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# The Groom Came C.O.D.

**MOLLIE MOLAY**

HAPPILY  
WEDDED  
AFTER



Mollie Molay

**The Groom Came C.o.d.**

«HarperCollins»

## **Molay M.**

The Groom Came C.o.d. / M. Molay — «HarperCollins»,

The groom is always the last to know...Imagine confirmed bachelor Ben Howard's surprise when he opened the morning paper and discovered he was about to marry a total stranger! The explanation: bridal shop owner Melinda Carey had accidentally released an imaginary engagement announcement. The thing Ben didn't get: why she'd chosen him as her fake fiancée! Could life be any more embarrassing? Mortified, Melinda had secretly dreamed about marrying her high school crush. Now their "wedding" was the talk of the town, her loopy aunt Bertie was convinced canceling it would be bad luck—and most shocking of all!—Ben declared his intention to go through with the marriage. Happily Wedded After: Jump headlong into these unforgettable stories about saying "I Do!"

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## **What was Ben Howard, premier bachelor, doing pounding on her door?**

Melinda's heart was racing. She'd admired Ben in high school. He was a flawless package of sheer masculinity.

"What in the blazes do you call this?"

Her caller was shaking the morning newspaper under her nose.

Local Businessman To Marry Childhood Sweetheart.

Beneath the headline, Melinda caught a glimpse of her name coupled with Ben's. The words were too familiar to ignore. No wonder he was so angry. It was what she deserved for giving in to a wedding fantasy and choosing him for the groom.

She was going to faint. Before she could fall, Ben caught her. Even through her distress, she felt herself respond to his touch.

Melinda sagged in his arms. "I have no idea how that got in there!"

But she did. She did.

Dear Reader,

Come join us for another dream-fulfilling month of Harlequin American Romance! We're proud to have this chance to bring you our four special new stories.

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Find out this month, only from Harlequin American Romance!

Best wishes,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

*The Groom Came C.O.D.*

Mollie Molay



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For Harrison Ty Bauer.

Now there are eight. Welcome.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After working for a number of years as a logistics contract administrator in the aircraft industry, Mollie Molay turned to a career she found far more satisfying—writing romance novels. Mollie lives in Northridge, California, surrounded by her two daughters and eight grandchildren, many of whom find their way into her books. She enjoys hearing from her readers and welcomes comments. You can write to her at Harlequin Books, 300 East 42nd St., 6th Floor, New York, NY 10017.



## **Books by Mollie Molay**

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE

560—FROM DRIFTER TO DADDY

597—HER TWO HUSBANDS

616—MARRIAGE BY MISTAKE

638—LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

682—NANNY & THE BODYGUARD

703—OVERNIGHT WIFE

729—WANTED: DADDY

776—FATHER IN TRAINING

799—DADDY BY CHRISTMAS

839—THE GROOM CAME C.O.D

Miss Melinda Carey

and

Mr. Ben Howard

are pleased to invite you to their wedding on

Saturday, August 5

at 8 p.m.

at the Oak Tree Distillery, Ojai, California.

Proudly giving their niece and nephew

in marriage are

Miss Bertilda Blanchard

and

Mr. Joseph Howard.

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## Prologue

Melinda Carey skimmed the dismal financial data on her computer screen. There was no doubt about it—the bridal shop was slowly but surely sliding into a sea of red ink.

It was the second week in June—traditionally, the most popular time for weddings. A time when romantic hearts and minds were supposed to turn to thoughts of weddings, home, hearth and family. But what should have been the shop's busy season looked as if it were going to be the slowest month of the year.

August, the second most popular month, didn't look as if it were going to be an improvement. And no matter how difficult it was to face, the rest of the year looked alarmingly bare.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way," Melinda muttered as she changed screens to check future bookings. Not in the bridal business, anyway. Things had been different before local brides had decided to shop in nearby Santa Barbara.

The screen told the story; after years of comfortable income, Bertie's Bridal Shop and Bridal Referral Service hung precariously on the brink of bankruptcy.

Melinda gazed out the window at the small park across the street. Newly watered spring greenery sparkled under the bright morning sunshine. Red, purple and white petunias lined gravel paths. Rose bushes displayed all their glory.

She'd always loved the little walk-in park. She'd fantasized about getting married under the weeping willow tree that hung gracefully over the newly painted white gazebo. Fat chance. The way her life was headed, her dream didn't have a chance.

It hadn't been for the lack of a suitor, she thought sadly. She'd been engaged to the man she'd worked for in San Francisco, and they were about to set the wedding date. Luckily, she'd discovered Paul was self-centered and self-serving before it was too late.

Now there was her Aunt Bertie to consider. What man in his right mind would want to take on a thirty-something spinster and her fey aunt—Ojai's beloved town character?

She willed the figures on the monitor to change. Instead, they remained solidly in the red. Not even the bridal referral service she'd started a few months ago managed to turn red ink into black. With no ready answers to the financial problems facing her, her thoughts wandered.

She was thirty, almost thirty-one. Single, with no prospective groom in sight. Let alone a man she was attracted to. Her biological clock was ticking loudly. Loudly enough to keep her awake at night. Almost without deliberate thought, her fingers surfed the Net, creating a dream wedding of her own.

No groom? No problem. Her bridal referral library service had access to every possible item a bride could want. After all, this was a harmless fantasy, wasn't it?

Her fingers raced over the computer keys and clicked onto a dating service Web site. In seconds, she was looking at photographs of men available to "rent" for all occasions. Including that of a stand-in groom for wedding rehearsals. She gasped as she took a second look at a new entrant, tall, athletic, blue-eyed Ben Howard.

He was an older version of the boy she'd had a secret crush on in high school. The school's top athlete, Ben had been the handsome hero of every young girl's dream. Including hers.

Drawn to him in a way that still made her blush, she couldn't take her eyes off the screen. To her dismay, his eyes seemed to bore into hers with a message she found herself responding to. The faint smile that hovered at his lips sent heat rushing through her middle.

Her hormones raced as she recalled the single dance they'd shared at a high school Sadie Hawkins Day party years ago, when the girls chose their partners instead of waiting to be asked. At the time, he was the high school's star basketball player. She had been a silent, adoring fan.

Even today, she could feel his strong arms around her as he whirled her around the dance floor. She'd been lost in a dream world—until he'd planted a chaste kiss on her forehead and told her he'd see her around.

Twelve years later, here he was again. And although he was only a photograph on a screen, he was still the man of her choice. She studied his image wistfully.

She'd heard he'd gotten married and divorced while he was still in college. Maybe that was the reason there was something about the determined look in his eyes and the edge in his body language that told her he'd turned into a no-nonsense type, definitely not given to indulging in romantic dreams. For sure, he'd changed from the laughing young boy she remembered to the sober, socially prominent and wealthy distillery owner.

What was he doing on a dating Web site?

Still, there he was. Large as life—and for hire. Since this was only a fantasy, she chose him. No one would ever know.

The date of the ceremony? The sooner the better. With an eye on the calendar, she chose a date one month away.

The location? The small walk-in park, of course.

The wedding dress? No problem there, either. A simple three-quarter-length sheer silk slip-dress with pink and pale-green hand-embroidered flowers and a matching jacket from the bridal shop. A simple wreath of pink roses for her hair.

The minister? The Reverend Charles Good, a long-time friend of Aunt Bertie's.

Deep in her fantasy, she included a caterer to provide a picnic lunch of turkey sandwiches, fresh veggies, fruit and cookies.

Flowers? The local nursery to provide gardenia bushes.

Her excitement grew as she drafted and “sent” an announcement to the local newspaper.

The telephone rang. “Melinda!” a plaintive female voice moaned. “You’re never going to believe what’s happened! You’ve got to do something to help me!”

With her eyes on the monitor screen, Melinda asked absently, “What’s wrong, Sue Ellen? Your wedding is all taken care of. There can’t be anything left to worry about.”

“Frank is allergic to live flowers!”

Melinda’s fingers froze above the computer keys. “He can’t be! Not at a time like this! Your wedding is only two days away!”

“He is! He couldn’t breathe when I took him to the flower shop this morning to show him the flowers I ordered for the church! I thought he was going to faint! When I finally got him into the fresh air, he told me he’s allergic to all kinds of flowers!”

With Sue Ellen Fry’s wedding only two days away, Melinda knew she had to move fast. She improvised mentally. “Don’t worry. I’m sure I can locate enough silk flowers here and in Santa Barbara to decorate the church!”

“But my bridal bouquet! And the bridesmaids’ bouquets!” her caller wailed. “I can’t get married without flowers!”

“I’ll think of something for you and the bridesmaids. And for Frank to wear in his lapel. Don’t worry, Sue Ellen. I’ll take care of everything. Just make sure you and Frank are at the church on time.”

She hurriedly set her fantasy wedding aside to turn her attention to the problems confronting a real-life bride.

A quick trip out of town was clearly in order.

## Chapter One

The pounding on the front door was loud enough to wake Sleeping Beauty.

Still groggy after a weekend spent scrounging for every silk flower arrangement within a fifty-mile range of Ojai, Melinda stopped in mid-stride on her way to the kitchen. Thank goodness she was invisible to whomever was determined to break down the door. Maybe the caller would give up and go away if she didn't answer.

She was frazzled. She'd been coping with a wedding featuring a disappointed bride, an allergic groom and eight bridesmaids who couldn't seem to understand why they had to carry small white prayer books decorated with sprays of silk lilies of the valley.

Footing the extra cost for silk flowers hadn't helped. She had to figure out a way to return the live flowers so she wouldn't lose the slim profit Bertie's Bridal Shop would eventually realize on the wedding.

The pounding on the door escalated. So did her headache. Her eyes misted with pain. She couldn't take much more.

She glanced at her watch; it was barely eight o'clock—the shop downstairs wasn't scheduled to open for another hour. For that matter, she wasn't properly dressed for company. Considering the monster of a headache she was nursing, whomever was out there would have to wait until she had a cup of hot, ink-black coffee to clear her head.

The pounding became frantic. In the background she could hear a male voice—swearing? That tore it! The last thing she needed to cope with right now was an impatient salesman. Anyone who didn't have the sense to realize it was too early to do business with her was out of luck, and she intended to tell him so.

She tied her sleeveless white shirt in a knot at her waist. Made sure her favorite old denim cutoffs covered her bottom and threw open the door.

The next thing she knew, her caller was shaking the morning newspaper under her nose.

"What in the blazes do you call this?"

"I'm afraid there's been some mistake. I haven't reported a missing paper, but thank you anyway." She would have hollered back and given him a dose of his own medicine but someone was pounding on an iron anvil in her head. She started to close the door, but his foot was in the way.

"Of course not! I found your copy on your doorstep!" He thrust the open paper at her.

Ignoring the paper, she looked into eyes that seemed vaguely familiar. "Ben? Ben Howard?"

She gulped as she peered through her pain. The scar at the corner of the caller's lips was white, his eyes breathed fire. What was Ben Howard, the premier bachelor of Ojai, doing pounding on her door at eight o'clock in the morning? She closed her eyes and counted to ten. Maybe he would go away.

It didn't seem to help. Her heart was pounding too fast, and it wasn't from anger. She'd admired Ben years ago in high school and on the dating Web site, but her reaction to his electronic presence paled now that they were face-to-face again. He was a flawless package of sheer masculinity and the last man she expected to see on her doorstep.

"Who else did you think it would be after the wedding announcement I found in the paper?"

Melinda swallowed hard. An uneasy feeling swept over her. This was definitely not a social visit. She took a step backward and tried to hide between a wall of affronted dignity. "I don't know what you're talking about. There's obviously been some mistake."

"Oh, there's been a mistake all right, and it looks as if you made it!" He elbowed his way through the door. "I want to know the meaning behind this!"

She suppressed a moan of pain and took another step backward. "I'm sorry, but I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Like hell you don't!" He pointed an accusing finger at the offending article.

Melinda willed herself to remain calm. Maybe if she read the article he would leave. She reached for the paper and squinted at the offending article: Local Businessman To Marry Childhood Sweetheart.

Beneath the headline, she caught a glimpse of her name coupled with his. The words were too familiar to ignore. No wonder he was so angry. It was what she deserved for giving in to a wedding fantasy and choosing him for the groom.

The pounding in her head became stronger than ever. She closed her eyes and felt ready to faint from pain. Before she could fall, Ben caught her. Even through her distress, she felt herself respond to his scent of coffee and masculine anger.

Melinda sagged in his arms. She felt like a Raggedy Ann doll, but she matched him glare for glare. He didn't seem intimidated, so she handed him back the newspaper. "I have no idea how that got in there!" But, she did. She did.

"If you don't know who put this in the newspaper, who does?" He read the article out loud while she fought for a sensible answer.

"Melinda Carey, I guess that's you," he said with a cold glance, "a former local resident who recently returned to take up residence in our little community with her well-known aunt, Bertilda Blanchard, has announced her engagement and upcoming marriage to Benjamin Howard.

"Ms. Carey assists her aunt in managing Bertie's Bridal Shop and its Bridal Referral Service. Mr. Howard is a prominent vintner and owner of the Oak Tree Brandy Distillery." He stopped long enough to scowl.

"The Carey-Howard nuptials are scheduled for July 4th and will be celebrated outdoors in Sunlight Park on Main Street."

He lowered the paper and peered at Melinda.

"There's more of this garbage, and what I think of it doesn't bear repeating." He glared. "Why pick on me? I don't even know you!"

To her growing discomfiture, his gaze roved over her bare legs, worked its way up past her thighs to her bare midriff and to her flaming cheeks. He paused. "Or do I?"

Melinda fought a growing dismay and a faint sense of déjà vu. Childhood sweethearts? Ben Howard hadn't spoken to her in years, let alone qualified as a sweetheart. He'd never even held her in his arms—except for the one memorable high school dance they'd shared years ago. He probably didn't remember that, either.

They hadn't been close, not when they were in high school, and definitely not now. She tried to think of an alibi, but all she could think of was the wedding fantasy she'd been toying with on her computer. She couldn't possibly have put it into action, could she?

"Maybe it's just overzealous reporting?" she ventured into his scowl.

He didn't look as if he were buying the explanation, but the way he was eyeing her was another matter.

She tried to ignore him and went back to her mental drawing board.

A wedding at her favorite park across the street?

Her thoughts flew back to her computer musings. She couldn't have! Oh no! She'd done the unthinkable! She stared at Ben uneasily. What would he do if she confessed to fooling around with a wedding fantasy on her computer? That she'd found him on a dating Web site and had chosen him as her groom because she'd never quite gotten over her crush on him.

"So, do I know you?"

"Er...sort of." She smiled weakly. "I'm Melinda Carey. We were in high school together." He shook his head. "I was a junior, you were a senior."

She closed her eyes and steeled herself for another blast of anger. When none came, she slowly opened her eyes. To her chagrin, he was regarding her with a hint of masculine approval.

“You sure have a great imagination, Melinda Carey. I’ll give you that much.” He studied her meaningfully until goose bumps rose at the back of her neck. “How could I have managed to forget you?”

She found herself staring back at him. His eyes were the blue of memory, only deeper and wiser. He’d matured into a tall, athletic man; he was even more sexy as a grown-up than he’d been as a boy. He’d been the subject of her dreams when she was a teenager. Now that she was older and more experienced, he was still the man she dreamed of.

Her youthful crush on him had been a boy-girl thing, an infatuation with the high school’s star athlete. What she felt for him now was pure woman-man attraction.

As if that wasn’t enough, one moment he was fit to be tied over some stupid mistake she’d made, and the next moment he was sending her a male seal of approval!

“Probably because you were too busy with that blond cheerleader who took you to that Sadie Hawkins dance,” she retorted before she stopped to think. At the look that came into his eyes, she could have bitten her tongue. How could she have said something so inane? So stupid? If he didn’t already think something was wrong with her, he was sure to think so now.

His eyebrows rose, a smile curved at his lips. “Ah, Melinda Carey, I may have forgotten you,” he said suggestively, “but it looks as if you haven’t forgotten me.”

She felt herself flush.

“Is that why you put the wedding announcement in the paper? To get even with me ten years later? And why pick now?”

She took a deep breath and started over. “No, of course not. I don’t even know why I remembered the dance, or why I even mentioned it. I haven’t thought about the dance in years.”

He looked incredulous. “So why did you do it?”

“The truth is, I was fooling around planning a make-believe wedding on the Internet when I saw your photograph on a dating Web site. I figured if you were available for a date, you’d be available for an imaginary groom.”

If he’d looked angry before, he looked furious now.

“A dating Web site?” He reared back and frowned.

“No way! You’re putting me on!”

“It’s true, honest. I chose you for an imaginary wedding, not a real one. Why would I lie about it?”

“Beats me. You haven’t made any sense up until now, either. How could I get on a dating Web site without my knowledge?”

“I don’t know, but it was there,” she protested weakly. “All I did was choose you for my groom for my wedding fantasy when I saw your picture.”

“Why me?” he repeated. “You could have chosen anyone!”

Melinda thought rapidly. How could she tell him he’d been her idea of a perfect mate ever since she’d first laid eyes on him in high school? That she had even dreamed of him as a perfect husband and father? Or that when she’d seen his image, she jumped at the chance to make him her fantasy groom.

He looked angrier than ever. She hurried to put out the fire growing in his eyes. “I’m sorry about the announcement. I just realized I must have pressed the enter button on my computer by mistake after I was interrupted by a client. It doesn’t mean anything. After all, it was only a fantasy wedding.”

“A fantasy wedding? You’ve got to be kidding! Whose?”

“Mine,” she answered defiantly. “But I swear I didn’t intend to put it into action!”

“You didn’t mean to do it?” He waved the newspaper at her. “Hell! That’s a weak excuse considering the possible damage you’ve done.”

She continued to protest her innocence, all the time knowing she was as guilty as hell. “Well, it’s true. I told you it was unintentional! I pressed the enter button by mistake.”

His eyebrows rose until they met. She smiled weakly.

He examined her thoughtfully. Under his studied gaze, her hormones stood at attention. She self-consciously checked the buttons on her blouse.

“About this dating Web site thing,” he finally said. “How could you believe I would have agreed to anything so stupid?”

“Maybe not, but your picture’s there!”

“So, take it off!”

“Quit hollering,” she said, with a glance over her shoulder. “I keep telling you I didn’t put you on there! Why can’t you believe me?”

“Because you haven’t made any sense since I got here.” He lowered his voice, but his frustration showed. “In fact the whole story sounds as if you made it all up.”

“Kind of, but I’m in no condition to discuss this any further.” She gestured to the door. “I have a splitting headache, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone.”

“Alone to do what? Create more havoc on your computer?”

“No, I intend to have several cups of strong, ink-black coffee. Then I’m going to get dressed and try to go to work. If you insist, I’ll get back to you later.”

“You mean that’s not your working outfit?” His gaze roamed over her with blatant honesty. It was obvious he liked what he saw and was man enough to show it. She shook her head and fought off an urge to cover herself. It was her territory, wasn’t it?

“Too bad.” He glanced at the mahogany staircase. “You live here?”

Melinda nodded carefully. “With my Aunt Bertie. She owns the shop.” The dull ache in her head had turned into a crescendo of pain. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her holding her head to keep it from falling off. Things were bad enough.

His gaze swung back to her. He glanced at the newspaper and raked his fingers through his hair. “I hope you realize you may have blown it big time. How are you going to get us out of this mess.”

“There is no ‘us,’” she protested. “It was all a mistake. I’m sure everyone will understand when I tell them so. Now, please leave. I honestly can’t discuss this right now.”

He stepped closer, his now hard blue eyes bore into hers. “Well, I can. Why don’t you start at the beginning of this mess and give me the whole nine yards.”

“It’s a long story,” she said. “But honestly, I’m in no condition to discuss it. Not right now. I’ll get back to you.”

“You’re in no condition?” he barked. “You call it a mistake, but how do you think I feel? I’ve acquired a fiancée and a wedding date with a bride I don’t even know!”

“Please,” Melinda protested. She massaged her temples. “I have a terrible headache. You’ll have to wait. I’ll do something about it. I just don’t know what.”

Her heart skipped a beat when his gaze softened.

“Okay. I’m willing to compromise. Go ahead and have your coffee. But after you’re through I expect you to call the newspaper and retract the announcement. But I warn you, we’re not through talking.”

Melinda closed her eyes and swallowed hard. How could she carry on an intelligent conversation, let alone try to convince him she had all her marbles when she wasn’t all that sure herself? What she needed was to have time to figure out a way to undo the mess she was in.

So much for raging hormones.

Her head pounded. She tried to put one and one together. Before she’d left to rescue a client and her allergic fiancé, she must have pressed the enter button on her computer! Her fantasy wedding plans must have gone into action, including the newspaper announcement. She peered at Ben through a mist of pain. High school sweethearts, of all things! No wonder Ben looked ready to throttle her.

She was heartsick. How could she have gotten so careless as to chose Ojai’s most eligible bachelor for a fantasy husband—even by mistake?



Things got even worse when she envisioned the orders she must have placed and supplier's cancellation penalties to follow. And, horror of horrors, the public apology it looked as if she would have to make before Ben was satisfied.

"As long as you insist, come on in the kitchen," she said over her shoulder. "I'll put on the coffee, but I don't guarantee it won't taste like mud."

"Good! I could use something strong right now. You have no idea of the mess you've created or the attention I'm bound to get because of it."

Sure, Melinda thought to herself. The number of disappointed women who had set their hopes on winning Ben for a husband were bound to be legion. Considering that he hadn't been in a hurry to take any of them up on it, maybe he should have been grateful to her for getting him off the marriage market.

She was ready to tell him so when the sound of footsteps coming down the wooden stairs interrupted her. Her aunt Bertie tripped into the kitchen.

"Ah, there you are, Benjamin!" She cocked her head to one side and smiled at Ben and Melinda. "How sweet of you to come over early to see your fiancée."

Fiancée? Ben hesitated. The word made his hackles rise, but considering who he was talking to, he bit back the words he was tempted to say. "Not really, Ms. Bertie. I came as soon as I discovered your niece and I had a lot to discuss."

He felt himself blush like a teenager when she smiled and glanced at the newspaper crushed in his hand. "I must tell you how good I felt to see your pending wedding announcement in there! Frankly," she said with an admiring glance at Ben, "I didn't even know you and Melinda were seeing each other, let alone planning to wed. How romantic."

Ben nodded politely, but his mind cringed at the timing of Bertie's entrance. This was no time to finish reading Melinda the riot act. Nor was it a good time to insist she call the newspaper with a retraction. He'd have to wait until the excitement died down before he had a calm and serious heart-to-heart talk with her. Before he was through, she'd never pull a fool stunt like this again.

As for Bertie, she was a staunch supporter of the high school's athletic teams and the basketball team just as he was. She'd baked her famous chocolate-chip cookies for the high school's fund-raisers as far back as when he'd been a kid. He owed her respect.

Her niece—well, that was another story. He should have been angry with Melinda, but somehow he wasn't any longer.

He glanced over at Melinda. In spite of her headache, with her blond hair caught back in a ponytail and dressed in a brief outfit that revealed as much as it concealed, she looked as fresh and pretty as a spring sunrise.

"I'm so happy for you both," Bertie cried when he bit his lip. "Especially for you, Melinda. I know you tried to keep the wedding a secret, but the truth is that I've known about it since Friday." She beamed proudly.

"How could you have known? I didn't tell anyone!" Melinda's heart took a dive at the innocent smile that came over her aunt's face. The premonition she wasn't going to like her aunt's answer was as strong as the anvil beating in her head. "How did you find out?"

"Martha Ebbetts called me when she got the e-mail message." She beamed at Ben. "I'm sure you know that Martha is the society editor of the Ojai Newsday. Anyway, Martha called here Saturday. When she heard Melinda wasn't home she asked me for some filler for her article."

"Filler?" Melinda gasped.

"Article, Ms. Bertie?"

"Yes, of course. Martha wanted to add some human interest to the announcement. I was thrilled to be able to oblige."

"Aunt Bertie—you didn't! Tell me you didn't tell Martha anything!"

Ben glanced over at Melinda. The water in the coffeepot she held in her hand sloshed over the brim. Her face had turned white. Hell, she looked ready to faint again. He sprang into action, grabbed the glass coffeepot, put it on the sink and threw his arm around her shoulders. “Just what was it you told Martha Ebbetts, Ms. Bertie?”

Melinda’s aunt put a forefinger to her lips and appeared to think for a minute or two. By the time she was ready with an answer, he was a nervous wreck.

“Why, I just told Martha you’ve known each other since high school. I was right about that, wasn’t I?”

Ben swore under his breath. Bertie looked so innocent, it was hard for him to believe she could be serious. Considering she’d known him as a high school student, she must have known he and Melinda were practically strangers. “Maybe, but that’s a long way from being sweethearts, wouldn’t you say?”

Bertie smiled happily. “Martha wanted to spice up the story a wee bit. Calling you childhood sweethearts does tend to make the story more romantic, don’t you think?”

He heard Melinda groan softly. From long experience as a local businessman, he knew exactly what she was thinking. If anyone could pump up a story and turn it into a fairy tale, it was the legendary Martha Ebbetts, a contemporary of Bertie’s. But one thing was clear; whatever else Melinda had done, at least she hadn’t labeled them high school sweethearts.

“You have no idea just how the announcement is going to sound to some people, Ms. Bertie. Or what a few of them might think when they get around to reading it,” he added slowly. “But I suppose there’s not much I can do about it now.” He glanced at the stack of bridal magazines on the kitchen table and became aware of the soft music that was filtering through the intercom. Coupled with the bridal paraphernalia that filled the front rooms, the house was a potential hotbed for hopeless romantics. What else should he have expected from Melinda and her aunt?

Bottom line, he didn’t intend to be caught up in a fantasy wedding, harmless or not. Let alone one Melinda had apparently broadcast to the world on the Internet! When things calmed down, he intended to take care of whomever had put him on that damn Web site she talked about.

Melinda broke the silence. By nature, the last thing she wanted to do was to hurt anyone. Including Ben, who was after all an innocent party to her mistake. “It was all a mistake, Aunt Bertie. Ben and I aren’t engaged to be married, honest.”

Her aunt tittered. “A wedding is a poor thing to joke about, dear.”

“I’m not joking, Aunt Bertie.” Melinda glanced at Ben for support. This time he was listening, thank goodness.

“I’m afraid I was playing around with my wedding fantasy on the computer,” Melinda explained. “I planned the whole wedding, including the announcement to the newspaper.” She ran a trembling hand over her forehead. “I wasn’t aware I’d set my daydream into action until Ben showed up. But now that we know what happened, why don’t we all just forget it and go on? I’ll try to think of a way to correct my mistake.”

“I wish, but I’m afraid it’s not that easy. Not after the newspaper announcement,” Ben muttered as he envisioned the telephone calls waiting for him when he got home. Calls from his country club friends—hell, he could handle those by treating it all as a joke. The expected telephone call from his uncle Joseph, was something else. His uncle, his only remaining relative, had been after him to remarry. He’d have to think fast to keep from disappointing him one more time.

Ben paced the floor, his thoughts in turmoil. He couldn’t think of a damn suggestion to help Melinda straighten out the mess she’d made of things. But first things first. “You’ll have to call Martha Ebbetts and retract the story. The sooner the better. I’ll try to think of some kind of alibi as to why we’re calling off the wedding.”

“Absolutely not,” Bertie broke in briskly. “Any cancellation of the wedding would bring you both bad luck. No matter how it started, I believe this wedding was destined to happen or Melinda

wouldn't have pushed that whatever you call it button on the computer. As for what prompted her to do it, maybe a higher and wiser power than we was behind it."

"Aunt Bertie! You can't possibly be serious!"

"I certainly am," her aunt replied firmly. "One ought not to argue with destiny, you know," she warned, shaking her finger at Melinda. "Besides, I've always been fond of you, Benjamin. I think a marriage between you and Melinda is a splendid idea."

"Thank you, and I appreciate the way you feel. But this wedding business is something different." Ben cringed inside. He had mental visions of Aunt Bertie baking a mountain of chocolate-chip cookies for the wedding. As for her regaling wedding guests with stories of his days as the star of the high school's basketball team, there were a few escapades he would rather forget. It was time to set the record straight even if he was tempting fate.

"The truth is, I don't want to be any part of this." He shot Melinda a hard look that belied his earlier softening. "I have my reasons for asking you to call off this so-called wedding. The sooner the better."

"I wish I knew how," Melinda said over her aunt's protests. "No matter what I do, it's going to raise a lot of questions." She bit her bottom lip. "Maybe we ought to go through a pretend ceremony?"

"No way! As a matter of fact, I've never been so sure of anything in my life," he answered grimly. "The wedding is off!"

At the final note in Ben's voice, Melinda felt more miserable than ever. It wasn't only her headache that wouldn't allow her to think clearly, it was Ben. The star basketball player in high school had been happy-go-lucky, full of innocent fun and laughter. And very aware of his sexy impact on all the girls. To her dismay, he had the same impact now. "You're sure you want me to call everything off?"

"Damn sure."

Visions of more problems for the struggling bridal shop once her retraction was out tumbled through Melinda's mind. She'd be the laughing stock of Ojai.

She started to explain again then stopped. It was useless. There was no room for argument in Ben's unbending body language. She'd have to face the music and hope for the best.

"If you won't change your mind," she answered with as much dignity she could muster, "I'll try to take care of everything as soon as I get dressed."

"Good." Ignoring the unhappy look in Melinda's eyes and her aunt's reproachful gaze, Ben made his way past the two front rooms that had been turned into a bridal shop. The sight of cases full of wedding paraphernalia made him clench his teeth.

On his left, in what would have been a parlor in earlier days, were open boxes of white satin shoes and glass cases filled with matching beaded bags and other accessories. A glass case displayed bridal headpieces, strings of pearls and small gifts for the bride to give to her attendants.

The room to the right of him was lined with flowing white and pastel gowns for brides, bridesmaids and for mothers-of-the bride. A mannequin dressed as a bride with a flowing veil and a bridal bouquet in her arms seemed to gaze at him with a look of reproach as he passed.

His conscience stirred; for a moment he almost hesitated and turned back to the kitchen to explain himself. To explain why he was so against marriage. Until he recalled that the bottom line was that he couldn't afford to care or, real or not, he would find himself a married man.

As for Bertie and her niece, they might live in a dream world of happily-ever-after, but there was no happily-ever-after in the real world he'd lived in. His misbegotten marriage when he'd been a senior in college had proved that to him. He knew from bitter experience there were no happy endings when it came to marriage—real or otherwise. Not before and certainly not now.

## Chapter Two

Ben got as far as the entrance to the small park across the street from the bridal shop before he came to a stop.

He felt like a heel leaving Melinda and her aunt without a decent explanation for his attitude. Not that it would be easy to explain when he wasn't even sure he understood why himself. His earlier marriage had taken place years ago, but that was then and this was now.

Maybe he should have been grateful for the unexpected turn of events. Maybe now he could get rid of all the wannabe Mrs. Ben Howards.

Shaken out of his reverie by a flock of birds bursting from the full branches of the tree above him, he found himself gazing around him. It was the setting where, according to the wedding announcement, he was scheduled to marry Melinda next month.

The scent of jasmine filled the air. Rustic bridges crossed a babbling brook that slowly meandered through the small park. Carefully tended green hedges bordered the cobblestone walks that led to a white lattice gazebo in the park's center. A sundial, a birdbath and white iron benches were scattered throughout the small park. It was the last place in the world he expected to find himself. Let alone find himself taking Melinda seriously.

What had brought him here when he had more important things that needed his attention? And why was he suddenly so unsure of his decision to have the fantasy wedding called off?

He thought of Bertie's assurance that a higher power was at work. Was there some kind of magic aura in the early morning air that made her pronouncement sound reasonable? Was it the same aura that was urging him to go back and tell Melinda he was thinking of changing his mind? That he didn't want to call off the wedding? And why did it suddenly seem as if it were the right thing to do?

His thoughts stopped him cold. After all, he was an intelligent and successful businessman. Why was he even thinking of magic auras? Was he losing it?

Something turned him back to gaze at the vintage Victorian house across the street. Bertie's Bridal Shop had been housed there for more years than he could remember. He remembered his two older sisters had purchased their bridal gowns there years ago.

The brown wooden house with its faded white trim was showing its age. The porch railings sagged, but freshly starched lace curtains proudly graced the windows. It looked familiar, and yet there was something different about it today that caught his attention. He squinted in the sunshine to get a better look. The lettering on the sign in the window that advertised a Bridal Referral Service was fairly new. According to Bertie, the service was Melinda's attempt to keep the shop in the black. The idea may have sounded like a good idea, but there were screwups every day on the Internet.

The realization that she'd found him on an Internet dating service turned his blood to ice water. He should have looked into how it got there before he left. If word got out that Melinda had found him there, he was a dead man.

Before he could decide what prompted him to retrace his footsteps, he found himself back at the bridal shop's front door. He was about to knock when he remembered Melinda's headache. He rang the door-bell—gently, but firmly. He had a mission to accomplish.

The door opened a few inches. Bertie peered out. "I knew you'd be back as soon as you had a chance to think things over, Benjamin." She held the door open with a welcoming smile. "I baked your favorite cookies last night. Why don't you come in and join me in a fresh cup of coffee?"

Ben glanced over her shoulder at the empty entry. "Actually, Ms. Bertie, I came back to talk to Melinda."

"Of course," she agreed amicably. Come right in. Your bride is upstairs getting dressed. She'll be down in a minute."

His bride! It was the last thing he wanted to hear, at least until he had a chance to talk things over with Melinda. “Sorry, Ms. Bertie. This bride stuff is a little premature.”

She wagged her forefinger at him. “Now, Benjamin, you aren’t still having cold feet, are you?”

He shook his head. Why wasn’t he heading for the safety of his distillery where more rational heads prevailed instead of talking to a wall? “Not really. The fact is, I came back to apologize for losing my temper. It’s just that I was sure the wedding announcement would play havoc with my life. Even now,” he added with a wry shrug as he followed her into the kitchen, “I feel as if I’m caught in the middle of a hornet’s nest.”

She smiled and prattled on about reluctant bridegrooms.

Maybe it was the odor of freshly brewed coffee or the plate of chocolate-chip cookies waiting on the kitchen table, but Ben felt right at home. The bright-yellow and white chintz curtains at the windows were invitations to enjoy a few moments of relaxation. Under different circumstances, he would have been ready. Unfortunately, the soft music coming over the intercom designed to calm bridal nerves wasn’t exactly music to his ears.

The muscles at the back of his neck tensed as he dropped into a chair. Bertie’s contented smile did nothing to reassure him he was going to make a dent in her conviction that he was about to become a member of her family.

He watched her flutter about the kitchen setting out cups and saucers.

“How did you know I’d be back, Ms. Bertie?” he asked, interrupting a tale that had something to do about a bride having to wrestle a groom to the altar.

Her answering smile was benevolent. “You can’t run away from your destiny, dear.”

He didn’t have a ready reply to that remark.

What was there about the lady that made the illogical seem logical? What was there about her that had him ready to believe in her conviction that destiny had brought him here and not the wedding announcement in the newspaper. Or were they the same?

He was a pragmatic man who had spent his life creating his own destiny. He’d decided the only way to do something for the economy of Ojai was to do it himself. With Bertie happily prattling in the background, his thoughts swung to his Oak Tree Gourmet Distillery, an enterprise he’d started to bring industry to a town that survived largely on tourism. That decision hadn’t been decided by fate, as Bertie preached. No, sir. It had been a sure, pragmatic decision and, thank God, it had worked. Oak Tree brandies were known all over the world.

Still, considering he was a visitor in her kitchen, he couldn’t tell Bertie he was ready to believe she must have come from a different planet. Or that maybe she could be a guardian angel in disguise. For sure, she was an innocent who saw only the positive side of everything and everyone, including him.

“Ms. Bertie,” he began, “I don’t know if it was fate or destiny that turned me back here, but the fact is I owe you an apology.”

“Of course, dear,” she soothed. She moved the plate of plump cookies closer to him. “But, there’s no rush. Take your time.”

Ben swallowed a sigh. Once the newspaper announcement of his “wedding” hit the streets, there was a rush. He was running out of time.

“It’s just that you’ve always been so decent to me—and the whole town, for that matter. I shouldn’t have lost my cool. I wouldn’t want you to think I’ve gone off the deep end.”

“There’s nothing to explain, dear.” She patted his shoulder in passing on her way to turn off the coffee.

“I understand perfectly. You’re just having a bit of bridegroom nerves.”

Ben bit back a hollow laugh and tried again. “I don’t think you do understand, Ms. Bertie. I want you to know I don’t hold what Melinda did against her. I came back to tell her so. Everyone

makes mistakes, myself included. It's just that I don't understand why Melinda would pick me for her fantasy bridegroom. We hardly know each other."

Bertie smiled over her shoulder. "The answer is there for you to see, Benjamin. All you need to do is open your mind."

"Open my mind?" Ben reared back in his chair.

"That's the problem! I have opened it, and I've been in a state of shock ever since I read this morning's newspaper! Marry Melinda? I swear it was the first time I'd heard of it."

Her eyes took on a sparkle. "Perhaps so, but I believe you and Melinda were fated to meet again. It doesn't matter how. Although I have to admit the circumstances are a bit unusual."

"You got that right," Ben murmured under his breath.

"However, I'm very pleased at Melinda's choice," she went on. "I've always said you're a fine young man."

He would have laughed at her naïveté if she hadn't been so sincere. Bertie wouldn't have seen anything wrong with him even if the truth stared her in the face. "After all the crazy things I managed to get into in high school?"

"Boys are boys," she agreed. "It comes with the territory. But I'm sure what you did then was harmless and not at anyone's expense. Just look at you now! Ojai owes you a great deal for all you've done for us."

After Bertie's endorsement, he was beginning to think there was a halo blinking above his head. So why didn't he feel saintly?

In the interest of getting out of here before the morning was through, Ben agreed his intentions were good. It wasn't all that much, but every little bit helped. "Thank you. But to get back to why I'm here. I want to set the record straight. I got angry because I hate to be used. Or made to do something I hadn't planned for...like get married."

"If it will make you feel better, go right ahead and get it off your chest." She smiled and waited expectantly. "But I'm all for you and my niece getting married."

Ben took a deep breath. "I want to go on record that I haven't spoken to Melinda in years before now—certainly not since high school. The truth is, I don't remember her. So you see," he went on earnestly, "I couldn't have proposed."

Bertie set a steaming cup of coffee on the table in front of him. "Perhaps. What do you think prompted my niece to plan a marriage to you if fate hadn't prompted her to make her little mistake?"

Little mistake! It was a mistake large enough to change his life!

He munched on a chocolate-filled cookie and gazed around the kitchen. "Maybe, but considering we're knee-deep in bridal territory, I guess it could have been natural for Melinda to play out her dream wedding on the Internet. Maybe it was a harmless fantasy—but it sure backfired. I'm not even sure it'll help even if she does retract the story," he said morosely.

Bertie smiled. "You're thinking of changing your mind about asking Melinda to go ahead with the retraction, aren't you?"

"How did you know?" The way the woman was able to read him was beginning to make him nervous. Why hadn't he left well enough alone and kept on going when he'd left the first time? Why had he given in to the urge to come back to explain himself to someone who was convinced fate was about to make him her nephew?

"By the way, Ms. Bertie, a moment ago you said you expected me to come back. How did you know I would change my mind?"

She answered his question with a question of her own. "You have come back, haven't you?"

Ben took a deep swallow of coffee and studied his companion. Did the little park have some magical power that had worked on him? Had it been Bertie herself who had willed him back? He shook his head to clear it. No matter what she might believe about fate and destiny, he for one was living in a real world. He tried again.

"I have to tell you that when I found myself in the park across the street, the strangest feeling came over me, Ms. Bertie. Before I knew it, I found myself back at your door." He shook his head in wonder. "I had the strongest feeling someone was sending me a message."

She beamed at him as if he'd passed some kind of test. "I'm so pleased you feel this way. You see, when Melinda asked you to go along with the wedding, it was more than a matter of pride." She slid the plate of cookies closer to him. "Here, have another cookie."

"Thanks." Years of Bertie's famous cookies had turned him into a cookie addict. "Too bad you aren't running a bakery instead of a bridal shop, Ms. Bertie." He wouldn't have been in such a mess. Bertie might be oblivious to the implications of Melinda's wedding announcement, but it was his life they were talking about. "Go ahead."

"The bridal shop is on the verge of bankruptcy," Bertie began slowly, but he could see a hint of sadness in her eyes. Obviously, even guardian angels had human feelings. The knowledge that he might be adding to her unhappiness made him feel worse than ever.

"Melinda doesn't think I know the financial status of the shop, but I do," Bertie went on. "I couldn't let on that I knew the truth. Not when she left a good position in San Francisco to come back to help me. Why," she added proudly, "she's even added a bridal referral service to make ends meet. It has been useful, but I'm afraid there aren't enough interested brides in Ojai. Young women today aren't interested in tradition. They go to a bigger city to shop."

Ben stirred uncomfortably. "I'm truly sorry to hear that, Ms. Bertie. I remember my sisters telling me how helpful you were with their weddings."

"Thank you, Benjamin, it's kind of you to say so. The fact is that because of the state of my finances, Melinda is afraid any unusual or adverse publicity would hurt the little business I do have left. So you see, by asking you to go along with her, she was only trying to protect me."

Now Ben really felt like a worm. If only Melinda's make-believe wedding hadn't involved him, he might even have thought the caper was amusing. Now, after hearing Bertie's story, the picture was changing. The problem was more than Melinda's pride—Bertie's future was at stake. Damn!

As if sensing his mixed emotions, Bertie leaned over and patted his hand. "It's not your fault Melinda's fantasy went awry, dear boy. I believe that there's another reason that prompted her to set her fantasy in motion." Her blue eyes lightened as she gazed fondly at him. "I believe this is a moment to give you both a second chance to fulfill your destinies. Fate brought you two together."

Ben felt shivers run up and down his spine. He was in between a rock and a hard place. He didn't want to remarry, not yet. And certainly not after his earlier marriage had been such a sorry experience. There was also his uncle Joseph who was after him to marry and start a family. And women at the country club who seemed to be set on being his wife.

Maybe a make-believe marriage to Melinda Carey could be the answer.

Then, too, from what he understood, there was Bertie. She could lose everything she'd spent a lifetime working for.

He struggled for an answer, but one thing was clear. It was beginning to look as if he might be damned if he went through with the wedding and damned if he didn't.

"Aunt Bertie! Ben! What's going on?" Ben jumped to his feet as Melinda rushed into the room. Bertie calmly motioned him back to his seat. "I was just explaining the situation to Benjamin, dear."

Melinda was horrified. To her, "situation" could mean only one thing. "Aunt Bertie, please tell me you didn't!"

Her aunt's guilty look was all the answer Melinda needed. She turned her gaze on the noncommittal look on Ben's face. Her aunt not only knew the truth about her financial affairs, it looked as if she'd shared the information with him!

"What are you doing back here, Ben Howard? I've already agreed I would call Martha Ebbetts and retract my announcement, haven't I? What more do you want?"

“Yes, well...” He seemed to struggle for an answer, but whatever he wanted to say wasn’t coming easily. “I was just about to say that maybe I was too hasty before. In fact, I’ve been thinking of changing my mind.”

Melinda stiffened her back. If this was a marriage proposal, she’d never heard a more reluctant one. “I can just imagine what my aunt told you. Well, let me set you straight. I don’t need your pity. My aunt and I have managed to get along until now, and we’ll get through this, too.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ben rejoined. He eyed her in a way that made her hormones snap to attention. “But before I commit myself, I have a few thoughts of my own about this marriage you’ve dreamed up. Maybe we can settle it to our mutual satisfaction.”

Mutual satisfaction? The only way she would be satisfied was if Ben Howard took himself out of her sight before she died of embarrassment. “I’ve just told you it’s not necessary.”

“Maybe so, but I think you at least owe me the chance to discuss it.”

Bertie rose. “Why don’t you and Benjamin talk things over quietly, dear. I have an errand or two to take care of.” She waved goodbye and glided out of the kitchen.

Ben eyed Melinda warily. He was determined to find a way to at least discuss his crazy ideas with her—for both their sakes. Too bad she didn’t look as if she were the compromising type.

He plunged in before she could start up again. “I wanted to explain why the wedding announcement riled me. Okay?” She nodded reluctantly. “The truth is I was married once—in college.”

Melinda held up her hand to stop him. “I’ve heard all about it. What does it have to do with me?”

“Only that the marriage lasted long enough for Annie and me to realize we were too young to know what we really wanted. When I told her I wanted to go on to grad school and study law, she announced she wasn’t willing to wait that long to have a life. The divorce came though the day we graduated.” He shrugged. “You might say it was a graduation present.”

“I still don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“I was just trying to explain why I reacted the way I did after I read the newspaper this morning.” He grinned sheepishly. “I guess you could say I’m allergic to marriage.”

“Great!” Melinda grimaced. Another allergic bridegroom! “All the more reason to forget this whole thing.”

Ben bit his lower lip. Hell, she was the one who started the mess, why was she so upset? Forget it? Fat chance. “I’m trying to tell you there’s a good reason why a temporary marriage between us might be a good idea.”

“A good idea?” If Ben had said Mars was hurtling its way toward Earth and would arrive in Ojai tomorrow, she wouldn’t have been more surprised. “Are you trying to tell me you want to get married now?”

“Yes, no...that is, maybe.” Ben gazed thoughtfully at his prospective bride. If he’d been looking for another wife, Melinda would certainly fit the bill. She was honest and loyal. She wasn’t greedy, either, or she would have jumped at the chance to be the wife of one of Ojai’s first families.

Luckily, there was more to admire in Melinda than her character. Her silky legs turned him on. Her womanly curves were pleasing. And so were her expressive green eyes and tossed blond hair.

She wore beige linen slacks and a matching silk blouse, pearls around her throat and at her ears. Definitely a class act. But the shorts and the sleeveless white shirt that left her midriff bare and the lush line of breasts exposed earlier had been a lot more interesting. If she’d been as attractive in high school as she was now, how could he have managed not to notice her?

If he put the facts together and threw caution to the wind, marrying Melinda could make sense. All he had to do was control his testosterone and remember he was planning on a marriage of convenience followed by a quiet annulment.

“If you don’t mind,” he began again, “I’d like to tell you something. It’s not easy for me to say, but I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”



Seemingly speechless, Melinda continued to stare at him. He didn't blame her. He didn't recognize himself in all of this, either. "If it's okay with you, I'd like to apologize for the things I said earlier."

Melinda nodded. Reluctantly, but he was relieved to see he had her grudging attention.

"So...maybe we ought to think about this marriage business."

Melinda looked at him warily. "Wait a minute! Let me understand this. You're suggesting we actually go through with a wedding ceremony?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"I can't believe this!" She let loose. "Either you do or you don't. First you blow your stack and then you come back here to tell me that you've changed your mind. Let's get this straight—do you want to get married or don't you?"

"Sort of," he murmured, caught between a rock and a hard place. "Something changed my mind and brought me back here. I'm just not sure what it was."

How could he tell her what had turned him back when he hadn't had a logical answer to account for it?

He tried to concentrate on the happy smile on Bertie's face. And the way she'd waved at him before she disappeared through the kitchen door. A blessing?

All the more reason he had to go on record about the conditions of the forthcoming wedding—provided they ultimately decided to go through with it.

"There is one thing I'd like to put on the table." Melinda stared at him silently. Good. After what he had to say, he wasn't sure she wasn't going to take things so quietly. "This so-called marriage thing—you didn't intend it to be real. It was only a fantasy. Right?"

Melinda's face turned pink. She nodded hesitantly.

"I hate to get personal," he insisted, "but under the circumstances, I have to be sure you do understand what I'm talking about."

Melinda's face turned a deeper pink. "If you're saying this is going to be a marriage of convenience, I never intended anything else. In fact," she frowned, "the more I think of it, the more I know this would never work. We'd have to be crazy."

Ben had the feeling he should have his head examined. Two hours ago he'd gone on record as being against a wedding of any kind and here he was trying to convince Melinda they should go for it. Strangely enough, even though she was giving him a chance to back out, he actually felt disappointed. "The truth is," he blurted, "I might need a wife."

"Might need a wife?"

If ever there was a time to admit the whole truth, this was it. "Yes. This might sound crazy, but my uncle has been after me to get married. For that matter," he muttered darkly, "so have a lot of women."

"Lucky you." The look she gave him would have frozen an Eskimo. "Why pick me?"

How could he tell her mistake was opportune? That he sensed she could be trusted to "dissolve" the marriage when the right time came. That it might be convenient to have her as his "wife" for the duration. He managed a grin. "Maybe your timing was right. Or maybe your aunt was right about your 'mistake.' Maybe it was fate."

Melinda considered Ben's answer. Her aunt had talked about fate and destiny for so long, she was conditioned to believe it herself. At any rate, a mock-marriage, without a license, to a socially prominent man with connections might just be the ultimate answer to the lack of prospective brides. She didn't have to feel she was using him. From what he'd said, the marriage would be to his advantage, too. "I'll think about it."

"Good, I'm glad we finally agree on something." Ben settled back in his chair. "I think we should also settle a few important details while we're at it. Okay?"

Melinda shrugged. "After the story you just told me, I can't imagine what else is left to talk about. But go ahead."

"I'll supply the minister."

She hesitated. "Actually, if I decide to go through with the wedding I was going to ask the Reverend Charles Good to conduct the ceremony. Charles is a good friend of Aunt Bertie's."

"A real minister?"

"Of course."

"No way!" Ben rose and paced the kitchen floor. He counted off the squares in the brown and white linoleum until his frustration cooled. "I'm not going to take a chance on anything going wrong. I have a friend back in Boston who is a drama professor. Dex will fly out to do the honors if I ask him to. He'll not only look and act like a real minister, there's a plus."

"What's that," she asked cautiously. "No one will ever see him again."

"We can't," she protested. "It would break my aunt's heart, and I'd feel like a fraud!"

His eyebrows rose. "Would you feel any differently if this friend of your aunt's performed a mock-ceremony without a license?"

Melinda glanced down at her clenched hands. Her heart was breaking into little pieces. The dream she'd woven into her fantasy wedding was crumbling fast, and she didn't know how to stop it. A platonic, temporary marriage with a man she'd yearned over for half of her life was the last thing she'd expected. How could she have gotten in so deep?

Ben cleared his throat. He'd never seen a more unhappy look on the face of a woman who had just gotten engaged. He'd have to make it up to her later. "Sorry. Tell the reverend I'm having a close college friend do the honors. Just be sure he doesn't know the truth. What he and Ms. Bertie don't know won't hurt them." He hesitated. "Oh, one more thing. I want you to take my photograph off that damn dating Web site before anyone else sees it!"

"I told you I had nothing to do with putting it on there!"

"I don't care. If it's not too late, see if you can get me off there before the whole town sees it."

## Chapter Three

Ben headed for his office wondering just what he'd talked himself into.

Built on to a side of the Oak Tree distillery, the office was a refuge where he could let the world, the telephone and the fax machine go by when he was so inclined. After his mind-boggling discussion with Melinda and her aunt, he was definitely inclined.

Shaded by the oak trees that surrounded the building, the office was cool and scented with the rich pungent aroma of fine fruit brandies that were Oak Tree's specialty. On the other side of the office wall, the season's fruit crop was being aged in oak casks until it was ready to be bottled. He took great pride in knowing that the brandies carrying the Oak Tree name were the among the finest dessert liquors on the West Coast. Maybe, in the world.

Educated as a lawyer, he'd quickly discovered practicing law wasn't for him. For an innovative thinker like him, the law had turned out to be more about precedent than creativity. He'd realized he needed to create something tangible. That had translated into utilizing the bountiful fruit orchards on Howard family land. Happily, with his uncle's agreement, the Oak Tree Distillery had been the answer.

He dropped into his well-worn leather chair, stared at the telephone and willed it not to ring. He needed time to pull his thoughts together, to make sense of the day's events—if there was anything sensible about it.

What really worried him was what his uncle would think when he saw the wedding announcement in the morning newspaper. A no-nonsense, dignified man with high standards, as well as an upholder of tradition, Uncle Joseph was bound to have questions. Who wouldn't? He had some himself.

He knew it was too late to worry when his uncle strolled into his office unannounced, the morning's newspaper in his hand. At sixty-five, he still carried himself with dignity. So much so, no one thought to shorten his name to Joe. Not even him. In white linen slacks, light blue shirt and dark blue jacket, he looked every inch the wealthy owner of vast real estate holdings in and around Ojai. Ben took one look at the purposeful look in his uncle's eyes, uttered a silent prayer and rose to greet him.

"Believe it or not, Uncle Joseph, I was just thinking about you."

"Glad to hear it, my boy. I've been thinking about you, too." He tossed the folded newspaper on to Ben's desk. "I knew it was long past time for you to get married again," his uncle commented dryly, "but did you have to keep your engagement a secret?"

Ben laughed. He hoped the laugh didn't sound as hollow to his uncle as it did to him. "Guess you could say it happened before I knew it myself."

"You don't say?" His uncle dropped into a chair, crossed his legs and looked more serious than ever. A signal that trouble was coming if there ever was one. "I wonder if the story I heard at the country club this morning could also be true?"

Ben's heart began to race. He glanced at the newspaper. Since the wedding announcement didn't seem to have shaken his uncle, there had to be something else bothering him. "What story was that, sir?"

The answer was swift and succinct. "I find it difficult to believe, but I was told your photograph appears on an Internet Web site dating service."

Confronted by the hole someone had dug for him, Ben froze. He'd been right. It had been too late. How in the hell was he supposed to explain what was, according to Melinda, unexplainable?

His uncle went on. "I can see from your reaction the story is true. Do you mind telling me why, if you knew Melinda Carey well enough to ask her to marry you, why you were appearing on a dating

service Web site?” While Ben searched for an plausible answer, any answer, his uncle continued. “Unless, of course, that was how the two of you met?”

“Not exactly, sir. That is, the photograph is a mistake!”

“I would hope so. And the wedding announcement? Is that a mistake, too?”

“No.” From the set look on his uncle’s face, Ben knew better than to confess he was having second thoughts about marrying Melinda. Or to announce the wedding might still be in an iffy stage. “It’s a long story, sir, but you’ll have to trust me. I believe the photograph on the Internet was intended as a joke. I’ve taken steps to rectify it. You have my word.”

“Good, the sooner the better.” His uncle motioned to the newspaper, folded open to the society section. “I’m glad to see you’re marrying Bertie Blanchard’s niece. Good family, good stock. Although Ms. Bertie tends to sometimes sound a little unconventional.”

Ben thought of fate and destiny. “Unconventional” was being polite. “You know the lady?”

“Who doesn’t?” his uncle replied. His expression softened, a smile crinkled at the corners of his eyes. “She’s a fine, highly respected woman. I knew her years ago and I have a great deal of admiration for her now. You could do a lot worse than marry her niece.”

Relieved, Ben mentally crossed his fingers and prayed his uncle would never get wind of the truth. “Glad you feel that way. Did you come to congratulate me, or did you have something else on your mind besides the photograph?”

Ben searched his conscience when his uncle nodded. Outside of Melinda and her fantasy wedding, he was clean.

“Yes to both questions. As a matter of fact, I’d been meaning to talk to you soon.”

“About?”

“The future of the ranch and the distillery.” His uncle’s thoughtful gaze rested on Ben.

Relieved at the change in subject, Ben pushed the newspaper aside. “Sure. The orchards are in fine shape; producing healthy fruit right on schedule. What we haven’t raised, we’ve imported. The distillery and its crew are doing great, too. In fact, the last batches of fruit brandies we bottled were perfect.”

His uncle steepled his hands and continued to study Ben. “As is the family reputation, my boy.”

Ben stirred uneasily. The message was clear; he was expected to keep that reputation intact. And he would—that is, if he could with Melinda and her fantasies. “The Howard legacy and reputation are just as dear to me as they are to you, Uncle Joseph.”

“Good. Then we understand each other. Simply put,” his uncle went on, “you might be interested to know I’ve been considering retiring soon. I’d planned on gifting you with the ranch the day you married. The distillery, too, if you wanted to keep it going.” His uncle paused to let the importance of his announcement sink in. “I was just about to give up on you and make other plans when I saw the wedding announcement in this morning’s paper.” He fixed Ben with a telling stare.

Ben tried a smile. He was afraid to ask just what his uncle had intended to do with the properties if Melinda hadn’t put her fantasy wedding into motion. His uncle’s announcement might have come as a surprise, but Ben was in no condition to inquire what alternative his uncle had had in mind. On the other hand, maybe the announcement was a ploy to move Ben in the direction his uncle wanted. Either way, it was sink or swim. “No problem, Uncle Joseph.”

A childless widower, his uncle had helped finance Ben’s education. After graduation from grad school, he’d invited him to return to Ojai to help manage the Howard ranch and fruit orchards. With the vast ranch practically running itself, Ben had suggested and started a new gourmet fruit brandy distillery as a sideline. Both the ranch and the distillery had prospered. So if it wasn’t money his uncle was referring to, maybe it was time to face up to what he owed to the family legacy.

Come hell or high water, he intended to keep that legacy proud and intact. But what he wanted most of all was his uncle’s respect. He didn’t have a choice, Melinda had made up his mind for him. His unexplainable decision to marry her would answer one of his uncle’s concerns—the family’s

reputation. Married, the future of its real estate holdings would be taken care of rather than be sold to some stranger.

One thought led to another. After all, he and Melinda had a lot in common. Each of them had bonded with a close relative other than their parents. He didn't know where Melinda's folks were, but his had been lost forever on a holiday during an unexpected Caribbean hurricane. Whatever he was was due to his uncle's devotion. He owed him more than money could repay. It was pay-up time.

As for Melinda...Whatever was the basis for her close relationship with her aunt, it was touching and real. The two appeared to be harmless romantics. At least, they had been until now. To make them the laughing stock of Ojai was out of the question.

Another reason he had to go through with the make-believe marriage.

"And the photograph on the Internet, Benjamin? You won't forget to take care of that right away?"

Of course, the photograph on the Internet! Ben didn't intend to give up until he found the culprit. If Melinda wasn't behind it, someone was. And that someone was going to answer to him.

"Look, Uncle Joseph. I've told you that photograph has to be someone's idea of a joke. I don't want to sound like a conceited ass, but you know me well enough to know I don't need to advertise to find a date!"

"True," his uncle agreed with a faint smile. "You do have quite a reputation where the ladies are concerned. In fact, I've known about it for too long a time." His smile faded. "All the more reason for you to settle down, accept your responsibilities. Starting the distillery is fine, but it's time to get on with marrying again. Don't forget, it's up to you to carry on the Howard name."

Children! Ben's blood ran cold. Being tricked into marriage and going along with it for everyone else's sake was bad enough, but kids? "Sorry, sir. I can't promise you children, but at least I can provide you with a niece."

"Good enough, for now." His uncle winked. "We'll let nature take its course."

Ben mustered a feeble grin. If his uncle only knew the truth, that he'd agreed to go through a make-believe wedding, but that was as far as he intended to go. Children were out.

"Anything else on your mind, Uncle Joseph?"

"Not at the moment." His uncle rose to leave. "I'm sure I've left you with enough to think about. Just make sure you're on time for the wedding, my boy. I'll see you there."

Undecided if his uncle's departing shot was a promise or a threat, Ben shook his uncle's hand. Now, the next problem was to convince Melinda she wanted to marry him.

"MELINDA, DEAR, are you sure you feel well?"

Melinda tore her gaze from the window that looked out over the park. "Yes, I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You look as if you have something on your mind." Her aunt gazed lovingly at her. "But then, I suppose all young women do when they're in love and about to get married."

Melinda noticed her aunt's wistful smile. "Have you ever been in love, Aunt Bertie?"

"Yes, years ago, but I'm afraid it was one-sided. When it came down to getting married, it seemed I was the only one in love."

Melinda threw her arms around her aunt. "I'm so sorry. Whoever the man was, he missed out on getting the best and the most generous woman in the world for a wife. You would have made a wonderful wife and an even more wonderful mother."

Her aunt returned her hug. "Thank you, dear. But it wasn't as bad as all that. When you lost your mother as a little girl and came to live with me, I couldn't have asked for a more loving child than you. I'm afraid this might sound a bit selfish, but I've always thought of you as my own daughter."

"Me, too," Melinda confided with a kiss on her aunt's cheek. But instead of being happy, she was filled with guilt.

Before her aunt had interrupted her musings a few moments ago, she'd come to the conclusion the right thing to do was to release Ben from his agreement. She didn't want an "agreement," or a life filled with regret. She didn't want to burn any bridges behind her, either. Not when she still yearned for a real marriage with a man who loved her. And children while there was still time.

"And now your Benjamin will be part of my family, too," her aunt went on happily as she turned away to right a lopsided veil on a mannequin. "And one day, if the good Lord wills, there will be your children to love." She glanced back at Melinda. "I must be the luckiest woman in the world."

Melinda watched her aunt flutter around the room, straightening a box here, a counter display there. If marrying Ben was the answer to keeping the smile on her aunt's face, she couldn't broadcast her uncertainty about going through with the wedding. Make-believe or not.

Could she break her aunt's heart by backing out of the wedding now?

Melinda grabbed a light sweatshirt to cover her blue T-shirt and shorts, changed into running shoes and headed for the park across the street. A lengthy jog was just what she needed to clear her head.

She ran past the bench in front of the white lattice-wood gazebo where she'd spun countless dreams about her own wedding. Considering the disaster she'd managed to create, she should have been smart enough to confine her daydreaming to the park instead of the Internet.

The picturesque park and its story-book setting had always soothed her, but not today. The faint scent of pink climbing Cecile Brunner roses that wound their way through the gazebo's latticework wasn't working its magic. The mating calls of resident birds nesting in the trees didn't help, either. Nor did the small boy "fishing" with a fallen tree twig in the bubbling brook that ran through the park.

She'd managed to hold up well enough, but it was the sound of the boy's laughter that finally broke down her defenses. Tears came to her eyes.

She'd thought of children as she'd dreamed her wedding fantasy. Three, at the last count. Two little girls and an older brother to watch over them. The boy would have inherited his father's chiseled good looks and his legendary athletic powers. The girls, his softer image. To ensure the children could live in the daunting millennium and still be able to laugh like the little fisherman, she'd mentally added her Aunt Bertie's fey charm and her optimistic way of looking at life to the mental picture.

How could such a harmless fantasy have become the first steps on the road to disaster? she wondered as she stepped up her pace.

It wasn't as if she hadn't come close to marriage once before. But the "something" that had stopped her from making a final commitment had been the same "something" vibes that had brought her back to the small town of Ojai to check on her aunt.

Instead of finding her aunt despondent over her financial affairs, Melinda had discovered the once-thriving shop had become more than a mere business to Bertie. It hadn't taken Melinda long to gather that her aunt's apparent mission was to send countless brides happily into the future without financial hardship.

In retrospect, coming home to Ojai single and alone had been a good thing for both her and her aunt.

"Melinda! Hold up there!"

Ben Howard's voice was the last voice she wanted to hear. She glanced over her shoulder to see him jogging after her. In casual khaki slacks and white knit shirt, he still resembled the boy she'd silently admired in high school. A little older and more mature, sure, but every bit a man who sent her hormones humming. Her heartbeat, already pounding from the exercise, pounded faster.

She picked up her pace.

She didn't have a chance. Not when he ran beside her as if he could run forever. She took a deep breath and tried to get her second wind. "What's up?"

He cleared his throat. "I was driving by and decided to join you."

"You want to go jogging?" She didn't believe it for a minute.

“Actually, I stopped by to see if you’ve taken my photograph off the dating Web site.”

She shook her head. “No time,” she puffed. “Can’t seem to get away from the telephone.”

“Ditto. But I wanted to talk to you.”

She didn’t like the way he sounded. Ben had something on his mind. Well, so did she. And she wasn’t betting on a good reaction.

“No one answered your doorbell,” he went on before she started in, “so when I saw you here I figured I’d join you. So, are you getting anywhere?”

Melinda swallowed a groan. A reminder of his photograph on the Internet was the last thing she needed to worry about when she was so preoccupied with her doubts about marrying him. Even jogging wasn’t helping.

“No, and Rome wasn’t built in a day, either. I didn’t put it on the Internet, and I’m not sure how to get it off. You’ll just have to wait.”

His stride paced hers. “You have no idea how many people have congratulated me over this marriage. Nor how many strange looks I got at work today. Everyone probably knows about that damn photograph. When I find out who put it there, someone’s going to pay.”

Melinda briefly thought of Bertie, then shrugged away the thought. Her aunt had a sixth sense, but surely she didn’t have that kind of power. As for knowing about an Internet Web site, her aunt didn’t even have a nodding acquaintance with a computer.

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