

THE

*Wedding Dress*

CHRISTMAS

## *Endorsements for Rachel Hauck*

### THE WEDDING DRESS

“Hauck weaves an intricately beautiful story centering around a wedding dress passed down through the years. Taken at face value, the tale is superlative, but considering the spiritual message on the surface and between the lines, this novel is incredible. Readers will laugh, cry and treasure this book.”

—RT Book Reviews, TOP PICK!

### THE WEDDING CHAPEL

“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, TOP PICK!

### THE WEDDING SHOP

“*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 more than just a good read—it’s a book to be savored.”

—Karen White, New York Times Bestselling Author

### THE ROYAL WEDDING SERIES

“Rachel Hauck’s inspiring *Royal Wedding Series* is one for which you should reserve space on your keeper shelf.”

—USA TODAY

## THE MEMORY HOUSE

“Accomplished Hauck demonstrates genre finesse as she blends inspirational romance with a cinematic style of storytelling, bringing empathic characters to life as they cope with grief in marriage and faithfulness, parenthood and adoption, death and tragedy. Challenging decisions, the blessing of finding love again, and the solace of a beautiful Victorian home all come together in this spellbinding, lovely novel.”

—Booklist Review

## THE FIFTH AVENUE STORY SOCIETY

“You are cordially invited, dear reader, to step through the doors of an enchanting old library and embark on a remarkable journey with the *Fifth Avenue Story Society*. In this beautifully written novel, Rachel Hauck has created a cast of masterful characters whose stories seem shattered beyond hope. But Rachel doesn’t leave them in their brokenness. She sweeps up the pieces and begins sculpting together a new story. A better story for each of them. Their fireside society is a place where miracles still happen. A space full of wonder to savor and dream. If you dare to step inside these pages, into this mysterious story society, you’ll be warmly welcomed as a fellow sojourner and friend.”

—Melanie Dobson, bestselling author of  
*Catching the Wind* and *Memories of Glass*

“Rachel Hauck’s rich characterization and deft hand with plotting and setting had me enthralled until I turned the last page of this superb novel. *Fifth Avenue Story Society* is truly a masterpiece—a one-of-a-kind novel that lingers long after the last page is turned. This is one I’ll reread often, and it should garner Hauck much well-deserved acclaim. This should be on everyone’s shelf.”

—Colleen Coble, USA Today bestselling author of  
the *Lavender Tides* series and *Strands of Truth*

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THE  
*Wedding Dress*  
CHRISTMAS

RACHEL HAUCK



THE WEDDING DRESS CHRISTMAS

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To God from whom all blessings flow.



# *Chapter One*



JOJO

In the glow of the town's newly strung Christmas lights, all her fears seemed to fade. How could anxious thoughts survive in the gold and silver of the most wonderful time of the year?

Yet JoJo's fears resided deep. They rattled in her bones. Born from adversity and rooted in experience. She'd hoped to escape the family "curse," but it followed her. All the way to Dallas and back again.

Even so, on this glorious, cold afternoon before Thanksgiving, she sensed change lurking in the gentle breeze. A kind of change wrapped with hope and joy.

Surely she imagined things. But change in her life, her family's, especially around Christmas, meant pain, betrayal, trauma, and death.

Yet there was no place like her beloved hometown. And Hearts Bend, Tennessee, as of this moment, was dressed for the holidays and beaming with a million lights.

"Okay, boss lady, what do you think?"

JoJo turned to Lem McLeroy, the town's utility manager, as he collapsed his ladder.

"Magical. You and your crew worked hard, Lem. Thank you. And I'm not your boss lady. Just the volunteer coordinator."

"Are you sure?" Lem said with a bit of a laugh and sass. "Seems like you did a lot of *bossing* while me and the boys hung the wreaths, strung lights, and dangled the garland."

"I prefer the word *visionary*."

Lem's deep chuckle shook his round belly. "I guess that's why they pay you the big bucks."

Her turn to laugh. "Yes, city planning volunteers are among the rich and famous."

"Just you wait, Jo. Your ship's coming in."

"My ship? In the middle of Tennessee? Now that *would* be a miracle."

"Tis the season," he said, surveying the lamppost lights, their small glow lost in the last of the sunshine.

"Well, my season can just stay nice and calm. *Miracles* for me seem to come in the form of disaster." She avoided his expression by going over her checklist one more time. "My ship is a broken-down canoe with only one paddle and a hole in the bow."

"Shew-wee, girl, that's some positive thinking right there." Lem walked toward his truck, ladder in tow. "I feel inspired."

"I call 'em like I see 'em."

Or lived them. But since she'd returned home five years ago, the dark cloud seemed to have passed from the Castle family. And she was grateful.

So she gave back to her safe, cozy, charming hometown. She chaired the Spring Garden Planting Committee to improve the renovated and beautiful downtown. Coordinated the fundraiser for the new pavilion in the park. Used her public relations experience to spearhead the Bash the Trash campaign, which taught the younger generation the streets and parks were not the city dump. Painted sets and walls at the Kids Theater. Even

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directed the Christmas play last year and the one before.

She had no idea what she was doing but faked it well enough. People applauded at the end. Thank goodness Ami-Jean Pringal replaced her this year.

The best part about being back in Hearts Bend was being with her family. She worked with her cousin Haley Danner at The Wedding Shop. Not her original dream job of taking the public relations world by storm, but one she fell in love with more every day. The brides, the gowns, the whole wedding process charmed her.

And was probably the closest she'd ever get to being a bride. Romance had not gone well for her lately. If ever.

But she found solace and comfort tucked away in her old room, living with her parents and Uncle Ben, not missing her swanky Dallas loft with the swanky pool on the rooftop. Well, maybe sometimes. Until she remembered *that* night.

No, being home was best. Safe. With the shine off her wanderlust. Besides, Daddy and Mama needed her. Found comfort in her presence.

And, oh her sweet Daddy melted her heart the day she came home from a weekend of bridal shows with Haley to see he'd knocked a hole in her bedroom wall in order to annex the attic stairs.

"For your own sitting room," he said, clearing his throat beneath the soft tone of his voice.

Took him two years to finish, but JoJo had a private space. Not that she used it all that much.

What she loved most about home was being five years and six hundred miles from the nightmare. From that dreadful night.

Lem returned to where she stood staring toward the park, toward a fading yet real memory. "Jo, the boys and I are going to Ella's Diner for a late lunch. Care to join us? My treat." He approached her, squinting through a bright but thin ribbon of sunlight, zipping his jacket against the cold.

She glanced at her phone. It was going on four.

“Thanks but I need to get to the shop. We’re decorating tonight for Black Friday. And Haley is making the pies for our family Thanksgiving dinner and hasn’t even started. So she wants to finish early.”

But it was usually midnight before they had the shop dazzling with Christmas lights and cheer.

“Black Friday and a wedding shop. Somehow my man brain never put those two things together.” Lem scratched his head as if he really wanted to understand.

“You have a daughter who will probably get married one day, Lem. Trust me, she’ll be wanting the best dress for the best price.”

“She says she’s going to wear her granny’s, but by the looks of her closet, I’ll be steering her and my wife to your Black Friday sale when the day comes.”

“I hate to tell you, but she’s already been in.” JoJo started for the shop. “Charge your lunch to the city account.”

But Lem’s head was down, phone pressed to his ear. “Gracie, are they *that* serious?”

JoJo grinned at the snippet of conversation. Dads were always the last to know.

At the corner of Blossom and First Avenue, she paused as Old Man Exley slowly approached the stop sign in his ’70s era Cadillac, looked both ways twice and then slowly turned the corner.

He gave JoJo a single horn blast and she waved as she crossed toward the shop, which sat regal and beautiful in the light of the setting sun, the large pane windows soaked with a golden glow.

The three-story structure with an apartment featuring gables and turrets was built in 1890 by Haley and JoJo’s great-aunt Jane. Since then the shop had dressed almost seventy thousand brides in the last 130 years and she was proud to join the family tradition.

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Whatever made her think she had to “see the world?” Everything she needed, everyone she loved, was right here in Hearts Bend. Including the Wedding Shop, her favorite place in town.

Especially at Christmas. She and Haley decorated a large tree, trimmed the windows with twinkle lights and set caroling statues in the small front lawn.

“Lovely evening isn’t it, JoJo?”

She’d just made it to the other side of the street when a man wearing a brilliant purple shirt approached. His brown hair was in need of a comb but the spark in his blue eyes seemed to radiate all over his whole face.

“A bit cold, but yes, lovely.” She stepped backwards toward the shop. Did she know this man?

*Steady. You’re fine. It’s Hearts Bend. In the afternoon.*

“We’ll have a white Christmas,” he said.

“You sound sure of yourself.”

“Because I am.” His gaze never left her face. Never blinked or faltered.

“I’d best be going. Work and all.” She motioned toward the shop.

“Yes, I know.” He started in the opposite direction. “Don’t be afraid, Jo. Change is in the air, and it’s good.”

“Change? What change? And how do you know me?” She didn’t like being known by a stranger.

“Have a good evening, JoJo.”

She shivered as he tipped an imaginary hat and walked on, crossing the avenue toward the town center. For a flash second, a memory surfaced. She had seen him before. Yes, but the scene was dark and murky. Where was she? What was she doing? Then the moment faded before she could arrange the scattered pieces.

Hearts Bend boasted a population of 10,223. It was impossible to know everyone. But Jo was pretty sure she knew everyone who knew her. Ah, never mind. Probably an old friend of Daddy’s.

And now she was really late. Depositing her decorating checklist in the passenger seat of her semi-faithful '83 Datsun 280ZX parked beside the shop on Blossom Street, JoJo made her way to the shop, entering through the back porch door.

When she first started working with Haley, she spent a lot of summer evenings here, talking, laughing, eating takeout from Ella's or The Fry Hut with Haley and her husband Cole.

Then they remodeled their house. After all, he did own his own construction company. When they finished their house, they took on her parents' kitchen upgrade project. And the summer evenings on the porch faded away.

The creak of the wide old porch boards made JoJo crave the medicine of laughter. It'd been too long since she really, really laughed. With joy. With abandon.

Even on the summer nights with Haley and Cole, she was reserved. Still locked down.

"Hal, sorry I'm late," she called toward the grand salon as she ducked into the kitchenette, an old butler's pantry modernized while maintaining its old-world charm. She stored her handbag in the cabinet next to the wall.

"I'm upstairs." Haley's distant voice beckoned Jo past the boxes of Christmas decorations stacked by the fireplace in the grand salon toward the sprawling center staircase.

Taking the steps two at a time to the mezzanine, she found her cousin and best friend, who was pregnant with her first child, kicking a large box toward the storage room, better known as "the closet."

"Here, let me."

"It's the veils. Amber Miller's should be in this shipment. She called again to see if it had arrived." With a sigh, Haley sat in the mohair club chair in the corner under the eaves and the high portal window. "The baby is getting heavy. By the way, I've decided to just decorate the tree tonight. I'm too tired to do the whole kit and caboodle. Let's do it Saturday, after Black Friday.



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I've convinced myself the brides don't care about Christmas decorations, only the dresses."

"Wise move."

"Plus, I still have the pies to bake for tomorrow. I don't suppose Aunt Lila would cotton to store bought."

JoJo shot her a wry look. "Have you met my mother?"

"Right. I didn't think so."

"If we only decorate the tree tonight, when do you want to do the rest of the shop? Saturday won't be any better than Friday."

"Hush, let me live with my fantasy."

JoJo laughed as she ran the box cutter through the packing tape. "I'll take care of the tree and staircase tonight. You go on home."

"You know I don't deserve you." Haley shifted forward, her sleek blonde hair falling over her shoulders, her hand resting on her round middle, watching JoJo sort the veils. "Nor does this town. You do so much. How did the final downtown decorating go?"

"We added twinkle lights around the lampposts this afternoon. And the park trees." JoJo sighed. "The town is so beautiful. Please, God, let it snow this Christmas."

"The predictions are for a warm Christmas."

"This weird man in purple stopped me on my way here. Said we were going to have a white Christmas but I don't think he knew what he was talking about. Anyway, I ordered a pair of beautiful white ankle boots with cloth buttons. Keep your eyes out for them. They've not arrived yet." JoJo handed the first veil to Haley. "The Bray-Lindsay is gorgeous. Almost makes *me* want to get married."

"You mean you don't? Is there something you want to tell me? Besides buying a pair of *bridal* booties you never intend to wear."

"Oh, I'm going to wear them. Just not as a bride. No one will know the difference."

“Where are you going to wear them?”

“To the Christmas Eve service. Maybe the kids’ play, and under my costume for the Dickenson Carolers. Cole’s company Christmas party. If I’m invited again this year. There are plenty of places to wear wedding boots besides down the aisle.”

“Only you, Jo.”

“I’ll consider that a compliment. What do you think of the Melinda House?” JoJo raised another veil to the light falling through the portal. “The lace looks cheap.”

“She’s new to veils and might have cut some corners. Though she charges enough.” Haley shifted in the chair, pressing on the baby. “She’s sleeping on my bladder.”

“Take heart. Only three months to go.” JoJo unwrapped a floor-length, embroidered lace mantilla veil. “This is from Elnora. Gorgeous.”

“She always has beautiful veils. Amber will be pleased. Is it cathedral length? The first one came in as a chapel.”

“It’s long enough.”

“Try it on.”

Jo glanced at her cousin then down at her slacks and sweater. “I’m not dressed for it.”

“Please? I want to see the length and you’re her height. It should touch the floor and trail ten feet behind you.”

“I’d rather not, Haley. Trying on a veil when I’m not the bride feels...” Jo glanced in the mirror. “Feels weird. Especially when I don’t intend on getting married. I don’t even have a boyfriend. Besides, I’m not the bride type.”

Since her first day on the job, she’d determined to never tempt her heart. Never try on a gown or veil and glance in the mirror. Why dress up for a party she’d never attend?

Black Friday would deliver the bride types. The hopeful, the curious, the wannabes. Women trying on dresses when they didn’t have a ring or a promise.

JoJo didn’t judge their enthusiasm, but she’d not join them.

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“But you don’t mind wearing bridal booties?” Haley said.

“In my mind they’re just white ankle boots. And don’t mess with my logic. It’s precariously balanced.” JoJo examined the thick tulle where the edge was trimmed with flowers in French lace. Stunning.

She’d never confessed out loud but the idea of marriage terrified her. Well, not the institution but her poor judgment in men.

“Hey.” Haley reached out with her soft tone and gentle touch. “He’s gone.”

“Who? What are you talking about?” JoJo turned away from her cousin’s knowing gaze.

“You know who I’m talking about. He’s out of your life. We all make mistakes. Look at me with Dax. I had no idea he was married. After I left him, I came home to find Cole.”

“I’ve been home five years. I’m not sure there is someone in Hearts Bend for me.”

“Are you looking?”

Jo shook her head. “Were you looking?”

“Don’t mess with my logic. It’s precariously balanced.”

“I don’t trust my judgment.”

“That’s understandable, but you’re home, with us, not alone in a big city.” Haley pushed out of the chair and reached for the veil. “We’ll help you.”

“It takes a village to find JoJo Castle a husband?” Jo examined the veil as Haley spread it across the floor. “If Amber doesn’t want it, someone will. It’s beautiful.”

“I agree. Hey, remember how Tammy and I used to play brides in here? You always wanted to join us.”

“And you never let me.”

“The difference between twelve and nine is enormous. But now look, we’re the same age. And if I recall, we *did* let you play with us once. You were a bridesmaid.”

“I was supposed to be a bridesmaid with a newspaper veil, but

you demoted me to a guest sitting in a smelly, dusty, ripped chair.”

She’d pestered Haley and her childhood best friend Tammy to let her play, following them on her bike, until they finally agreed she could sneak into the shop with them.

“Do you think of her often?” Jo said. “You were going to own this place with her.”

“Not as much as I did. But when I was in the midst of the remodel or fighting to get inventory, I thought of her all the time. I’d have quit otherwise.”

Tammy was supposed to be alive and working with Haley’s business partner. But she lost a battle with cancer before her thirtieth birthday. Haley carried the torch of their dream into reality.

“I hope I’m a good replacement,” Jo said.

“More than. And you don’t have to try on the veil but I will officially promote you to a bridesmaid. You’re no longer a *guest*.”

Tenderness filled the pause between them.

“Oh, here, give it to me. I’ll try it on. In memory of Tammy.”

“Jo, no, you don’t—”

“Move before I change my mind.”

Before the veil made her yearn for a good man and a house with the yard and children to play in it.

Of course the world was full of good men. Daddy was a good man. So was Cole. Jo had resigned herself there just wasn’t one for her.

Jo turned her back to the mirror as Haley smoothed her wild brunette wisps toward her falling ponytail and fit the headband in her hair. Then she arranged the veil around Jo’s shoulders.

“Oh, Jo, I wish you’d turn around. Look in the mirror.”

“No thanks. I already broke my don’t-try-on rule.”

“You look so lovely.” Haley stepped back for a wider view, arms crossed, a smirk on her lips. “Standing there so stiff and uncomfortable.”

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“Remind me not to try on a veil for you in the future. Can I take it off now?”

“I’m just telling you how beautiful you are.” Haley fussed and perfected the veil around Jo’s shoulders. “You know, one day some *cowboy* is going to ride into town on his black steed and sweep you off your feet.”

“You’ve been reading romance novels again.”

“So what if I have? Please, one glance in the mirror.”

“Nothing doing. I know your tricks. I’ve seen you do it on dozens of brides.”

“What tricks?”

“The ones you learned from Charlotte Rose. Where you get a bride to see herself how her groom, her family, or shoot, all of heaven sees her and next thing you know, she’s weeping and her mother is writing a check.”

“Those are truths not tricks.”

Charlotte Rose, who owned Malone & Co., a bridal shop in Birmingham, helped Haley open her shop four years ago. Even gave her some sort of magical wedding dress to wear on her own special day.

The gown came with some sort of lore. A grand tale about four brides and a dress designed in 1912 by a black seamstress for a Birmingham society girl. Ever after the gown was rumored to fit every bride who tried it on. It fit the bride no matter what her size, and looked contemporary and in-style for the decade she lived in. Even more crazy, the material, the threads, the beading and adornments never broke, faded or wore out.

Haley had recounted the dress story to JoJo as she was emerging from the dark fog of Dallas so the specifics remained vague. Only a few poetic details lingered.

She’d been at the wedding but not present. Not open to love because fear still clung every part of her.

“I’m calling Amber. I’ll tell her the veil is stunning and perfect.”

“Unique. Stress how this veil is one of a kind.”

“Listen to you. And you called me tricky.”

“One thing I learned in the PR business. Base all your exaggerations in truth. This is the only Elnora cathedral length veil with French lace in Hearts Bend, right?”

“The shop will be in good hands when I have the baby.”

“Speaking of the baby. I was wondering if we could—” Jo paused when her phone jingled from her hip pocket.

The face of Uncle Ben, youngest brother to her daddy, and Haley’s mama, was on the screen. He was also the wildest child of the Castle kids. Ben had lived with Daddy and Mama since he’d burned all the wax off his candle wick about ten years ago.

“Jo!” His loud voice vibrated with panicked. “Better get here. Not going to sugarcoat it, there’s blood. I called 9-1-1.”

“What happened?” The light faded from the closet’s high portal window as a winter cloud passed over.

“Just get here.”

She didn’t have to be told again. JoJo bolted from the long, narrow space and sailed down the stairs. Tragedy. Right on time. At Christmas. She hated to believe in bad luck, but it seemed holiday disaster was the curse of the Reed Castle family.

“JoJo, what’s wrong? Where are you going?” Haley bounced down the grand staircase behind her. “You’re still wearing the veil.”

But she didn’t have time to answer. She grabbed her handbag from the pantry and banged out the porch door, fishing for her keys, praying the old red beater—so opposite the two-year-old Beamer she drove in Dallas—would start.

Her hands trembled as she turned the ignition. Slamming the door, she shifted into gear and shot toward First Avenue and the six-mile drive down River Road toward home.

As she turned the corner, she caught sight of Haley running from the shop’s front door, her hand holding her belly. “Jo! Veil...decorating...”

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Speeding past the town Christmas lights into the last sliver of the setting sun, Jo knew it'd been a mistake. To put on the veil. To hope. Even at Christmas, some people just couldn't find joy. And she was one.



### BUCK

After ten years on the road, he was eager for a season at home. Parking under the thick, naked limbs of the oaks in Gardenia Park, Buck paused at the First Avenue light on his way to Java Jane's, Hearts Bend's favorite coffee shop.

"Buck Mathews!"

Buck waved at the disembodied voice without looking. A fan. Or maybe a friend of his parents, or an old buddy of his from high school.

He glanced at the light, waiting for his turn to cross. Hearts Bend was small and charming, hosting not one but *two* traffic lights. And First Avenue, the main drag through town, seemed busier than he ever remembered.

The walk sign gave him the go-ahead, but his step off the curb was arrested by a coughing and clattering beat-up old Datsun gunning under the red light.

The driver, without much concern for her traffic violation, wore a long, white veil. Which was caught in the door and flapping in the wind.

A runaway bride. A country song in live action. A melody spun in his head as his gazed followed the sorry-looking machine through the second light.

However, he wasn't a singer-songwriter this month. He was a son, brother, friend.

With a glance at his watch, Buck hurried across the avenue. Stokes would be waiting.

On the other side, he spotted Haley, a treasured, longtime friend who was also the wife of his good buddy Cole.

“Haley, hey.”

“Buck.” She drew her gaze from the street and flashed him a bright, albeit surprised smile. “Wow. You’re in town.” Her tone carried a thousand unspoken words.

“For the holidays, yes.”

Okay, so he’d not been home much since he moved to Nashville after high school. But he had a dream to chase and sacrifices had to be made. Though lately, he wondered at the price he paid for his fame and fortune.

“One of your customers? The runaway bride?” he said.

“She wasn’t a runaway bride. That was JoJo wearing an expensive veil. She told me she didn’t want to try it on, but did I listen? No. Then Ben called, and she shot out of the shop like a fireball. And we have to put up the tree for Black Friday.” She closed her eyes and waved off her complaints. “Never mind me. Buck Mathews, what are you doing in town?”

“Taking a break. Visiting the folks.”

As it turned out, building a successful music career required every ounce of his heart, mind, body, and soul. His visits home were brief. Often full of distraction.

Yet a dozen years later with seven albums and nonstop touring he’d achieved the skyrocketing career he’d dreamed of since he was fourteen.

His effort and talent paid big dividends. Fame. Awards. Money. Lots of money.

Lately he noticed this hole, a kind of loneliness, filling the space between his heart and ribs. His personal life, with little time for his family and friends, was cold and barren. His one attempt at romance with a tech executive was short-lived and tumultuous.

But Haley? She was warm and open, kindness replacing the



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surprise in her eyes. The hole in his middle drank of her presence. “I thought you’d become too famous for Hearts Bend.”

“Never. You’re my people.”

“Then you must visit more often. Can you come into the shop?” She shivered in the cold. “I’ll fix you a cup of tea. Cole’s stopping by soon.”

“I’d love to but I’m meeting my manager at Java Jane’s.”

“Then come by the house later. How long are you in town? Just for Thanksgiving?”

“Thought I’d stick around until the New Year. Eat too much turkey and too many Christmas cookies.” He patted his lean belly then motioned to Haley’s swelling middle. “When’s he due?”

“She. Late March. We’re going to call her Emily.”

“Let me know where you’re registered. Be sure there are big, expensive items on it.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Do it.” From his pocket, his phone rang, and he knew without looking it was Stokes. He answered with, “I’m on my way.” Then turned to Haley. “I need to go, but I want to get with y’all for sure. I’ve been missing home.” More than home. He’d been missing community. Love. And every nuance about Hearts Bend that had formed him.

“I’ll have Cole call you.” Haley glanced in the direction where the faded red car had disappeared. “By the way, did you hear me say the *runaway* was JoJo Castle?”

“I heard you.” He started for Java Jane’s before Stokes could call again.

“She’s not engaged or anything,” Haley said. “She works at the shop.”

“Not really my business, Hal.”

“Just thought you’d want to know.”

“Get inside. It’s too cold to stand here without a coat.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

He laughed the one block to Jane’s. Did he know JoJo Castle

was in town? Last he heard she landed a big time PR job in Dallas? Worked for a swanky PR firm? No, wait, Mom did tell him she'd come home. But that was a few years ago. She stayed? As much as she loved Hearts Bend, she'd always wanted to see the world.

"Buck, where you been?" Stokes Stubbins met him with a scowl. "You make me drive all the way down here only to make me wait."

"I ran into an old friend." He made his way to the counter. "Once you taste Jane's coffee you'll be glad you came."

Stokes ordered a large Black Java from a cheery barista who was trying hard not to make a fuss over Buck. It was an unwritten Hearts Bend rule that Buck Mathews was just an ordinary dude if he was in town. When he was in town. Which was rare.

Since his career hit the tipping point he worked harder, toured more and prayed to God he'd not be a has-been before he turned forty.

On those rare occasions home at his parents' place on Ox Bottom Parkway, he slept and ate. Mom's country cooking refreshed his soul. He'd binge watched movies, played video games, and talked to Dad about the business.

When the barista handed him his herbal tea—caffeine was bad for the throat—he winked at her and pulled two tickets to his Grand Ole Opry show from his inside coat pocket.

"See you there."

"Really? No, you're joking. Really?" She muffled a squeal as she ran around to give him a hug and beg for a selfie.

Buck happily complied. His relationship with his fans was the biggest reason for his success.

He found Stokes at a secluded table in a dark corner, and after waving to his balding and retired high school math teacher, Buck joined him.

"So, what's this about?" Stokes fidgeted as if he planned to make a run for it any moment.

"My mom has cancer."

## THE WEDDING DRESS CHRISTMAS

Stokes lowered his cup without taking a drink. “Since when? I never heard. Just saw your dad last week. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now.” Because he didn’t know until now. The family had kept him out of the loop.

Buck’s mom wasn’t just *any* mom, she was Lana Mathews, award-winning, acclaimed Nashville songwriter who’d penned ten number-one singles in the last twenty-five years. His dad, Owen, was a record label executive.

“Buck, I’m here. What do you need me to do? Move your media schedule? Most of those interviews can wait until the new year.” Stokes sipped his coffee, grimaced, then took out his phone. “What’s your mom’s favorite store? I want to send her something.”

“Stokes, it’s more than interviews. I want to cancel my December shows. Mom loves flowers. Especially Christmas arrangements.”

Stokes’s resolute expression turned to stone. “Cancel? Your shows?”

“Yes.” One nod to emphasize his point. “Turns out this is Mom’s second bout. They didn’t tell me the first time. But Sadie called this go-round. She thought I deserved to know.”

“Well, it was the sisterly thing to do. Buck, I’m sorry about Lana, but you can’t be serious about canceling. The show *must* go on. Remember when I tried to cancel the year you broke your leg skiing? You refused. Never missed one performance. Same thing when you had the flu with a 101 fever. These Christmas shows are in small, intimate venues with very rich, influential people. You can’t cancel.”

“I don’t care. My mom has cancer, Stokes. I want to spend time with her. I don’t even know the full diagnosis or what happened the first time. They didn’t tell me because I was on the road. Over a decade on the road building a career and I guess I got kicked out of my own family.” Buck sat back and stared at the Christmas tableau beyond the window. When had the family decided he wasn’t one of them? That they could go through a

crisis without him? “They thought I needed to be out there, entertaining and winning over fans. Becoming some *big* star. What does it all mean if I don’t have family? If my mother is in the cold, hard ground?”

“I’m sure they would’ve called if—”

“She was on her deathbed? When it’s too late?”

“You exaggerate. Buck, these shows are important. The label will not be happy. Don Bliss will be livid.”

“Forget the label. Forget the booking agent. For the past twelve years I’ve done everything asked of me and more. Now it’s my turn to make a request.”

He had debated cancelling the shows. There were only five and he’d be gone four days tops. But the moment he crossed Hearts Bend city line, he yearned for a season of rest. To go to ground. To his roots. Be with the town and people who formed his youth.

And if JoJo was back...

Stokes tapped notes on his phone, mumbling. “I guess I could say it’s a family emergency.”

“No.” Buck clapped his hand on Stokes’s arm. “That will raise suspicion and I want to protect Mom’s privacy. Tell them I need a rest. I did a hundred shows this year while recording a new album. I need a break before it starts all over again.”

“You know the buzz on the album is trending. Song Tunes increased the marketing and promotion budget.” Stokes smiled. He’d been in the biz for over thirty years, but Buck was his biggest and best artist. “Greg Leininger is already talking new contract.”

“Then give me grace to step back this month. And maybe the next. Regroup.” Too much time in the glow of the superstar limelight had dried up the core of the humble country boy who charmed the world.

Just the idea of staying close to home and lovely Hearts Bend for the holidays eased the tension in his neck. Released the knot of work-work-work from his gut.

## THE WEDDING DRESS CHRISTMAS

He missed Dad, Mom, Nana and Paps, Sadie, her husband Eric, and their kids. He missed the town square and all the traditions that made this place one for the books.

Hearts Bend was the best-kept secret in the South. In fact, Buck scrubbed the name from all his bios. Never mentioned it in interviews. He was born and raised “outside of Nashville.”

“Are you sure?” Stokes sighed over his coffee. “If so, I’ll do my best tap dancing. It is Christmas after all. But come January, Buck, you have to start promoting the new single. It drops in March.”

Buck swallowed his *We’ll see* with a sip of tea. On the short walk from The Wedding Shop to Java Jane’s, the desire for a break had rooted even deeper. He didn’t want to hit the New Year on the run. A couple of months off sounded darn good.

Time with Mom in her music room made him exhale. He needed to be around her, her softness, her talent. Hear her words of wisdom, make memories. Ask her how to let go of all the entrapments of fame to *find a life*. Find love.

“Get Aubrey James or Tracie Blue to cover the December dates,” Buck said. “They’re bigger names than I am.”

Aubrey had been around for almost twenty years, and Tracie charted back-to-back number ones last year.

Stokes gave him a long look. “Humble looks good on you.”

“My old paps says, ‘Humility is a magnet for God’s affection,’” Buck said. “Don’t know why I said that. Haven’t thought of it in a long time.”

But he needed some Divine affection on his tattered soul.

“Has a ring of truth, I suppose.” Stokes made a face as he finished his coffee.

Humility had been the seed of Buck’s beginning. Despite being born with Music Row’s silver spoon in his mouth, he’d paid his dues like every other artist. Didn’t matter he grew up with country legends at his family’s dinner table. He had to wait his turn at open mike nights at the Bluebird, gigging whenever and wherever he could.

Mom taught him to write songs and Dad schooled him on the business side of music, but neither one used their influence to give him an inside track.

“So your mom,” Stokes said. “Is she dying?”

“I don’t think so. She has spots on her lungs. They thought they got them before. Ironic isn’t it? Never smoked a day in her life.”

“Lana’s a fighter.” Stokes leaned toward Buck. “I’ll support you canceling shows but it has to stop here. Hard work and humility got you this far. It’ll take you the rest of the way. But the moment you look and act like you’re believing your own press, it’s over.”

“I know. I’m sorry about this. I like these small venues. They’ve been good to me. But I need to be here.” For himself as much as Mom. “And I doubt I’ll be missed. Private parties with very rich people who drink too much and beg me to sing ‘Free Bird’ in the middle of my first set is not exactly my fan base.” He leaned toward Stokes and lowered his voice. “I’m thirty years old and my memories of home end when I was eighteen. The rest is a blur of tour buses, recording studios, writing sessions, and award shows.”

“Some would call that living the dream.”

“What happens when you wake up and find you’re living it all alone?” Buck pushed back from the table. “Thanks for seeing to this.”

“What about the Opry?” Stokes stood and tossed his coffee cup in the trash. “It’s next week. Close to home.”

“I’ll play the Opry. I can drive up on next Friday, rehearse, do the show on Saturday, and be home that night.”

“Home as in here? You’re not even staying at your place in Nashville?”

“Home is Hearts Bend for the next month.” Buck moved toward the door. “There’s some people I want to get reacquainted with.”

## THE WEDDING DRESS CHRISTMAS

A tall brunette with vibrant green eyes to start.

Despite the cold, Buck drove to his parents' place with his window down. The chill, scented with a hint of snow and a wood fire, cleared his head. Unclogged his emotions. Unlocked memories.

Turning down his parents' trimmed and clipped driveway, his mind's eye envisioned JoJo speeding down First Avenue with her veil slapping in the wind. And he laughed. That move was so JoJo.

And one of the reasons he loved her.