

ACCLAIM FOR RACHEL HAUCK

THE WEDDING SHOP

"I adored *The Wedding Shop*! Rachel Hauck has created a tender, nostalgic story, weaving together two pairs of star-crossed lovers from the present and the past with the magical space that connects them. So full of heart and heartache and redemption, this book is one you'll read long into the night, until the characters become your friends, and Heart's Bend, Tennessee, your second hometown."

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"*The Wedding Shop* is the kind of book I love, complete with flawed yet realistic characters, dual timelines that intersect unexpectedly, a touch of magic, and a large dose of faith. Two breathtaking romances are the perfect bookends for this novel about love, forgiveness, and following your dreams. And a stunning, antique wedding dress with a secret of its own. This is more than just a good read—it's a book to savor."

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THE WEDDING CHAPEL

"Hauck's engaging novel about love, forgiveness, and new beginnings adeptly ties together multiple oscillating storylines of several generations of families. Interesting plot interweaves romance, real life issues, and a dash of mystery . . . Recommend for mature fans of well-done historical fiction."

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"Hauck tells another gorgeously rendered story. The raw, hidden emotions of Taylor and Jack are incredibly realistic and will resonate with readers. The way the entire tale comes together with the image of the chapel as holding the heartbeat of God is breathtaking and complements the romance of the story."

—RT BOOK REVIEWS, 4½ STARS AND A TOP PICK!

THE WEDDING DRESS

"*The Wedding Dress* is a thought-provoking read and one of the best books I have read. Look forward to more . . ."

—MICHELLE JOHNMAN, GOLD COAST, AUSTRALIA

"I thank God for your talent and that you wrote *The Wedding Dress*. I will definitely come back to this book and read it again. And now I cannot wait to read *Once Upon a Prince*."

—AGATA FROM POLAND

THE ROYAL WEDDING SERIES

"Perfect for Valentine's Day, Hauck's latest inspirational romance offers an uplifting and emotionally rewarding tale that will delight her growing fan base."

—LIBRARY JOURNAL, STARRED REVIEW

"Hauck writes a feel-good novel that explores the trauma and love of the human heart . . . an example of patience and sacrifice that readers will adore."

—ROMANTIC TIMES, 4 STARS

"A stirring modern-day fairy tale about the power of true love."

—CINDY KIRK, AUTHOR OF *LOVE AT MISTLETOE INN*

"*How to Catch a Prince* is an enchanting story told with bold flavor and tender insight. Engaging characters come alive as romance blooms between a prince and his one true love. Hauck's own brand of royal-style romance shines in this third installment of the Royal Wedding series."

—DENISE HUNTER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WISHING SEASON*

"*How to Catch a Prince* contains all the elements I've come to love in Rachel Hauck's Royal Wedding series: an 'it don't come easy' happily ever after, a contemporary romance woven through with royal history,

and a strong spiritual thread with an unexpected touch of the divine. Hauck's smooth writing—and the way she wove life truths throughout the novel—made for a couldn't-put-it-down read.”

—BETH K. VOGT, AUTHOR OF *SOMEBODY LIKE YOU*,
ONE OF *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY'S* BEST BOOKS OF 2014

“Rachel Hauck's inspiring Royal Wedding series is one for which you should reserve space on your keeper shelf!”

—*USA TODAY*

“Hauck spins a surprisingly believable royal-meets-commoner love story. This is a modern and engaging tale with well-developed secondary characters that are entertaining and add a quirky touch. Hauck fans will find a gem of a tale.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* STARRED REVIEW OF *ONCE UPON A PRINCE*



The
WEDDING
SHOP



RACHEL HAUCK

 ZONDERVAN®



Prologue



HALEY

Summer 1996

Heart's Bend, Tennessee

The scent of rain laced the afternoon breeze as it shoved through summer-green trees, ramming ominous black clouds together like a craggy mountain ridge. Haley scanned the heavens as she dropped her bike on the edge of Gardenia Park, a swirled chocolate-vanilla cone in her hand.

"Gonna rain, Tammy. Hurry!" Haley glanced over her shoulder toward their "fort," an abandoned building once known as The Wedding Shop.

The wind kicked up and a bass rumble thundered through the park. Haley shivered, curling her toes against her flip-flops.

"Tammy!"

"Hold your horses. He's making my dip cone."

Haley liked Tammy, the prettiest girl in their class, from the moment she met her in first grade.

"Just get regular chocolate." A thunderclap approved Haley's words, adding a lick of lightning for effect.

"But I like the dipped ones."

"We're going to get wet."

From the ice cream stand, Tammy shrugged, grinning, reaching for her cone as Carter Adams finally handed it through the window. Haley couldn't stand Carter. He was friends with her

oldest brother, Aaron, and every time he came over to the house he teased and picked on her until she screamed.

Then Mama would burst into the room. "Haley, for crying out loud, be quiet. What's with all the screaming?"

Did Aaron defend her? Or Carter confess he'd been teasing her? Nooooo . . . That would be too much to ask. When she grew up, she was going to defend people. Help others. Stand up for the picked on.

A girl learned a lot about self-defense when she was the youngest of four brothers. She liked them all right, except when they were being *boys*.

"Where do you want to go?" Tammy sat down on a bench, motioning for Haley to join her, careful with her cone, catching the vanilla dripping through chocolate cracks with the tip of her tongue. "Your house? We can play Mario."

"Naw, we did that already. Besides, one of my brothers is bound to be playing on it." Haley glanced back at their fort, the old wedding shop. "What about your house?"

Haley preferred the neat, quiet calm of the Easons'. An only child, Tammy had the run of the place, *including* her own bathroom.

Her very own bathroom! Haley had to share with Seth, two years older, and Will, four years older. They had what Mama called a Jack and Jill bathroom. More like a Jack and Jack with no room for a Jill. One of these days Haley was going to defend others, yep, and have her own bathroom. And that's that.

"I think your brothers are nice."

"Nice? Try living with them." Haley wrinkled her nose. "They're loud and they smell. Bad too."

More thunder rocked overhead, this time with a sprinkle of rain. From her bicycle basket, Tammy's beeper went off.

"That's Mama," she said, working hard on her ice cream to keep it from dripping down the sides and soaking the napkin wrapped around the cone. She reached for her beeper. "It's a three."

Ah, a three. Which meant “Be safe.” Usually Mrs. Eason sent a one, which meant “Get home.”

Darkness hovered over the large town-center park, over Heart’s Bend’s center square, as the wind blew sprinkles of rain. Lightning whipped through the black-and-blue sky.

Tammy shivered. “Better get someplace safe. Mama will ask me later.”

“Want to go to the fort?” Haley motioned over her shoulder toward the abandoned place.

As if on cue, the heavens burst open with buckets of rain. Tammy dropped her ice cream as she skedaddled for her bike, screaming, laughing as water poured from the clouds.

“Let’s go!”

“Wait for me.” Haley gripped her cone as she hopped on her bike and pedaled down First Avenue for all her life. “Wooooooo!” She ducked against the spiking rain, the water cooling her hot, sticky skin.

Dashing across the avenue as the light turned red, she bounced up on the Blossom Street curb, dropped her bike in the shade of the old oak tree, and ran her hand under the dripping Spanish moss, racing Tammy for the back porch.

The clouds crashed together, declaring war, wielding their swords of light and showering Heart’s Bend with their battle sweat as the girls tumbled onto the wide-board floor.

Haley jumped to her feet, hanging out of the door, her arm hooked around the weak screen doorframe. “Ha-ha-ha, you can’t get us now!”

“Come on, let’s go inside.” Tammy slipped through the shop’s back door by jiggling the doorknob, weakening the lock.

Haley followed, pausing just inside, next to what Mama called a butler’s pantry, shaking the rain from her stick-straight blonde hair. The shop’s stillness settled on her, speaking something Haley couldn’t understand but definitely felt. And like

every time before, Haley felt as though she'd walked into a place like home.

Daddy called it a sixth sense. Whatever that meant. But somehow Haley understood time and space and anything that might be beyond the world she could see. The notion excited her. And scared the living daylights out of her. Let's just be honest.

"Look, I can't get it off." Laughing, Tammy flicked her hand in front of Haley's face, pieces of the cone's white paper napkin stuck to her sticky fingers.

Reaching up, Haley yanked the piece free, wadding it up in her pocket. She didn't want to trash the place—like everyone who'd tried to run a business here once it was no longer a wedding shop. A shame, a crying shame, how folks could disrespect a building and all it stood for.

Haley may be only ten, but she'd heard the stories of the shop's brides, of Miss Cora, and all the good she'd done. The place needed respect.

"Let's play bride." Tammy ran up the wide, thick grand staircase. The carved and curved banister put Haley in mind of a great palace. That's what this shop was to Heart's Bend. A grand palace. For girls getting married. "You be the bride this time, Haley. Walk down the steps from up there—"

"The mezzanine."

"Yeah, that place." Tammy licked the chocolate from her fingers and wiped her hand on her shorts. "How do you know it's a mezzanine again?"

"I heard Mama say it when we watched some documentary." Haley made a snoring sound. Mama was all about education, and just about everything in the Morgan family had to be "educational." Even Christmas gifts. Praise be for Daddy who drew a line at Mama's educational obsession during the holidays.

See, Mama was a doctor and Daddy an engineer. They worked long hours and employed a maid-slash-cook, Hilda, and a nanny,

Tess. They were all right. Kind of cranky. Last time Haley asked either one of them to help her bake a cake, they tossed her out of the house.

“Go swim. Got that big ole pool out back and you kids all hang around inside. Crying shame, I tell you, a crying shame. In my day we’d have . . .”

Hilda’s “her day” stories shot Haley and her brothers out of the house faster than a greased pig.

Anyway, that was routine around the Morgan house. Daddy and Mama were home for dinner every night, though, because Mama believed in families eating together. But they had to discuss something intelligent. Mama always reiterated, “There’s nothing *more* important than education.”

Yeah? Except goal setting. That was Mama’s other bugaboo. Everyone had to set goals come New Year’s Eve. She made the family sit and write down what they wanted to accomplish. Even Daddy. So there was no way of ever getting out of it.

For the past three years, Haley wrote, “Get a puppy.” So far, she never got one. What was the point of a goal if her parents never helped her achieve it?

“Are you going to be the bride or not?” Tammy said. “I was the bride last time. It’s my turn to be the shopkeeper.”

Haley jogged up the stairs. She preferred shopkeeper to bride. “Okay, but who am I going to marry?”

“Who do you want to marry?”

“No one. I told you, boys smell.”

Tammy made a face. “Pretend they don’t. Now who?” She twisted the knob on the closet door under the dormer eaves. They liked to pretend the wedding dresses were inside.

But the door was locked. Like always.

Haley could only think of one boy at school who didn’t annoy the heck out of her. She peered over at her friend through the light falling through the mezzanine windows. “Cole Danner?”

“Cole?” Tammy sighed, making a face and planting her hand on her hip. “He’s mine.”

“I don’t really want him. Geez. This is just pretend. He’s the cutest boy in class and, as far as I can tell, stinks the least.”

“Okay, I guess it’s all right since it’s just pretend. But when we grow up, I got dibs.”

“On Cole? You can have him. I’m not getting married until I’m old, like thirty, maybe even forty.”

Tammy laughed. “But you have to be my maid of honor, promise?”

“Promise.” Of course she’d do anything for her bestie Tammy.

Overhead, the thunder rumbled. But the old wedding shop walls remained steady.

Haley’s Grandma Morgan and her friend Mrs. Peabody bought their wedding dresses here. Mama was in medical school in Boston when she met Daddy, who was at MIT. They got married in a courthouse or she’d have bought her dress from Miss Cora too.

At least Haley liked to think so. Even at ten, she had a strong sense of tradition.

Daddy and Mama moved back to Heart’s Bend when Haley was two, wanting to be near family, wanting out of the cold. And Mama started her own sports medicine clinic. She was pretty famous as far as Haley could tell. Athletes from all over came to see her.

“You need a veil.” Tammy claimed a discarded piece of newspaper, smoothed it out on the floor, and folded it over Haley’s head.

Haley laughed, ducking away, the black-and-white veil slipping from her head. “If I come home with lice, Mama will have a cow.” She inched toward the third-floor stairs. “Let’s explore up here. Maybe we can find something to use.”

But the third floor was cluttered, full of boxes and old computer equipment. Paint peeled from the walls, the floor was covered with rotting carpet, and the bathroom was torn apart.

Tammy shivered. "This creeps me out. Let's go back to the mezzanine."

But Haley spied something peeking out from the edge of the carpet. She stooped, pinching the edge of a black-and-white photograph.

Tammy squatted next to her. "Hey, that's Miss Cora. I saw her picture in the paper."

"I know. I remember." Haley looked up at the dank quarters. "Do you think she lived here?"

"I hope not. It's gross."

Haley stared at the haunting reflection in the woman's eyes, like she longed for something. A strange twist knotted up Haley's middle. Taut prickles ran down her arms. Her sixth sense again. Running into something she could feel but not see.

"Look, clothespins. And a piece of tulle. This can be your veil." Standing next to a bookshelf, Tammy held up her treasures.

"Let's just pretend I have a dress and a veil." Haley stared at the face in the picture. Miss Cora was not very pretty, but kind looking with old-fashioned hair, like in Granny's pictures, a curiosity in her expression. And sadness. She was definitely sad.

But she'd heard only happy things about Miss Cora. Did she like running a wedding shop? Did she have lots of brothers like Haley? That can make a girl sad. Or was she an only child, like Tammy?

"Hal, come on before Mama beeps me home."

Thunder let loose a boom of agreement. Haley tucked the picture in her shorts pocket and hustled down the stairs.

"I changed my mind. You be the bride. I'll be the shop owner, Miss Cora."

"Miss Cora?"

"Why not? It's pretend, right? Besides, if Cole's the groom, it's best you be the bride. You'll marry him before I ever will."

Back on the mezzanine, Haley hurriedly moved into pretend

mode jogging down the stairs to the foyer. "Oh, hello, Mrs. Eason. Your daughter is putting on her veil right now." She mimed opening the shop's front door because the real one was dead bolted. "Please, have a seat."

Overhead, Tammy shuffled across the mezzanine, then hummed the wedding song as she descended the staircase, one slow step at a time. Haley breathed out, blowing her bangs from her forehead, the stale, hot air of the shop making her sweat, causing dust to stick to her skin.

"Isn't she beautiful, Mrs. Eason?" Haley jumped an imaginary line and pressed her hands to her cheeks to play the role of Tammy's mother. "Oh my stars, I'm going to cry. I'm going to cry." She fanned her face with her fingers. "Darling, you are beautiful, so beautiful."

Tammy modeled her newspaper veil, held out the skirt of her imaginary gown, and cooed how she couldn't "wait to marry Cole Danner."

Upon her words, lightning cracked, so bold, so loud this time the windows rattled. Tammy jumped into Haley's arms.

Then they fell to the floor laughing, hooting, popping their hands on the splintered hardwood. When they quieted down, Haley stared at the high ceiling.

"Let's own this shop one day, okay?" She gripped Tammy's hand in her own. "We'll go to college, then maybe join the Marines or something—"

"The Marines! I'm not joining the Marines." Tammy's protest was sure. "But I'll run this shop with you."

"But first we go places, see people, visit Hawaii, *then* buy this shop."

"Best friends forever." Tammy hooked her pinky finger around Haley's.

"Best friends forever."

"We'll come back here one day and own this wedding shop."

“Pinky promise.”

“Pinky promise.”

The lightning flickered, kissing the front window again. Haley jumped up and ran screaming around the shop with Tammy in pursuit.

Because make-believe was what best friends did. But make-believe ended.

Best friends were forever. And pinky promises could never be broken.

Chapter One



CORA

April 1930

Heart's Bend, Tennessee

The morning began like every other weekday, with Cora making her way up the back walk to the shop, unlocking the door, and clicking on the lights.

But today the spring sun's brightness drifting through the trees stirred a sense of hope. A vibrant anticipation.

Let today be the day.

Hanging her sweater and hat on hooks in the mudroom, Cora entered the small salon and stood at the nearest window, pushing the lace sheer aside. She gazed toward the cut of the Cumberland River visible through the trees and wished for *him*.

While she treasured spring's green and gardenia perfume, she missed the unobstructed view provided by leafless limbs. In the winter, she could see for miles from her shop's perch on the hill. Despite the cold gray days of winter, its barrenness enhanced her perspective.

But now spring had arrived and, still, he had not. She so ached for a glimpse of his long, lean stride coming up from the port, boldly taking the avenue with his broad physique, his mass of blond hair tangling about his face while the loose sleeves of his white blouse billowed about his thick arms.

Come today, darling.

"Cora?" The back door slammed, drawing her away from her post. "I'm here." Odelia, Cora's shop assistant and seamstress, entered with a gust of cold wind and the scent of cinnamon. "Sorry to be late. The buns were still in the oven." She chuckled, shifting the weight of the garments in her arms. "The buns . . . get it? I should've been in vaudeville. Anyways, couldn't get the old car started so Lloyd drove me in on the wagon."

Cora leaned over her shoulder. "Hmmm, those smell divine. And no rush. We've an hour before they arrive. Mama's on her way."

"Good, good. Ain't no hostess like your mama." Odelia set the hot buns in the first-floor pantry, where Mama would set up a service of tea and coffee along with pastries from Haven's bakery. She'd have to delicately decide what to do with Odelia's buns. "Even your Aunt Jane said she couldn't out hostess Esmé. Now, let me get the rest of the dresses out from the wagon. Lloyd has work back at the farm and he don't cotton none to being held up."

"I'll help you." Cora followed Odelia out of the shop and down the walk to Blossom Street. "Morning, Lloyd."

"Cora." He jutted his chin her way, then lowered his hat over his eyes, handing her several dresses swinging from hangers. "Got work to do."

"Now, shush. What do you think we're doing here all day, playing tiddlywinks?" Odelia anchored her toe on the wagon wheel and lighted into the bed, taking the dresses from her man. "Don't hold them against you. They'll go smelling like horses and pigs."

"Odelia, here, hand them to me." Cora reached for three more dresses.

The woman was a backbone to the shop with her seamstress skills, yet a constant mystery. Part Irish, part Cherokee, she was a workhorse with smooth brown skin that defied her age. Mama said she'd stick a needle in her eye if Odelia was a day under sixty.

When they'd unloaded the dresses, Lloyd took off. Odelia called after him, "Come get me, you old coot, or there won't be no supper."

“How long have you two been married again?” Cora said, falling in step with her assistant. Odelia was an Aunt Jane find. Hired her when she first opened the shop in 1890.

“Since Jesus was a baby.” She examined one of the white satiny dresses. “If Lloyd’s old blanket left a mark, I’ll crown him.”

But in the light of the mezzanine, the dresses were perfect, the white skirts shimmering with purity and beauty. No one in Heart’s Bend could work a needle and sewing machine like Odelia.

“I’ll get the display cases set up.” Cora headed down the stairs. The grand staircase with the carved, glossy, wooden spindles divided the shop in two—the grand salon on the left, the small salon on the right.

The grand salon Cora treated like a Hollywood living room, at least from what she could tell from the movies and magazines, covering the hardwood with plush carpet and the walls with bold paper.

In the light of the front display window, she positioned ornate chairs around the long, curved davenport made of a polished wood and covered with heavy gold upholstery. Here she sat her clients and their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, cousins, friends, aunts, and nieces. Here they waited for the bride to descend the staircase in her wedding gown.

If the bride was so inclined, the bridesmaids also descended the stairs, modeling their gowns for the other women. Once in a while, a father insisted on joining the party. After all, they protested, weren’t they the ones footing the bill?

In the small salon, the display cases housed a variety of veils, gloves, sachets, clutches, stockings, and every other sundry a bride might desire. Dress forms and mannequins modeled wedding gowns, going-away dresses, and a very modest style of lingerie.

At the bottom of the stairs, Cora paused. What was she setting out to do? Oh yes, the display cases. And she needed to run and get the pastries from the bakery. But she paused at the front door,

peering through the etched glass, unable to quell the stirring in her heart. It moved from taut anticipation to a burning restlessness.

Rufus, where are you?

In his last letter, he said he'd be on the Cumberland this spring. "Look for me in March." But it was already the first week of April, when the dogwoods bloomed in Gardenia Park and down First Avenue.

She feared he'd been hurt, or fallen ill. Or worse, his boat had hit the snags and sank, a swift current trapping him beneath the surface.

"Do we have time to dawdle at the window?"

Cora turned to see her mother crossing the small salon, patting her hand against her hair, then smoothing her hand down the front of her skirt. "I was just checking the temperature." Cora rapped her knuckle on the cool glass in the direction of the thermometer. A blessed coincidence.

"Checking the temperature? Or watching the river?"

Mama liked to think Cora was an open book. One she could read well.

"I'm fixing the display cases before going to the bakery. Can you open the top panes of the windows, let in the fresh air? When the Dunlaps arrive it will get warm in here. They are a large party."

"You know, staring out the window pining for him won't make him arrive any faster, Cora. Or make him a man of his word." Mama unlocked the window next to the door and pulled open the pane.

"You're being unfair. He is a man of his word."

"Well, when he can change it at will and convince you it's the truth, then I suppose you're right. Did you say something about the bakery order? I glanced in the pantry and only saw Odelia's cinnamon buns."

"Yes, after I set up the cases I'll head over to Haven's. Will you start the coffee and tea at five till?"

"I've been hosting this shop since before you were born. I know

when to start the coffee and tea. What I don't know is what to do with Odelia's buns. The woman can sew dry grass into a beautiful gown, but her baking leaves much to be desired. No wonder Lloyd never smiles."

Cora bit back her laugh. "Shh, Mama. She'll hear you. You can't deny they smell wonderful."

"They do, but I've told her to her face her sweet buns are like rocks." Mama moved to the bottom of the stairs. "Isn't that right, Odelia?"

"What's that, Esmé?"

"Your baking could break the strongest teeth."

"That's what you've been telling me for twenty years, but Lloyd don't seem no worse for the wear."

"Except he never smiles." Mama turned to Cora, whispering behind her hand. "'Cause he ain't got no teeth."

"Mama, stop." Cora muted the laugh in her chest. "You taught me better. Now act like a kind Christian."

"Telling the truth is being a kind Christian." Mama moved to the remaining windows, slipping down the top panes. In the grand salon the grandfather clock chimed the hour.

Eight o'clock. Cora must get herself together. At the display cases, she retrieved the head forms from the bottom drawers and adorned them with veils, curving the long tulle around the glass and splaying it across the polished hardwood. On another set of heads, she stuck ornate combs into the coarse, fake hair.

Next she set out long, silky white gloves with pearl buttons and arranged a pearl set on a blue velvet runner.

The shop had an important client this morning. A Miss Ruth Dunlap from Birmingham, a society bride who also happened to be a shop legacy. Her mother, Mrs. Laurel Schroder Dunlap, born and raised in Heart's Bend, bought her gown and trousseau from Aunt Jane in 1905. She would expect the royal treatment for her daughter. As well she should.

Jane Scott cut her bridal fashion chops in Milan and Paris in the late 1880s, bringing them back home to Tennessee when her mama, Granny Scott, died. Never in all their born days had the women of Heart's Bend—farmers' wives, mountain women, half-breeds, and former slaves—seen the likes of what Aunt Jane brought to town.

But they loved it. Aunt Jane's elegant style made the small-town shop a legend in middle Tennessee and northern Alabama, launching an unlikely small-town tradition and becoming Heart's Bend's darling.

"Cora, I know you don't like me nosing into your business," Mama said, returning to the small salon. "But—"

"No, I don't. I'm not a child." Cora examined the last display case. Everything seemed to be in order.

With a smile at Mama, she headed up to the mezzanine and her desk. She shuffled the papers, shoving aside a large box of mail. All work for tomorrow after Miss Dunlap returned to Alabama.

Mama followed her up.

"You are *not* a child. Which is precisely my point." Mama anchored her hands on the side of the desk and leaned over Cora. "You're thirty years old, darling. I'd been married, given birth to two children, and become president of the local Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association by the time I was twenty-eight."

"Cora, you want to choose a veil for Miss Dunlap?" Odelia popped out of the wide, long storage room. "I think gloves would go well with her gown too."

"I set out the veils and gloves on the display cases in the small salon. She can choose when she tries on the dress."

Aunt Jane skimmed on nothing when she hired Nashville architect Hugh Cathcart Thompson to design The Wedding Shop. It was the height of high class.

A place of business *and* a place of residence. Though Cora had yet to occupy the third floor for herself, Aunt Jane had lived atop her beloved business for thirty years.

"What about a leaving dress? Casual wear? We have the samples from Elsa Schiaparelli's knit collection."

"Yes, of course, let her choose. We can order what she wants. The knitwear is still popular."

Cora liked Schiaparelli's styles. As if she knew women were real people, with real work to do.

"Odelia, help me out here. Tell Cora not to close off her heart." Mama brushed her hand over Cora's dark hair. "That's all I'm saying. Walk out with another man. Don't just stand at the window waiting for the captain. You run a wedding shop, yet have never been the bride."

"Thank you, Mama. I hadn't noticed." Everyone in a town the size of Heart's Bend noticed the thirty-year-old wedding shop owner had never been a bride. "Weren't you the one who taught me to follow my heart?"

"Yes, but I sure didn't know it'd lead to a dead end." Mama started down the stairs. "I'll say no more. I don't want you upset when the Dunlaps arrive. Shall I go for the pastries? I have time before the coffee and tea."

"No, Mama. I said I'll go." She needed the escape, the fresh air, the walk to straighten out her thoughts, to dream of *him* for a moment without Mama invading.

In the four years she'd known and loved Rufus St. Claire, he'd never lied to her. Ever. He'd been delayed, hampered by shipping schedules, and hindered by the rule of the river, but he always kept his word, walking up First Avenue with his rogue smile, his arms laden with gifts, his kisses more sweet and passionate than the time before.

Then he'd press his silky lips against her ear. *One day you're going to marry me.*

Cora shivered, collapsing in her chair. She missed him so much she ached. She'd been fine all winter and spring, satisfied with his

letters, until this week, until she saw the back end of March but not the face of the man she loved.

Leaving the mezzanine, with its three oval, cherry-framed mirrors used to dress and style the brides, Cora felt nothing like the brides she loved and served. But oh, she longed to walk where they walked.

She'd dreamt of her day in this shop since she was a girl. Of descending the grand staircase to the musical ooh's and ahh's of Mama and Odelia, her groom's mother—if she was alive—her friends and family.

She'd sip sweet tea and nibble on a butter cookie with sugar sprinkles, full of joy and life over her coming day.

She fought feeling dull, old, and left behind. But *he'd* promised. And until she knew otherwise, she'd follow her heart, believing and waiting.

"Esmé, help me out here, will you?" Odelia said, motioning to the mannequin she styled with the dress Miss Dunlap chose during her first trip to the shop a month ago. Miss Ruth Dunlap had selected a dress from a Butterick pattern, and Odelia worked her magic.

Cora anticipated Ruth's first glance at her gown. It was always a thrill, the bride's face a sight to behold. *It's happening. I'm truly getting married.*

When the clock chimed eight thirty, Cora fluffed the sofa pillows in the grand salon and made sure the curtains were opened wide. The shop was ready.

"Miss Dunlap is going to be swept off her feet," Cora said, heading to the stairs. "Mama, Odelia, I'm off to get the pastries. Mama, remind me to put a record on the Victrola when the Dunlaps drive up." Aunt Jane always liked the brides to enter with music playing, and Cora wanted to carry on the tradition. Because, after all, wasn't love the truest song of all?

Collecting her hat and sweater, Cora ducked into the first-floor powder room to fix on her hat. Seeing her reflection, she paused.

Thirty. She was thirty years old. Not a girl. Nor even a young woman. But a grown woman, a working woman. Where had the years gone? Where had she spent her youth?

She had been in love with her high school sweetheart, Rand Davis, until the war. Then he returned home and married Elizabeth White.

Good luck to them. May they be blessed. Cora had been so grieved over the death of her big brother, Ernest Junior, at Somme that she never found the heart to pine for Rand.

She leaned closer to the mirror, gently touching the corner of her eyes where one thin line drew toward her cheek.

In the twenties it seemed everyone was marrying. The shop was busy. But the door just never opened for her.

Because, she liked to believe, she was waiting for Rufus. Oh, seeing him the first time . . . He walked into the shop bold as you please to personally deliver a shipment. "*This was left behind on the Wayfarer. Thought I'd deliver it myself.*"

His blue eyes locked on her and never let go. She yielded without hesitation to their beckoning. His voice nailed her feet to the floor, and for the life of her, she couldn't utter one intelligible word.

Aunt Jane had to step in, direct him where to drop the bolts of cloth, and apologize for Cora.

Now she angled away from her reflection, smoothing her hand over her bobbed hair. She wasn't a beautiful woman. Handsome, Mama liked to say. Tall and lean, with the figure of a teen girl rather than a mature woman of thirty. But she kept herself dressed in the latest fashions and managed to keep what little shape she possessed without the aid of cigarettes or dieting.

Stepping out of the shop, down the front walk, Cora headed toward the center of Heart's Bend. The small but affluent town in the shadow of Nashville was alive with morning commerce.

Shop owners swept their front walks, calling to one another. And she was one of them.

No one counted on Aunt Jane dying five years ago, at seventy, from a malaria outbreak the authorities claimed was contained. Robust Aunt Jane never saw it coming. No one did.

So Cora took over the reins of the shop. Proudly.

Down the avenue, the air twisted with the aroma of baking bread along with the sour odor of horse droppings. Rosie, the milk cart mare, swished her tail at the biting flies.

Cora crossed Blossom Street, heading along First Avenue, trying to take in the beauty of the day to break free of Mama's comments. She spotted Constable O'Shannon across the wide avenue, at the entrance of Gardenia Park, talking to a giant of a man with blue leggings tucked into black leather knee boots and a loose blouse billowing about his arms, the breeze shifting his wild golden hair about his face.

Rufus?

"Rufus!" She shouted his name through her cupped hands, forgetting decorum, forgetting the gossips with their ears to the ground. "Darling! You're here."

Running into the avenue, Cora avoided a passing car. The driver sounded his horn, but she didn't care. Her Rufus was here.

The breeze kicked up as she ran to greet him, her heart racing with love.

So her morning tingle of anticipation was correct. He *had* returned. Just like he said. "Rufus, darling! You're here."