spot on the back side of a knoll, spread a blanket, open a bucket of chicken or a McDonald's bag, and exhale as she looked out over the valley toward the Magic City. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yep," Charlotte always said, but her eyes were on Mama, not

Birmingham's lights. She was the most beautiful woman Charlotte had ever seen. And almost eighteen years after her death, she still was the most beautiful woman Charlotte had ever seen. Mama had a way of just *being*, but she died before she imparted that gift to Charlotte.

Shouts invaded Charlotte's memorial moment with Mama. Bidders and buyers moved in and out from under the auction tent spread across the side lawn.

Shading her eyes from the angled sunlight, Charlotte stood in the breeze, watching, deciding what to do. Go back home or walk the grounds? She didn't need or want anything that might be under that tent. Didn't have the money to buy even if she did.

What she needed was to think through—pray about—her recent tensions with Tim's family. His sister-in-law Katherine specifically. The whole mess challenged her to reconsider the leap she was about to make.

As Charlotte turned toward her car, the wind bumped her again and she glanced back. Through the trees and beyond the tent, the second-floor windows of the Ludlow stone-and-glass mansion shone with the golden morning light and appeared to be watching over the proceedings on the ground.

Then the wind shifted the light, a shadow passed over the window, and the house seemed to wink at her. *Come and see . . .*

"Hey there." A lofty woman's voice caused Charlotte to turn around. "You're not leaving already, are you?" She lugged up the slope of the lawn with a box in her hands.

Charlotte recognized her. Not by name or face, but by aura. One of the classic Southern women that populated Birmingham. Ones with dewy skin, pressed slacks, cotton tops, and a modest string of pearls. She stopped by Charlotte, breathless.

"You've not even gone up to the auction tent. I saw you pull in,

sweetie. Now, come on, we've beautiful items for auction. Is this your first time here?" She dipped into the box and pulled out a catalog. "Had to run to my car to get more. We're busy, busy this year. Well, you can see that by the cars. Remember now, all the proceeds go to the Ludlow Foundation. We give millions in grants and scholarships around the city."

"I've admired the foundation for quite a while." Charlotte flipped through the catalog.

"I'm Cleo Favorite, president of the Ludlow Foundation." She offered Charlotte her hand. "You're Charlotte Malone."

Charlotte regarded Cleo for a moment, slowly shaking the woman's hand. "Should I be impressed you know me or run screaming back to my car?"

Cleo smiled. Her teeth matched her pearls. "My niece was married last year."

"I see. She bought her dress from my shop?"

"She did, and for a while, I believed she was more excited about working with you than marrying her fiancé. Quite a business you have there."

"I've been very fortunate." More than any poor, orphaned girl dreamed. "Who is your niece?"

"Elizabeth Gunter. She married Dylan Huntington." Cleo started toward the tent. Charlotte followed so as not to be rude.

"Of course, I remember Elizabeth. She was a beautiful bride."

"And she wanted the whole wide world to know it." Cleo laughed with a pop of her hand against the breeze. "She darn near sent my brother to the poorhouse. But you only get married once, right?"

"I hear that's the idea." Charlotte touched her thumb to the shank of her engagement ring—the reason she'd driven up here today. She paused at the edge of the tent.

“So, Charlotte, are you looking for any particular item? Something for your shop?” Cleo dropped the box of catalogs on a table and started down the main aisle as if she expected Charlotte would follow. “We have some beautiful wardrobes for sale. The catalog tells you the lot number, when and where to bid. The auctioneer just moves to the piece. We found that to be easier than—well, what does any of that matter? It’s a great auction and it runs smoothly. Tell me, what are you looking for?” Cleo tipped her head to one side and clasped her hands together at her waist.

Charlotte stepped under the tent’s shade. “Actually, Cleo,”—*I came up here to think*—“my bridal shop is strictly contemporary.” Charlotte rolled the catalog in her hand. “But I guess browsing is always fun.” She could walk the aisles to think and pray, right?

“Why sure it is. You’re bound to find something you like as you . . . browse.” Cleo winked. “It works best if you go ahead and give yourself permission to spend some of your hard-earned money.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Cleo trotted off and Charlotte picked a side aisle to wander, examining the pieces as if the answer she longed for might be lurking among the ancients and the antiques.

Maybe she’d hear, *He’s the one*, as she passed a twentieth-century breakfront or a nineteenth-century wardrobe.

But probably not. Answers didn’t often just appear to her out of the ethereal realm. Or drop on her suddenly. She worked for her life answers. Just rolled up her sleeves, evaluated the situation, calculated costs, and decided. She’d have never opened Malone & Co. otherwise.

Charlotte paused in front of a dark wood foyer table and traced her fingers over the surface. Gert had one like this in her foyer. Wonder what ever happened to it? Charlotte bent to see if the underside had been marked with a red magic marker.

It hadn't. Charlotte moved on. That table wasn't Gert's. Oh, she'd been so mad when she discovered her niece had run amuck with that red pen.

At the end of the aisle, Charlotte halted with a sigh. She should head back down to the city. Her hair appointment was in a few hours anyway.

Instead, she started down the next aisle, let her thoughts wander to Tim and the struggle in her heart.

Four months ago she'd been perfectly ensconced in her steady, predictable, comfortable day-to-day life. Then the contractor who remodeled her shop harangued her into accepting his Christmas dinner invitation. He seated her next to Tim Rose and changed Charlotte's life.

A dull, tired rolltop desk caught her eye. Charlotte stopped in front of it and smoothed her hand along the surface. If the grain could talk, what stories would it tell?

Of a husband figuring the family finances? Or of a child working through a homework problem? Of a mama writing a letter to the folks back home?

How many men and women sat at this desk? One or hundreds? What were their hopes and dreams?

One piece of furniture surviving time. Was *that* what she wanted? To survive, to be a part of something important?

She wanted to *feel* like she belonged to the Rose family. Katherine certainly didn't make Charlotte feel like a part of the gregarious collection of siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and lifelong friends.

On their first date when Tim told Charlotte he had four brothers, she couldn't even imagine what that felt like. It sounded thrilling. She drilled him with question after question. Charlotte only had Mama. Then old Gert when Mama died.

She'd never lived with a sibling, let alone four of them. Let alone a boy.

Was that why she accepted Tim Rose's proposal after two months? Fascination? At the moment, she wasn't sure her reason was love. She wasn't even sure it was to be part of a big family.

Charlotte glanced down at the one-carat diamond filigree and platinum engagement ring that had belonged to Tim's grandmother.

But the ring had no answers. *She* had no answers.

"Charlotte Malone?" A round, pleasant-looking woman approached her from the other side of a dining table. "I read about you in *Southern Weddings*. You look like your picture."

"I hope that's a good thing." Charlotte smiled.

"Oh, it is. Your shop sounds magical. Made me wish I was getting married again."

"We hit a lucky break with that piece." When the editor called last fall, it was the last in a wash of fortunate waves breaking Charlotte's way.

"I've been married thirty-two years and I read *Southern Weddings* about as religiously as the Good Book. I just love weddings, don't you?"

"I certainly love wedding dresses," Charlotte said.

"I suppose you do." The woman's laugh lingered in the air as she said good-bye and moved on, touching Charlotte's arm gently as she passed.

She *did* love wedding dresses. Since she was a girl, the satin and sheen of white gowns practically made her giddy. She loved the way a bride's face changed when she slipped on the perfect gown, the way her hopes and dreams swam in her eyes.

In fact, she was on the verge of her own transformation—slipping on the perfect gown, hopes and dreams swimming in her eyes.

So what was the problem? Why the holdout? She'd considered

fifteen dresses, tried on none. June 23 would be here before she knew it.

A year ago February, she was barely getting by, investing all her capital in inventory while duct-taping her shop—a 1920s Mountain Brook cottage—together.

Then an anonymous bank check to the tune of a hundred thousand dollars landed in her account. After weeks of panicked elation trying to find out who would give her so much money, Charlotte redeemed her gift and finally, finally remodeled her shop. And everything changed.

Tawny Boswell, Miss Alabama, became a client and put her on the map. *Southern Weddings* called. Then, as if to put a bow on the year, Charlotte attended the Christmas dinner and sat next to a handsome man who charmed everyone in the room. By the time she'd finished her first course of oyster soup, Tim Rose had captured her heart too.

The feathery kiss of destiny sent a shiver over her soul as the breeze rushing over the mountaintop tapped her legs. Did she smell rain? Dipping her head to see beyond the lip of the tent, Charlotte saw nothing but the glorious sun possessing a crystal blue sky. Not one vanilla cloud in sight.

She started down the next aisle and her phone buzzed from her jeans pocket. Dixie.

“Hey, Dix, everything okay at the shop?”

“Quiet. But Tawny called. She wants to meet with you tomorrow at three.”

Sunday? “Is everything all right? Did she sound okay? Like she was still happy with us?” Charlotte had spent months trying to find the perfect gown for Miss Alabama, lying awake at night, whispering to the God of love to help her fulfill Tawny's dreams.

Then she discovered a new, small designer out of Paris and

Charlotte knew she'd found her own brand of white-silk gold. "Call her back and tell her tomorrow is fine. Do we have crackers and cheese in the refreshment bar? Coffee, tea, water, and soda?"

"We're all stocked. Tawny seemed enthusiastic, so I don't think she's going to tell you she's going with another shop."

"How long have we been working in the bridal gown business together, Dix?"

"Five years, ever since you opened this place." Dix, forever pragmatic and calm.

"And how many times have we lost a customer at the last minute?" Even after countless hours of scouring designers to find the perfect gown.

"We didn't know what we were doing then. We're the experts now," Dixie said.

"You know very well it has nothing to do with us. Listen, I'll call Tawny and tell her we'd be happy to see her tomorrow."

"Already told her. Didn't think you'd want to turn her down." Dixie's voice always carried the weight of confidence. She was a godsend. Support beams for Charlotte's dream. "So, where are you anyway, Char?"

"Up on Red Mountain. At the Ludlow estate. I came up here to think but ran into the annual auction crowd. I'm wandering among the antiques as we speak."

"People or things?"

Charlotte grinned, scanning the gray heads among the aisles. "A little of both." She paused in front of a locked glass of jewels. Unique pieces were the perfect accent for her brides. Charlotte maintained an inventory of one-of-a-kind necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and tiaras. It was the small things that helped seal her success.

"Speaking of weddings," Dixie said low and slow.

“Were we?”

“Aren’t we always? *Your* wedding invitations are still on the storeroom desk, Charlotte. Do you want me to bring them home tonight?” Dix and her husband, Jared, Dr. Hotstuff as she called him, lived in the Homewood loft next door to Charlotte.

“Wait . . . really? They’re still on the storeroom desk? I thought I took them home.”

“If you did, they walked back.”

“Ha, ha, funny girl you are, Dixie. Yeah, sure, bring them home. I can work on them tomorrow after church. I need to see if Mrs. Rose has a guest list for Tim’s side—”

“You’re meeting with Tawny at three.”

“Right, okay, after I meet with her. Or I can work on them Monday night. I don’t think I have anything Monday night.”

“Charlotte, can I ask you something?”

“No—”

“You’re getting married in two months and—”

“I’ve just been busy, Dixie, that’s all.” Charlotte knew where her friend was going with her inquiry. Charlotte had been asking herself the same questions for weeks now, and the need for answers drove her up the mountain today. “I’ve got time.”

“But it’s running out.”

She knew. She knew. “We should’ve picked a fall wedding date. Fast engagement, fast wedding . . . it has me spinning.”

“Tim is an amazing man, Charlotte.”

She knew. She *knew*. But was he amazing for her? “Listen, I’d better go. I need to get back down the mountain in a few minutes so I can get my hair done. Call you later.”

“Have fun tonight, Charlotte. Don’t let Katherine get to you. Tell her to bug off. Just *be* there with Tim. Remember why you fell in love in the first place.”

“I’ll try.” Charlotte hung up, Dixie’s advice settling in her thoughts. *Remember why you fell in love in the first place.*

It’d all been heart pounding and romantic. She wasn’t sure she could identify a real, solid reason out of the whirlwind. As Charlotte made her way down the aisle to leave the tent, she found herself herded to one side by a gathering crowd.

She smiled at the man beside her and tried to step around him. “Excuse me.” He didn’t budge, but remained planted, staring pointedly at the item about to be auctioned.

“Pardon me, but if you could let me through, I’ll be out of your way. Are you bidding on that—” Charlotte looked over her shoulder. “Trunk?” *That ugly trunk?*

“Gather around, everybody.” The auctioneer jumped onto the riser next to the trunk. The crowd of fifteen or twenty surged forward, taking Charlotte with them. She stumbled back, losing her clog in the process. “We’re about to start bidding.”

Fishing around for her shoe, Charlotte decided to wait it out. The bidders on this item seemed determined. How long could the auction be? Ten minutes? Might be kind of fun to see the whole process up close.

Twenty bucks. The trunk didn’t look like it was worth more than that. Charlotte peeked around to see who she thought might be willing to shell out money for a dull, battered, and scarred box of wood with frayed and cracked leather straps.

The auctioneer was a man with nothing distinguishable about him. Average height and weight. Hair that might have once been brown but was now . . . gray? Ash?

Yet he wore a brilliant purple shirt tucked into charcoal gray trousers that he held up with leather suspenders. He bounced on the risers with his very clean and white Nike runners.

Charlotte grinned. She liked him, though when he looked at her, the blue blaze of his eyes made her spirit churn. She took a step back but remained hemmed in on all sides.

“This is lot number zero,” the auctioneer said, and his bass voice sank through Charlotte like a warm pearl.

Lot number zero? She fanned the pages of her catalog. There wasn’t a lot number zero. She cross-referenced with the itemized listing in the back. But no trunk, or chest, or luggage, or steamer was listed.

“This item was rescued from a house just minutes before it was torn down. The trunk was made in 1912.” He leaned over the crowd. “It was made for a bride.”

His gaze landed on Charlotte and she jerked back with a gasp. Why was he looking at her? She tucked her ring hand behind her back.

“It’s one hundred years old. A century. The hardware and leather are original and the entire piece is in good but thirsty condition.”

“What happened to the lock?” The man on Charlotte’s left pointed with his rolled-up catalog at the gnarled brass locking the lid in place.

“Well, that’s a tale in and of itself. It got welded shut, you see.” The auctioneer leaned farther toward his audience. Again, his roaming, fiery blue eyes stopped on Charlotte. He wiggled his bushy gray eyebrows. “By a gal with a broken heart.”

The women in the group “Ooh’d” and angled for a better look at the trunk while Charlotte took another step back. Why was he directing his attention toward her? She pressed her hand against the heat crackling between her ribs.

“But to the one willing, there’s great treasure inside.”

He scanned the crowd that seemed to grow thicker and winked. Laughter peppered the air and the auctioneer seemed satisfied he'd drawn everyone in.

Okay, Charlotte got it. There wasn't *really* a great treasure inside. He just wanted them to believe there could be. He was quite the salesman. Kudos.

"Let's start the bidding at five," he said.

Several from the crowd peeled away, releasing the pressure Charlotte felt to stay penned in. The swirl of cool air around her legs felt good.

"Do I have five?" he said again.

Charlotte checked the faces of those who remained. Come on, someone, bid five dollars. Now that the trunk had a price and had endured laughter, her sympathies were aroused. Hearing a bit of its story changed its dismal appearance.

Everyone, *everything*, needed love.

Another few seconds ticked by. Bid someone, please. "I'll bid five." Charlotte raised her rolled catalog. She could donate the trunk to the children's ministry at church. They were always looking for items to store toys or to pack with mission trip necessities.

"I have five hundred." The auctioneer held up his hand, wiggling his fingers. "Do I have five-fifty?"

"Five hundred?" She balked. "No, no, I bid five dollars."

"But the price was five hundred." The auctioneer nodded at her. "Always consider the cost, little lady. Now you know the price. Do I have five-fifty?"

Please, someone, bid five-fifty. How could she have been so stupid? The innocent-old-man routine fooled her.

The man next to Charlotte raised his catalog. "I'll go five-fifty."

Charlotte exhaled, pressing her hand to her chest. Thank you, kind sir. She flipped through the catalog pages again, searching for a

description, some information, anything on the trunk. But it was flat not listed.

“Five-fifty, do I have six? Six hundred dollars.” The auctioneer’s eyes were animated, speaking, and his cheeks glistened red even though the mountain air under the tent was cool for April.

The woman next to Charlotte raised her hand. “Six.”

Three more bidders peeled away. Charlotte regarded the trunk through narrow slits, thinking she should just take this time to be on her way too. She’d experienced enough of the bidding process.

Besides, she wanted to grab a bite of lunch before her appointment. By the time she left the salon, she’d have just time enough to go home and change before Tim picked her up at six.

“Six, do I have six-fifty?” The auctioneer’s voice bobbed with each syllable.

“Six-fifty.” The man on her left. “I can use it for replacement parts on a steamer I’m restoring.”

“Seven hundred,” Charlotte said, the words bursting from her lips. She cleared her throat and faced the auctioneer. Used for parts? Never. Something inside her rebelled at the thought of tearing the trunk apart. “This trunk deserves its own tender, loving care.”

“That it does, young lady. I rescued it myself. And what I rescue is never destroyed.” The auctioneer’s eyes radiated blue with each word and sent a burning chill through Charlotte. “Do I have seven-fifty?”

The woman next to her lifted her hand.

“Eight.” Charlotte didn’t even wait for him to up the bid. “Hundred. Eight hundred.”

Run! Get out of here! Charlotte tried to turn, but her legs refused to move and her feet remained planted on the Ludlow lawn. A blunt brush of the April breeze cooled the flash of perspiration on her forehead.

She didn't want this trunk. She didn't need this trunk. Her loft was contemporary, small, and so far, clutter-free. The way she liked it.

Malone & Co. was an upscale, classy, exquisitely contemporary boutique. Where would she put a beat-up old trunk? Never mind that she'd spent her windfall money on the remodel. Every last dime. And her personal bank account had just enough to foot the expense of a small wedding. Eight hundred dollars for a trunk was not in the budget. If she was going to blow that much cash, she'd buy a pair of Christian Louboutin shoes.

"It calls to you, doesn't it?" The man in purple leaned toward Charlotte with a swoosh up of his bushy brows.

"Unfortunately, yes." Tim would have a fit if she brought that thing home.

Charlotte regarded the trunk. Who was the man or woman who owned the trunk in days gone by? What about the bride the auctioneer spoke of from 1912—wouldn't she want a home for this battered old piece?

"Eight-fifty." The second man on Charlotte's left made a bid.

"One thousand dollars." Charlotte clapped her hand over her mouth. But it was too late. She'd made the bid.

Oh, she'd have to explain this to Tim.

"Sold." The auctioneer smacked his palms together and pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket. "This trunk belongs to you."

Charlotte read the preprinted slip. *Redeemed. \$1,000.* She whirled around. "Wait, sir, excuse me, but how did you know . . ."

But he was gone. Along with the crowd and the hum of voices. Charlotte stood completely alone except for the battered trunk and the glittering swirl in the air.