

Chapter One



“OH DEAR.” REVEREND SAMANTHA EVANS slapped her copy of *Winter Bride* down on the coffee table in the church parsonage. Home sweet home. At least until her wedding day in less than a month, praise the Lord. “I am not going to buy a wedding dress trimmed in lynx fur. I’m just ... not. That’s a horrible idea in more ways than I can count. I really don’t care if it’s the trendy thing to do.”

“What about faux fur?” Cecelia, Samantha’s older sister, scooted forward in the wingchair, snatched up the magazine, and flipped through the pages. She turned down a corner and handed it back to Samantha. “Take a gander at the one with the billowy sleeves. You’d look quite fetching in that little number.”

Samantha peered at the glossy photo of the model, who was too skinny for her own good. “Did you notice it was dramatically backless? Backless! First of all, not only is it inappropriate for a clergywoman to be wearing a dress cut down to her hinterlands, but in case you didn’t notice, I’m getting married next month. December. In Maine. Not the Bahamas.”

“Backless? Did I hear backless?” Eric Palmer stuck his head around the corner from the kitchen. “No one gets to see my fiancée’s ‘hinterland’ except me, and even then, not until *after* we’re married.”

He waved a serving spoon in the air. “Hey, Sammie, do we have any stuffing left? I thought I’d make us some turkey sandwiches from yesterday’s leftovers. Want stuffing on the side? Or maybe I’ll put the stuffing in the sandwiches. With some gravy. Can you ever have too much bread?”

Cecelia chimed in. “Or too much gravy? Ladle on extra for me, please.”

The glowing warmth of love and affection saturated Samantha as she admired the broad shoulders of her husband-to-be. She was so very fortunate to have found the love of her life, and she praised God for him every single day. “Stuffing is in the fridge on the bottom shelf next to the leftover sweet potato casserole. And thanks, honeybear, for making lunch. I’m starving.”

Cecelia rolled her eyes. “You two are just too cute.”

Beaming her sweetie a smile, Samantha raised her hands over her head and stretched her sore back muscles. Where had the morning disappeared to? In fact, the whole month?

Thanksgiving was yesterday. Come and gone in a flash. The whole family had gathered; Mom and Dad, Cecelia, her husband Marcus and their toddler, Kimberly, dear Aunt Clare, friend Camille who worked at the coffee shop, and Camille’s new boyfriend Brady. Including her and Eric, that made nine adults and one child—a full house.

“Yeah, thanks, Eric. I’ll have mine with a sliver of cranberry sauce if you have it.” Cecelia continued to flip through the glossy pages. “Samantha, you want to tell me again why you’ve waited until mere weeks before your wedding to find a dress? You’ve been engaged for months now. Good thing you called for reinforcements.”

“I’ve *been* looking. Sort of. I had no idea it was going to be this hard. And you have your hands full with that adorable two-year-old.”

“Since Marcus has to work, Mom and Dad took Kimberly home with them—Mom’s idea, remember—I’m happy to help. I can stay all week if you need me.”

Cecelia ... for a whole week. Now that would be a challenge. But she did need assistance. Time was running out. Samantha wiggled a welcoming tone into her voice.

“How wonderful that you can find the time to stay even longer. Too bad Mom and Dad had to leave so quickly. I don’t get it though. They were supposed to be here until Sunday, and Mom seemed to want to go dress shopping with us. What’s up?”

Her sister glanced away and focused her eyes on the ceiling. Uh-oh. Not good. “Everything’s fine. They ... wanted to beat the traffic.”

Samantha kneaded the nape of her neck. *A whopper for sure.*

“I repeat. What’s up with Mom and Dad?”

Her sister’s quick intake of breath was followed by a tight smile. Cecelia dipped her eyes, dug through her purse, and came up with a small pad of paper and a turquoise pen. “Why don’t you tell me what you’ve done so far about wedding plans? That way we can begin to check items off the list and know what you have left to do.”

Samantha gritted her teeth. Normally, her sister would gab until she ran out of air. Clamming up was not her style. Something was definitely going on. “Not going to let you off the hook, Cecelia, just so you know.”

CeCe was *so* going to get an earful later, though.

Adjusting her glasses, Cecelia poised pen over paper. “Ready. Set. Shoot.”

Samantha toed off her black flats and curled her jean-clad legs up on the couch. Jezebel, her Maine Coon cat perched on her shoulder all the while. The feline had an amazing sense of grace and balance and would even vault into Samantha’s arms if given half a chance. Bel minced down Samantha’s body and settled herself behind the crook of her knees, purring her catty approval of the arrangement.

Walking her fingers down her cat’s beautiful back, Samantha let the feline’s silky fur slip through her fingers. “What have I done about wedding preparations? I’ve booked the church. Does that count?”

Cecelia shook her head and laughed. “Not hardly. You’re the pastor of the Methodist church across the parking lot, for goodness sake, so I would think you’ve got first dibs on the reception hall. Got anything else? Who’s doing the ceremony?”

“I called a good friend to officiate. I don’t think you’ve ever met her, but I went to seminary with MaryAnn Wen. Since she lives in Boston now, she’s not too far. She’s going to camp out here and fill in for me while Eric and I are on our honeymoon. She’s even kitty sitting since I don’t want to dump Jezebel at Eric’s house without supervision. So that’s two down and a hundred more details to go, right?”

Eric’s handsome face appeared around the corner again. “I’m borrowing Larry’s old tux, so that’s three. My boss used to ballroom dance, believe it or not, so he bought his own. Might have to let down the pants an inch or so, but it fits fine except for that.”

Cecelia grimaced. “A borrowed tux from your boss? Didn’t you tell us at dinner yesterday that he’s ready to retire? So that puts him at what, sixty-five? Let me guess. Wide lapels? Surely you can do better than that, Eric.”

Samantha detected the slightest narrowing of Eric’s eyes. Her sister had a big-mouth sometimes, but she had a good heart. Even if it took a stethoscope to find it sometimes. “Hush, CeCe. I

should have mentioned that Eric and I have a goal. We're determined to keep this wedding on budget, so we're conserving cash wherever we can. It's not the amount of money spent that makes a marriage."

"But didn't Mom say they'd be happy to kick in some major dough? They paid for my wedding. Big bucks too." Cecelia tilted her head. "Seriously. Take what you can get. They can afford it."

Eric managed a polite smile. "I'm fine with borrowing a tuxedo. Samantha's friend Marion from church, offered to alter it for me. I'm going to be wearing it for one day, for a few hours. No sense in wasting money if there's a perfectly good tux available. Or ... here's a thought. I could wear my forest ranger uniform."

Uh-oh. Eric's eyes might be twinkling, but Cece's brows disappeared beneath her bangs at the very idea. Samantha tugged at her bottom lip. How to explain to her sister? "We simply want to pay for everything ourselves, okay? Let's leave it at that."

Cecelia shook her head but kept quiet this time. At least about the money. "Hmm. Let's talk about bridesmaids then. How many have you got?"

"Besides you being the matron of honor, I've asked my friends Camille and Genevieve. They both live in town, so coordination should be easy."

"Is that all? The three of us? Not much of a—"

Samantha silenced her sister with a glare. "Three is all I need. We're not doing a fancy wedding here, or did I not just mention that?"

"No need to get huffy. Just asking." Cecelia scribbled on her pad. "What about Eric?"

Eric bellowed from the kitchen, "What about me?"

"We're just going over the wedding party," Samantha called. "Could you come in here for a sec, please?"

Wiping his hands on a towel, Eric rambled into the room with a hint of hesitation. "Sammie, I know what you're going to ask, and I did my part. Travis is best man, and Brady and Jonathan are all set to be groomsmen. They're each responsible to rent a black tux, and you said you'd get the shirts since they're a color the rental place doesn't carry, right?"

“Right.” Ugh. With all that was going on, Samantha had forgotten about the shirts. “I still need to order them though, and you were supposed to get sizes.”

“Sorry.” Eric whipped out his phone and sent quick texts. “Done and done. I’ll let you know when they each get back to me.”

“Great.” Cecelia dotted an *i* and crossed a *t*. “I’ve heard all about your work buddy Travis, but who are Brady and Jonathan?”

Eric leaned against a doorjamb, ever-present phone still clutched in his hand. He was on call tonight. Who knew a forest ranger could be on call?

“Brady is Camille’s boyfriend, and Jonathan is a friend from college. After graduating from The University of Maine, he settled in Bar Harbor, one of the most picturesque towns in Maine. At least the tourists would say so. Hey, what color are those shirts again?”

Oh, he was so going to love this. Samantha waggled her brows. “Cranberry.”

Eric broke into a laugh. Even if he’d lived in the glorious state of Maine his entire life—the land of little red berries—he still despised the sour little suckers. “Okay. As long as I don’t have to eat them. Lunch in five minutes, ladies. Turkey sandwiches with extra gravy, stuffing, and *cranberry* sauce.”

Eric scrunched his nose as he uttered the words and ducked back in the kitchen. Samantha chuckled inside. Without a doubt, he wouldn’t be having any of what he called the “slimy stuff” on *his* plate.

“Bridesmaids dresses all taken care of?” Cecelia tapped her pen on her chin.

“Yep. Cranberry dresses in the mail, including yours. They should arrive in a day or two.” Samantha could only hope.

There was a sharp rap at the door, and Cecelia’s forehead crinkled. “Expecting someone? And yes, Samantha, I’ll get the door so we don’t have to disturb the cat. You spoil her, you know.”

Samantha slid a hand down Bel’s haunches, her palm relishing the downy softness. “And that would be why God put cats on the planet. So we could learn our place in the world. Cat servant. It’s something I’m good at and proud of.”

“I can see Bel has you wrapped tightly around her furry little paws.” Another knock. Cecelia sang out, “Coming,” and got off her duff, taking her own sweet time.

Cecelia yanked the door open and squealed. “Aunt Clare. I didn’t know you were stopping in today. Don’t you have the final walk-through of your new house on Moose Creek?”

Aunt Clare stamped her feet on the porch before she stepped inside. “The walk-through has been postponed a few days. The wainscoting still needs to be stained, and the pellet stove I ordered is still not in.”

She pulled off her knit cap and shook it out, snowflakes puffing up a mini-storm in the entryway. “It’s snowing something fierce out there. Again. Snow, snow, snow.”

Samantha shrugged. “It’s December in northern Maine. Not that easy life you had down in Portland.”

“Why do you think I moved up here? I was getting soft. Besides, I heard a rumor you girls were goin’ dress shopping.”

Samantha clapped her hands. “I’d love it if you could come with us.”

“Delighted.” Aunt Clare unbuttoned her coat, unwound her scarf, and pulled off her boots, stashing them by the front door. Dragging in a chair from the kitchen, she sat next to Cecelia in the wing chair. “One thing I like about this parsonage—everything is a quick step away.”

Eric strode into the room and cracked a smile. “Hi, Aunt Clare. In case anyone cares, I was sweeping off the back porch, and it’s snowing again.”

Cecelia rolled her eyes. “We heard. Can’t wait to get back to Maryland. It’s crazy up here.”

Eric narrowed his eyes and turned to Aunt Clare. “Hey, isn’t your new house supposed to be move-in-ready today?”

“Postponed until next week. After we go dress shopping, I might put in a few hours later at the church office, if that’s all right with my new boss?” Aunt Clare winked at Samantha.

“Fine with me. With the multi-purpose room addition coming down to the wire, it would be good to make sure that everything’s on schedule.”

Eric nodded. "I'm hoping the new facility will be finished in time for our reception. The meeting room in the basement isn't big enough anymore. And you're just in time for lunch, Aunt Clare. I'm heating up leftovers."

"As long as there's stuffing, I'm in. And in case anyone's interested, there was a mama moose and her adolescent baby traipsing through the churchyard when I came in."

Cecelia shrieked, raced to the window, and swept back the curtains. "Really? Where?"

Aunt Clare heaved herself up out of her chair, strolled to the window, and pointed. "Look over there on the right. Aw. There now. The old girl's ambling on down the lane, her darlin' moosette trailing behind."

Cecelia amped up a mega-watt smile. "Now I can die happy. I've finally witnessed the majestic spectacle of a real Maine moose. The baby is a bonus. And gracious, the mama is so much bigger than I imagined."

Samantha rose to her feet, scooped up Bel, and deposited her on the couch. She plodded to the window and peered out. "Yep. That's Matilda sauntering off into the distance. She's on the small side for a moose."

Cecelia's eyes widened. "How do you know it's Matilda? I would imagine all moose kind of look alike."

"Nope. They're all different, like people. When she swung around did you see that scar on her side? Last year, she got her feet caught in a fence and impaled herself. Eric saved her." Samantha had been so very proud of him. She'd fallen in love with him right then and there. "I can't tell which of her children she's got with her but, my goodness, they grow fast. The calves were born back in June on Eric's birthday."

Cecelia's eye's rounded. "Did you say *calves*, as in more than one?"

Samantha patted her sister on the shoulder. "Uh-huh. Triplets."

"They make me smile." Aunt Clare swiveled to Samantha. "I came by to bring glad tidings too. Speaking of shopping for a wedding dress, I found a good store. It's called Timeless Threads, and they have both new and vintage gowns. An old college friend of mine, Phoebe, opened it a couple of years ago. I'd forgotten all about it until she sent me an e-mail. Now that I've moved up here, we keep meaning to get together for lunch."

Samantha clapped her hands and woke the cat who'd settled back into dreamland. "Wonderful! Sounds like what I've been looking for."

"Used dresses? I—" Cecelia wrinkled her nose, but Samantha planted her hands on her hips and shut up her sister with a glance. "I mean, uh, goodie. Sounds great. When can we go?"

"How about after lunch?" Aunt Clare rubbed her hands together. "It's not too far, at least by Maine standards, and Phoebe is setting aside some dresses as we speak."

Samantha's chest squeezed. Aunt Clare's friend sounded like a God-send, and Aunt Clare too, for that matter. She hadn't been looking forward to shopping alone with her sister. No matter what store they were in, Cecelia gravitated toward the most expensive items. But with Aunt Clare along, the dread in the pit of Samantha's stomach took a hike. This could even be fun. Timeless Threads. Good name. She could use something timeless, classic, everlasting, just like her love for Eric.

As she headed toward the kitchen, Samantha fervently hoped there would be no dresses with fur attached. Cats had fur. Dogs had fur. Wedding dresses should be fur-less. With backs. And not too expensive...

Lord, help!