



A Novel

Restless
in
Carolina

Tamara Leigh

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

RESTLESS IN CAROLINA

PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN: 978-1-60142-168-5

ISBN: 978-1-60142-361-0 (electronic)

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Cover art by [**to come**]

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200 Colorado Springs, CO 80920 www.alivecommunications.com

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[**to come**]

Printed in the United States of America

2011—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*I dedicate this fourteenth book to my readers,
especially those who have supported me since my first book,
Warrior Bride, was published in 1994 and who stayed with me
through the transition from the secular to the inspirational market.*

*Thank you for believing in me and allowing me to weave
my faith journey through the characters who tumble
around in my head whispering, “Me next.”*

*It has been an amazing eighteen years.
I couldn't have experienced them as fully without you.*



*Your presence is eagerly anticipated
at the wedding of
Ms. Trinity Templeton to Mr. Bart Pickwick
on Saturday, July 24, 10:00 a.m.
at the Pickwick Mansion
1001 Pickwick Pike
Pickwick, North Carolina
Reception to immediately follow
Regrets Only*



Deep breath. "...and they lived..."

I can do this. It's not as if I didn't sense it coming. After all, I can smell an *H.E.A.* (Happily Ever After) a mile away—or, in this case, twenty-four pages glued between cardboard covers that feature the requisite princess surrounded by cute woodland creatures. And there are the words, right where I knew the cliché of an author would slap them, on the last page in the same font as those preceding them. Deceptively nondescript. Recklessly hopeful. Heartbreakingly false.

"Aunt Bridge," Birdie chirps, "finish it."

I look up from the once-upon-a-time crisp page that has been softened, creased, and stained by the obsessive readings in which her mother indulges her.

Eyes wide, cheeks flushed, my niece nods. “Say the magic words.”

Magic?

More nodding, and is she quivering? Oh no, I refuse to be a party to this. I smile big, say, “The end,” and close the book. “So, how about another piece of weddin’ cake?”

“No!” She jumps off the footstool she earlier dubbed her “princess throne,” snatches the book from my hand, and opens it to the back. “Wight here!”

I almost correct her initial *r*-turned-*w* but according to my sister, it’s developmental and the sound is coming in fine on its own, just as her other *r*’s did.

Birdie jabs the *H*, *E*, and *A*. “It’s not the end until you say the magic words.”

And I thought this the lesser of two evils—entertaining my niece and nephew as opposed to standing around at the reception as the bride and groom are toasted by all the happy couples, among them, cousin Piper, soon to be wed to my friend Axel, and cousin Maggie, maybe soon to be engaged to her sculptor man, what’s-his-name.

“Yeah,” Birdie’s twin, Miles, calls from where he’s once more hanging upside down on the rolling ladder I’ve pulled him off twice. “You gotta say the magic words.”

Outrageous! Even my dirt-between-the-toes, scab-ridden, snot-on-the-sleeve nephew is buying into the fantasy.

I spring from the armchair, cross the library, and unhook his ankles from the rung. “You keep doin’ that and you’ll bust your head wide open.” I set him on his feet. “And your mama will—” No, Bonnie won’t. “Well, she’ll be tempted to give you a whoopin’.”

Face bright with upside-down color, he glowers.

I'd glower back if I weren't so grateful for the distraction he provided. "All right, then." I slap at the ridiculously stiff skirt of the dress Maggie loaned me for my brother's wedding. "Let's rejoin the party—"

"You don't wanna say it." Miles sets his little legs wide apart. "Do ya?"
So much for my distraction.

"You don't like Birdie's stories 'cause they have happy endings. And you don't."

I clench my toes in the painfully snug high heels on loan from Piper.

"Yep." Miles punches his fists to his hips. "Even Mama says so."

My own sister? I shake my head, causing the blond dreads Maggie pulled away from my face with a headband to sweep my back. "That's not true."

"Then say it wight now!" Birdie demands.

I peer over my shoulder at where she stands like an angry tin soldier, an arm outthrust, the book extended.

"Admit it," Miles singsongs.

I snap around and catch my breath at the superior, knowing look on his *five*-year-old face. He's his father's son, all right, a miniature Professor Claude de Feuilles, child development expert.

"You're not happy." The professor in training, who looks anything but with his spiked hair, nods.

I know better than to bristle with two cranky, nap-deprived children, but that's what I'm doing. Feeling as if I'm watching myself from the other side of the room, I cross my arms over my chest. "I'll admit no such thing."

"That's 'cause you're afraid. Mama said so." Miles peers past me. "Didn't she, Birdie?"

Why is Bonnie discussing my personal life with her barely-out-of-diapers kids?

“Uh-huh. She said so.”

Miles’s smile is smug. “On the drive here, Mama told Daddy this day would be hard on you. That you wouldn’t be happy for Uncle Bart ’cause you’re not happy.”

Not true! Not that I’m thrilled with our brother’s choice of bride, but...come on! *Trinity Templeton*? Nice enough, but she isn’t operating on a full charge, which wouldn’t be so bad if Bart made up for the difference. Far from it, his past history with illegal stimulants having stripped him of a few billion brain cells.

“She said your heart is—Miles scrunches his nose, as if assailed by a terrible odor—“constipated.”

What?!

“That you need an M & M, and I don’t think she meant the chocolate kind you eat. Probably one of those—”

“I am *not* constipated.” *Pull back. Nice and easy.* I try to heed my inner voice but find myself leaning down and saying, “I’m realistic.”

Birdie stomps the hardwood floor. “Say the magic words!”

“Nope.” Miles shakes his head. “Constipated.”

I shift my cramped jaw. “Re-al-is-tic.”

“Con-sti-pa-ted.”

Pull back, I tell you! He’s five years old. “Just because I don’t believe in fooling a naive little girl into thinkin’ a prince is waiting for her at the other end of childhood and will save her from a fate worse than death and take her to his castle and they’ll live...” I flap a hand. “...you know, doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with me.”

Isn't there? "It means I know better. There may be a prince, and he may have a castle, and they may be happy, but don't count on it lasting. Oh no. He'll get bored or caught up in work or start cheatin'—you know, decide to put that glass slipper on some other damsel's foot or kiss another sleeping beauty—or he'll just up and die like Easton—" *No, nothing at all wrong with you, Bridget Pickwick Buchanan, whose ugly widow's weeds are showing.*

"See!" Miles wags a finger.

Unfortunately, I do. And as I straighten, I hear snuffles.

"Now you done it!" Miles hustles past me. "Got Birdie upset."

Sure enough, she's staring at me with flooded eyes. "The prince dies? He dies and leaves the princess all alone?" The book falls from her hand, its meeting with the floor echoing around the library. Then she squeaks out a sob.

"No!" I spring forward, grimacing at the raspy sound the skirt makes as I attempt to reach Birdie before Miles.

He gets there first and puts an arm around her. A meltable moment, my mother would call it. *After* she gave me a dressing down. And I deserve one. My niece may be on the spoiled side and she may work my nerves, but I love her—even like her when that sweet streak of hers comes through.

"It's okay, Birdie," Miles soothes. "The prince doesn't die."

Yes, he does, but what possessed me to say so? And what if I've scarred her for life?

Miles pats her head onto his shoulder. "Aunt Bridge is just"—he gives me the evil eye—"constipated."

"Yes, Birdie." I drop to my knees. "I am. My heart, that is. Constipated. I'm so sorry."

She turns her head and, upper lip shiny with the stuff running out of her nose, says in a hiccupy voice, “The prince doesn’t die?”

I grab the book from the floor and turn to the back. “Look. There they are, riding off into the sunset—er, to his castle. Happy. See, it says so.” I tap the *H*, *E*, and *A*.

She sniffs hard, causing that stuff to whoosh up her nose and my gag reflex to go on alert. “Weally happy, Aunt Bridge?”

“Yes.”

“Nope.” Barely-there eyebrows bunching, she lifts her head from Miles’s shoulder. “Not unless you say it.”

Oh dear Go— No, He and I are not talking. Well, He may be talking, but I’m not listening.

“I think you’d better.” Miles punctuates his advice with a sharp nod.

“Okay.” I look down at the page. “...and they lived...” *It’s just a fairy tale—highly inflated, overstated fiction for tikes.* “...they lived happily...ever...after.”

Birdie blinks in slow motion. “Happily...ever...after. That’s a nice way to say it, like you wanna hold on to it for always.”

Or unstick it from the roof of your mouth. “The end.” I close the book, and it’s all I can do not to toss it over my shoulder. “Here you go.”

She clasps it to her chest. “Happily...ever...after.”

Peachy. But I’ll take her dreamy murmuring over tears any day. Goodness, I can’t believe I made her cry. I stand and pat the skirt back down into its stand-alone shape. “More cake?”

“Yay!” Miles charges past me.

Next time— No, there won’t be a next time. I’m done with Little Golden Books.

Birdie hurries to catch up with her brother. “I want a piece of chocolate cake.”

I want to go home. And curl up in my hammock. And listen for the hot air to stir up a breeze and creak the leaves. And try not to think about my lost happily ever after. I set my shoulders and thoughts against memories and check my watch. I’ve been in this dress and these shoes for four hours. It’s time.

Outside the library, I pause at the grand staircase, step out of the heels, and try to flex my toes. They’re numb. I declare, if I have to have anything amputated, someone will hear about it. I retrieve the shoes and hobble into the hallway, through the kitchen, and outside into a bright day abuzz with wedding revelry.

No matter the season, the beauty of Uncle Obe’s garden always gets to me, especially now that it and the entire Pickwick estate will be passing out of Pickwick hands. For months I’ve about killed myself trying to find a way around the sale that will provide restitution to those our family has wronged as well as something of an inheritance to kin, but everywhere I turn, I find walls.

“Hey, babies,” my sister’s voice rings out, “did you have fun with Aunt Bridge?”

I halt and look toward the linen-covered table, where a large three-tiered wedding cake was the centerpiece earlier. Only one tier remains, and it’s had its share of knifings.

“Yeah, it was okay.” Miles holds out a plate for his mother to fill. “Until she made Birdie cry.”

My little sister’s gasp shoots around those standing in the twenty feet between us. “What happened?”

“Aunt Bridge didn’t want to finish the book. Did she, Birdie?”

Hugging it to her, she shakes her head.

“Well,” Bonnie slides a piece of cake onto each of their plates, “maybe she’s tired.”

“Nuh-uh.” Miles leans his face into the cake, takes a bite, and with crumbs spilling and frosting flecking, says, “She told us the prince gave the glass slipper to another girl and kissed sleeping beauty and then died.”

“Oh.” Bonnie’s lids flutter. “Huh.” Sunlight glints off the knife in her hand as she meets my gaze. “Well.” She forces a smile. “Hmm.” Back to her daughter. “We know that’s not true, don’t we, Roberta baby?”

Birdie bounces her head. “They lived happily...ever...after.”

Time to go. But as much as I long to run, I’m civilized, despite rumors to the contrary. I search out my brother where he stands with his bride, Trinity, my mother and father, and Uncle Obe in the gazebo built for the reception. A quick congratulations and I’m out of here.

“Bridget!”

I hurry past Maggie’s brother and his latest wife, around Uncle Obe’s attorney, between—

“Don’t think I don’t know you can hear me, Bridget.”

And so can everyone else. I swing around. “Bonbon!”

Bonnie rushes the last few feet. “I know we’re mostly family here, but I’ll do you the kindness of talking to you in private.” She points to the mansion.

I don’t care to accompany her, but neither do I want to throw a shadow over Bart’s special day. And going by the eyes turning our way, it’s fast approaching. “Of course.” I set off ahead of her, raise my eyebrows at Maggie when she turns a worried face to me, and give Piper a shrug.

In the kitchen, I cross to the pantry and raise my hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean to say what I did. I certainly didn’t mean to make Birdie cry.”

Bonnie steps near, causing my hackles to rise. I don’t like sharing my personal space, even with my own sister. My *hotheaded* sister. And then she goes and puts a finger in my face, and I have the urge to bite it. But I won’t. That would end badly.

“I trust you with my most precious possessions,” Mama Bear growls, “and what do you do? Try to steal my babies’ sweetness and innocence with that ‘life is dark’ outlook of yours.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just on edge, what with tryin’ to find a buyer for the estate who won’t turn it into a crowded development or a nasty theme park. And now Uncle Obe has listed it, and the real estate agents are swarmin’. It’s too much, Bonbon.”

She narrows her lids. “Don’t you Bonbon me!”

Though she’s five foot two, one hundred ten pounds to my five foot six, one hundred twenty pounds, I know she could take me down if I riled her enough to forget we’re grown women. But that’s not the reason I pull back on my emotions. I do it because I’m the one who lost control in front of her twins. I clear my throat. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you did!” The finger again. “You can’t stand for anybody to be happy if you aren’t happy.”

Ignore the finger. “That’s not true.” My throat strains from the effort to keep my voice level. “I—”

“Woe is me. My husband’s dead, and I refuse to get over it. Even though he’s *four* years gone!”

I suck breath. *Oh, God. I mean, no! I’m not talking to You. Of course,*

I could use a little self-control if You've got some lying around. But that doesn't mean I'm talking to You.

“Have mercy on us, Bridget, 'cause you know what? Grief is contagious. And I don't want my babies catchin' it.”

A chill goes through me. I never thought of grief as contagious, but I suppose it could be.

“So stop casting your widowhood like a net, catching others in it and saying stuff like that just because Easton is dead.”

Just because? I feel warm again. “Maybe...” My voice sounds all wet and boogered up with that stuff that boogered Birdie's nose. “Maybe I said it because my *constipated* heart needs an M & M.”

Bonnie startles so hard I find myself checking the whereabouts of my hands to be certain I didn't slap her. Not that I would, although she might slap me.

“Oh.” She steps back and gives a nervous laugh. “They told you I said that?”

Having regained some of my personal space, my shoulders unbind. “Out of the mouths of babes.”

“Uh, yeah. I didn't realize they were listenin'. They had their ear-phones in and were singing along with their iPods.” She frowns. “Or so I thought.”

I pull a hand down my face. It's a good thing I never took to makeup. “It's all right. I know you didn't mean it to hurt me.”

She raises her hands palms up. “I needed to talk it out with Claude. You know how I worry about you.”

Not really, but we live a ways from each other, averaging two visits a year when she and her family drive through on their way to elsewhere.

However, that pattern will be broken when my sister and her husband leave the twins with their grandparents for eight weeks while they're in the Ukraine to study the development of children awaiting adoption. My mother will have her hands full, but I'll help however I can.

"I really am sorry for what I said to Birdie and Miles. It won't happen again."

Once more, Bonnie invades my space, and this time I'm the one who startles when she lays a hand on my cheek. "Oh, Bridget, how are you going to keep that promise when you're still wrapped up in all those widow's weeds?"

Don't pull back. It's your sister, not a "widow sniffer" trying to get a hook into the lonely little widow. Pressing my dry lips, I long for my Burt's Bees lip balm. "I've accepted my loss. It's just taking me longer than some to adjust. But I am adjustin'."

Her eyes snap to slits. "Really?"

"Yes."

"No, if you were adjusting, you wouldn't still be clinging to your wedding ring."

I catch my breath. "There's nothing wrong with wearing it."

"Yes, there is." She grabs my hand and lifts it before my face. "It's time. *Past* time. You have to let him go."

I do *not* like this. "I have. I accept he's gone—"

"No, not *gone*. That implies he can come back. He's dead. And you have to call it what it is and get on with your life. Not yours and Easton's life. *Your* life."

I pull my hand free. "I'm getting there."

"Well, at this rate, you'll be in your own grave before you arrive."

My own grave... I feel cold. At thirty-three, if I live to see my body stoop and shrivel, that will be a very long time. Like one big unending yawn.

Bonnie tilts her chin forward. "That makes me plain sad, so take off the ring."

Now? That's asking too much. "I will when—"

"Take it off."

"But—"

"You made my little girl cry!"

I did. And though I don't care to look too deeply into myself, here I am, still holding tight to my interrupted life with Easton.

"Give me your hand."

I don't want to, and yet I raise my arm.

With surprising gentleness, Bonnie cups my fingers in hers. "It's for the best. I promise."

I hold my breath, and she tugs. And tugs. Then wrenches.

"Ow!" I try to pull free, but she sets her jaw and lifts her foot, as if to brace it against me for leverage.

"Stop it!" As I push her away, the ring comes free.

"Got it!"

Staring at it between her thumb and forefinger, I feel the air go out of me. How long before my deflated self pools on the floor? It doesn't happen. I miss the constriction around my finger, and I may be a bit numb, but that's it. Am I in shock?

"You okay, Bridge?"

"I think so."

She presses the ring into my palm. "Put that in a good place where you won't be looking at it every day."

I close my fingers around it. How's that for a good place?

She smooths her blouse. "Now let's go outside so everyone will see I didn't yank out those ugly dreadlocks of yours."

"They aren't ugly."

"They aren't beautiful. Just"—she waves at my head—"more widow's weeds."

She's not the first to call them that, seeing as Easton had dreads and always wanted me to try them. Unfortunately, God didn't give him a chance to see how well I wear them. No, God had other plans for my man, and they didn't include me. If ever there was a reason not to talk to Him or His Son, there it is.

"Those are next," Bonnie says.

"What?"

"The dreads have to go."

I want to argue, but I don't have the energy. Besides, maybe she's right. Since that night on the mansion's roof months ago when a dread caught in the telescope and I had to cut it free, I've considered returning to my formerly undreaded locks that once fell soft and fluid down my back.

"Bridget?" She worries her bottom lip. "I know you have a business to run, but when Miles and Birdie come to stay in September, you will help Mama, won't you?"

"Of course."

Her gaze intensifies. "I mean really help—take them off her hands overnight and some weekends."

Overnight? Weekends? Visits to the park, nature walks, and occasional lunches out are what I had in mind. Though Maggie's daughter, Devyn, sometimes sleeps over, she's the only one I've allowed to do so since I lost Easton. And she either shares the bed in the guest room with me or

crashes on the couch. There's no way Birdie, Miles, and I will fit into the guest room's full-size bed.

"It's going to be a long eight weeks for"—Bonnie's voice cracks—"everyone."

I can't remember the last time I saw her so sorrowful. Was she ever? I have a sudden impulse to give her a hug, but she's not a hugger, and since Easton's death, I've related to this side of her.

"So?" She prompts.

She's not asking much. And it's not as if she even knows what she's asking. Or does she? Keeping Birdie and Miles overnight fits nicely with her demand that I remove my wedding ring. *Which is only a problem if you plan to live the rest of your life in mourning and persist in making little girls cry.*

"Bridget!"

Out of my mouth pops, "I'd be happy to keep them overnight."

Bonnie's body eases. "Thank you."

I can handle it—once I get used to my bare left hand. And it is six weeks before my niece and nephew return to Pickwick. Surely between now and then I can...well, reset my life.

"Eight weeks didn't seem long when we started planning the study a year ago, but now..." Bonnie sniffs, only to snort. "My period must be coming. We won't be gone that long, for goodness' sake! And this *is* our last opportunity to conduct a full-fledged study abroad before the children start school."

Is the study the reason Miles and Birdie aren't enrolled in school this year? The newly minted five-year-olds certainly seem bright enough to start kindergarten.

Bonnie points a finger at me. “No more tales of heroes dying.”

“I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Good. Let’s get back to the party.”

Over the next two hours, I stand on the sidelines, watching happily married couples as my finger silently mourns the loss of its constant companion. Time and again, I touch it through the dress’s crisscrossed top where I slipped the ring into my bra. I know it’s just a symbol of the love Easton and I shared, but on *my* wedding day, I’d believed I would wear it to the grave after years and years with the man I loved. I didn’t even come close. And as I watch Trinity with her Bart, Piper with her Axel, and Bonnie with her Claude, I force myself to put a name to what earlier made me retreat inside the big house.

Envy.

An ache opens at my center and radiates out to the ends. I want what they have—one another. All I have is “one.” My “another” is gone, and every time I think about opening my eyes to other men, I’m set upon by guilt and uncertainty. After all, it may have been four years, but Easton wasn’t a coffeepot that needs replacing every so often. He was my love. How could I ever have another? And yet...

My cousin Maggie puts her head on the shoulder of what’s-his-name. I frown. What *is* his name? Since it looks like he plans on being a major part of her life, I ought to make more of an effort to— Reece! That’s his name. Reece, who runs his fingers through her red curls, tilts her chin up, and kisses her.

My hand goes to my ring, but the feel of it does little to ease my longing for a shoulder on which to lay my head... a mouth to make mine flush... a heart to make mine jump...



She did not do that. Oh yes, she did—chucked her gum out the window, which landed on my windshield, after she crossed a double yellow line into the oncoming lane and flew past me, after she honked at my unavoidable deceleration up a particularly steep rise on Pickwick Pike. If that doesn't beat all, according to her magnetic door sign, she's a real estate agent.

Let it go, Bridget.

"I know," I mutter, doing my best to reduce the gum in the corner of my windshield to a blur, "but..." It's been one of those days, and so near a total loss I don't see how anything I do can make it much worse.

Bringing the gum back into focus, I put the pedal to the metal, causing Buchanan's Nursery truck to lurch and growl. Fortunately, with a bit of prodding and flattery—and now that I'm on the other side of the incline—I can always count on my trusty Ford to pick up speed. "You can do it. You're strong. And not bad lookin' either." Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Before long I'm riding the bumper of the sporty little Cadillac, honking and blinking my lights and motioning for the litterbug to pull over. But she pays me no mind, just keeps yakking at her passenger—probably a client, and it looks to be a man.

Time to take it to the next level. *Far better you get home to Reggie and let this day wash itself away.*

As the pike curves to the right, the sinking sunlight zings off the roof of the car ahead, nearly blinding me, but I flip my sunglasses on and I'm good to go. Gaining momentum, I swerve into the opposite lane that is empty as far as the eye can see and roar past the Caddy. I'm not rash, so I give the woman plenty of warning, gradually decelerating as I straddle the two lanes so she can't get around me on the narrow road. When I stop, she has no choice but to brake or mess up that shiny grille of hers.

I push open the moan-and-groan door, swing my legs out, and drop to the asphalt, only to remember I'm barefoot—and still wearing Maggie's dress that puffs up around me like an open umbrella. I whack it down as I approach the car.

When I'm twenty feet out, the driver's door swings open, and the woman says, "Gracious no, it's just one of those good ol' girls I told you about. I can handle her."

Oh yeah?

"Besides, I know how important it is we maintain your anonymity."

Obviously, someone full up on himself. As the asphalt heats my feet, almost making me wish for Piper's pointy shoes, I attempt to make out the man on the other side of the windshield. However, he's mostly in shadow.

The woman, jacked up on three-inch heels, steps from the car, closes the door with a swat, and saunters forward to meet me at her front fender. She cants her glossy head to the side, revealing a talkie thing in her ear. "What is your problem?"

Man, the asphalt is hot! I pull off my sunglasses, the better for her to read my eyes. "That would be the gum you tossed out the window a ways back. It's called litterin'. And it's illegal."

Her copper-colored lips part as she stares at me. “All this because of a little piece of gum?”

“That and your reckless driving.”

Shifting her gaze past me to my truck, she drawls, “Right, and there’s nothing at all reckless about parking in the middle of a two-way road, hmm?”

I open my mouth to tell her there’s good line of sight in both directions, that I’m not the one who crossed a double yellow line, and Pickwick Pike is rarely traveled since the new highway exit went in, but she does have something of a point. So I close my mouth and raise my eyebrows.

She plants her manicured hands on her hips. “Look, I have a very important client in the car, and people like you, putting on displays like this, make people like him think Pickwick is uncivilized and unfit to live in.”

“I’m okay with that.”

She looks me up and down. “Well, of course you are, darlin’.”

My imagination momentarily transports me out of my body, and I see myself as I appear before this professional woman and her client—barefoot, wearing a fancy dress a bit too long, a bit too wide, and way too stiff, no makeup, and dreads hanging down my back. And mustn’t forget the backdrop of my battered Ford. Oh, to be in a pair of jeans, not too long, not too wide, and soft as peach fuzz. And my Crocs. If I don’t get off this asphalt soon, I’m gonna be blistered.

The woman checks her watch. “I need to get back to Asheville.”

I shift my weight to my right foot to give my left a break. “Just as soon as you take care of the gum.”

With a chicken bob of her head, she says, “You expect me to go back and scrape it off the road?”

“You’re in luck. It’s stuck to my windshield.” I hitch a thumb over my shoulder.

She rolls her eyes. “Honestly!”

“I have all day.” I fold my arms over my chest.

She peers beyond me, as if to calculate the likelihood of squeezing past my truck without scraping the guardrail on one side and the chiseled-out mountain on the other. Of course, if she waits long enough, eventually a car will come down the pike and I’ll be forced to move out of the way.

She huffs. “Fine.”

As I start to follow her to my truck, I glance through the Caddy’s windshield and catch sight of reflective sunglasses. And a wedge of white teeth.

Yes, this is a peculiar situation, and I might find humor in it if my feet weren’t blistering, two five-year-olds hadn’t manipulated me into saying *H.E.A.*, and my wedding band wasn’t burning a hole in my bra.

I hurry after the woman. “You know, if your gum hadn’t landed there, it could have become a deathtrap for some critter that got it caught in its craw.”

“Uh-huh.” She reaches to my windshield only to snatch her hand back, whip around, and splay that same hand in my approaching face. “Oh. My. Word. Hold it!”

I do, ensuring her white-tipped fingernails don’t come within a foot of my face. “What?”

“I know you.”

I look closer at her. “No, you don’t.” Unless she knows *of* me, what with me being a scandalous Pickwick, more specifically, she of The Great

Crop Circle Hoax that gained worldwide attention years ago before I exposed my creation for what it was.

With a satisfied smile, she drops her hand. “You’re Bridget Pickwick—”

Buchanan.

“—tree huggin’, animal lovin’ prankster.”

“Your point?”

“Cotillion.”

Oh. That. “Yes, that was me.”

“And your skunk—was it Stripe?”

I’m surprised she knows his name. But then it was in the Asheville newspaper, along with the headline: “Pickwicks Raise a Stink at Cotillion.” More accurately, Bridget Pickwick, who foiled her mother’s attempts to transform her into a Southern lady by loosing her skunk on the ballroom.

I reconsider my once-fellow debutante—her wide mouth, narrow nose, and heavily lashed eyes. “I suppose you were there.”

“I was. Sprained my big toe and tore my new dress in the stampede.”

“Sorry about that. He was deskunked, you know.”

“Found that out after the fact.” She narrows her lids. “You haven’t changed much, have you?”

Not a compliment. “Thankfully, no.” I point at the windshield. “Do you mind?”

She gives a throaty laugh. “If you ask me, we’re more than even.”

But— Oh, all right! “Even we are.”

She sidesteps. “Thank you for the lesson in environmental stewardship. I can’t tell you how it’s impacted me.” She walks past. “Oh, here’s a little something for you.”

When I turn, she's holding out a business card. "Wesley Trousdale, premier real estate agent." Her smile turns sly. "I have a feelin' we'll meet again soon."

The Pickwick estate. That's probably why she's here all the way from Asheville. The day just gets heavier. "Not likely." Still, I take the card.

As she sways back to her car, I peel the gum from my windshield and climb into my truck. After wrapping the sticky offender in an old paper napkin, I press the accelerator with a foot destined for blisters and pull into the right lane. Not unexpectedly, Wesley Trousdale draws alongside. As she accelerates past, I glimpse the sunglassed face of her anonymous client.

"No, you are not getting your hands on my family's estate," I mouth, though he can't hear me. Though how in the world I'm going to stop him, I haven't the foggiest.

Ten minutes later, I halt at the end of my long driveway and lower my forehead to the steering wheel. What a day—my brother married to a female version of himself, that whole *H.E.A.* business, the argument with Bonnie, happy couples all around...

I tug a dread—a comfort, especially when I'm missing Easton—then dig my wedding ring out of my bra and stare at its out-of-place shape between my thumb and forefinger. How's Bonnie to know? I start to slide it on, but the pale circle at the base of my finger that contrasts with the tanned length above and below makes me hesitate. It's as if I'm wearing an invisible ring and, actually, I can still feel it there.

Goose bumps rising, I turn the simple band around, reading the words inscribed on the inside: You and me. Forever.

"About as make-believe as *H.E.A.*" However, once more I position

the ring to slide it on. *Don't do it. Bonnie's right. When you make little girls cry, it's time to say good-bye. Time to stopper the big yawn between now and the grave and get on with your life. Your life, Bridget. Easton is dead. Dead.*

I try to say the four-letter word, but I can only mouth it. Yes, Easton is. Not just gone, as Bonnie pointed out. He's... Yes, he is.

In the next instant, anger stomps me up one side and down the other. What is my problem? "Easton is dead. D-E-A-D." I curl my fingers around the ring. "And I can say..."

A mental door behind which I haven't looked in a long while creaks open, and I see Easton on our wedding day. It's the first dance. A slow dance. He's so near I can feel the beat of his heart. "And they lived," he lowers his forehead to mine, "happily ever after."

I swallow hard. "No, they didn't." But I can say it. "Happily..." I draw a breath. "...ever after."

Now all I have to do is figure out how to live happily after ever after.