

# **The Bride Next Door**

**By Hope Ramsay**

**Excerpt**

# Chapter One

Courtney Wallace hated the month of June.

The sixth month of the year brought heat, humidity, and a mother lode of brides. Why everyone wanted to get married in June was a mystery. In Courtney's opinion, September and October were the best months to get married.

But for some reason, September and October were slow months at Eagle Hill Manor, where Courtney was the main wedding and event planner. And June was nothing short of a madhouse. It was still a week shy of Memorial Day, and already the inn's lineup of June brides had stressed her out. Today she'd had to deal with no less than three June-bride meltdowns.

So drinks at the Jaybird Café and Music Hall sounded like a great way to unwind, especially since it was Wednesday—open mic night—and Courtney's friend Arwen Jacobs was planning to perform. Arwen, who was painfully shy about singing in public, needed all the support she could get. Her songs were wonderful, complicated, and insightful, which meant people tended to talk over them.

Courtney and Arwen sat at their favorite table, toward the back of the room, away from the stage. As usual, Arwen looked like an accountant in a blue suit and a white silk T-shirt. She'd pulled her brown hair into a side part with a tortoiseshell clip in a no-nonsense style that made her look about nineteen. The freckles across her nose added to the impression. Unlike the other musicians and wannabes who showed up on Wednesday nights, Arwen didn't believe in pretending to be someone she wasn't. Most of the other performers sat close to the stage, and their hair color ran the gamut from natural to bright purple.

"You'll be fine," Courtney said.

“If I can get my fingers to stop shaking.” Arwen took a long swig of her Diet Coke. She never drank on open mic nights.

Courtney rolled her head to loosen her tight neck muscles and drew in a deep breath filled with the scent of the bacon and cheese potato skins sitting on the table between them. She loved this place with its scarred tables and exposed-brick walls. The music hall was anything but pretentious. To Courtney, it was like her home away from home.

She took a swig of her Manhattan. “Ah, this drink is exactly what I need tonight. Have I mentioned how much I hate June brides?” she said.

Arwen nodded and then suddenly stilled, like a fawn caught in the headlights.

Courtney followed her friend’s gaze to the front door, where Matthew Lyndon had just strolled into the Jaybird looking precisely like Casanova, or maybe Don Juan.

Whichever. It didn’t matter. He was pure sex in motion, all wide shoulders and slim hips and a sinewy way of moving, like an athlete, or a dancer, or a dangerous, predatory cat. Courtney didn’t know very much about him, except that he was a member of the Lyndon family, which around these parts made him local royalty. That, and also he was a Hook-up Artist and a jerk.

Courtney had developed a list of male loser types that any woman should avoid at all costs. The list included the Man Baby, the Nice Guy Not, the Space Invader, the Too Selfless to Be True, and the Emotionally Unavailable. But the Hook-up Artist was number one on her list of losers. A Hook-up Artist was the kind of player any wise woman would stay away from.

Courtney was about to look away from the loser when Brandon Kopp strolled in right behind him.

“Oh my God, the Lyndons and the Koppes have arrived,” Arwen said. “Damn. I hate it when people from work show up on Wednesdays. Maybe I’ll take my name off the list.” Arwen curled into herself, trying to become as inconspicuous as possible.

Courtney continued to watch the two men as they moved toward the bar at the side of the dining room. Matthew and Brandon, who had dumped his fiancée at the altar, were a pair—the Hook-up Artist and the Nice Guy Not. A Nice Guy Not looked like a perfect mate until you realized that he expected adoration for common courtesies like saying please and thank you.

The men settled on a pair of barstools right next to Ryan Pierce, the epitome of the Emotionally Unavailable Man—a man type that needed no real explanation. It was sort of like a rogue’s gallery of guys on Courtney’s list.

“Has Brandon left his job on Capitol Hill?” Courtney asked, turning back toward Arwen. Last autumn, Brandon Kopp was supposed to have joined his father’s law firm, Lyndon, Lyndon & Kopp, but instead he’d dumped his bride at the altar and taken a job in DC.

Arwen shook her head. “Not Brandon, Matt. He joined the firm. Today. They made Andrew Lyndon a partner and then brought Matt in as an associate. So now Lyndon, Lyndon, and Kopp is more like Lyndon, Lyndon, Lyndon, Lyndon, and Kopp. At least they’re all easy on the eye.”

Arwen’s day job as a paralegal at LL&K was in every respect more important to her than the songs she wrote and performed as a hobby. She worked on all the firm’s pro bono cases and tried to right the world’s wrongs.

Courtney leaned forward. “Arwen, promise me you will stay as far away from Matt Lyndon as you can. The guy’s a Hook-up Artist.”

“No worries. Even if he wasn’t a player, I’d have to be careful. It’s just not a good idea to hook up with anyone you work with, especially in a law firm. And besides, I don’t think a guy like Matt Lyndon would look at me twice.” She paused a moment, her gaze riding over the men at the bar. “But he’s sure looking at you.”

“No, he’s not,” Courtney insisted even as Matt Lyndon’s three-hundred-watt gaze rode over her body, stirring up awareness. What was it about that man? He gave off heat like an industrial furnace.

“Yes, he is,” Arwen said. “And to be honest, Ryan’s throwing shade at you too.”

Courtney turned her head a little for a quick glimpse of Ryan. Oh boy, he was giving her *the look*. There was nothing sexy about this. The ex-marine with the giant biceps and the military buzz cut was a member of the Shenandoah Falls Police Force. In addition to being emotionally unavailable, he masqueraded as Dudley Do-Right.

Ryan had potential, but whoever unlocked him would have to be ready to deal with his emotional baggage, whatever it was. That made Ryan ten times more dangerous than Matt in some ways. Ryan could fool a girl into thinking he cared. And even worse, a girl could delude herself into thinking she could change him, or heal him, or whatever. Not a good risk all the way around.

“Oh my God, he’s coming over here.”

“Who? Matt?” A three-alarm fire ignited in Courtney’s core.

Arwen shook her head just as Ryan appeared at Courtney’s elbow.

“May I?” His voice came from the depths of his chest. He could probably do a great Barry White imitation if he wanted to.

He didn't wait for a formal invitation. He simply slipped into a seat and said, "Hey," in that monosyllabic way that proved without question that he was emotionally unavailable.

Arwen helped herself to another loaded potato skin and sat back in her chair, watching Courtney as if she was making mental notes for her next song. Arwen had captured quite a few of Courtney's romantic mistakes and turned them into imaginative hook lines like "he broke my heart and I broke his car."

"I saw you looking at Brandon Kopp," Ryan said.

Oh, the dear man was so wrong; she hadn't spared one minute looking at that loser. But she didn't disabuse Ryan of his mistake. "So? It's a free country."

"His Camaro is out in the parking lot, and if you do anything to it—I mean anything—I'll take you in for destruction of property. Is that clear? This vendetta has got to stop."

"Anything?" she asked, giving him a wide-eyed innocent stare. "What if I put a bumper sticker on his fender that says 'Humanitarian Onboard' or something like that?"

Ryan scowled. "No bumper stickers. Not even nice ones. And do not unscrew his license plates again, please."

"You're no fun, you know that?" She let go of a long sigh. Harassing Brandon by sabotaging his car was fair game in her book, even though Brandon had gotten his comeuppance when Laurie Wilson dumped him for Brandon's best friend. But she just couldn't let it go. Any guy who dumped his fiancée at the altar deserved to have his life disrupted in small but annoying ways.

"It's not my job to be fun, Courtney. It's my job to keep the peace."

And he took that so seriously, didn't he? "All right. I guess that's fair. I mean Laurie is marrying Andrew in a couple of weeks."

Ryan nodded and took a sip of his Coke. “Good. And I don’t want you raiding the cradle either.” He managed a crooked smile.

“Whatever does that mean?” she asked, even though she had a good idea what he was trying to say.

“Courtney, you were just ogling Matt Lyndon like he’s a pint of Ben and Jerry’s Karamel Sutra ice cream.”

“And this is your business because?”

“Because I actually care about you. Because Matt Lyndon is too young for you. Because we both know he’s a player. But mostly because I just overheard Brandon Kopp express the opinion that you are an ice queen, and Matt countered that he could seduce you in less than two dates.” Ryan grinned like the Cheshire cat.

“No way. He didn’t,” Arwen said, suddenly coming out of her shell. Oh brother. Courtney could almost see the musical wheels turning in Arwen’s mind.

“Oh yes. He did,” Ryan said with a sober look in his blue eyes. “And then Brandon bet him a hundred dollars that he couldn’t.”

“No,” Arwen and Courtney said in unison.

Ryan nodded. “And Matt took the bet.”

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Matt tucked Brandon’s business card into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. Of course he didn’t need Brandon’s contact information, but the card served as Brandon’s marker. One hundred dollars if he wrangled the ice queen into bed.

“You sure you don’t want to put a time frame on that?” he asked. “Because having an indefinite period of time to pursue her gives me the advantage, you know.”

Brandon snorted a laugh. “You’re delusional.”

“Why do you say that?” Matt turned on his barstool and studied his friend. Brandon was a few years older, but that didn’t mean he had any experience. Not when it came to women. Brandon had spent the last ten years in a serious, committed relationship with Laurie Wilson. Last August, he’d halted the wedding with a heartfelt speech about needing to date other people. The drama had been hard on Laurie, and Matt truly felt for her.

But he’d also understood Brandon’s fear. Matt had done everything in his power to help Brandon learn how to play the field, but the guy just wasn’t a player. And he’d been a jerk to think that he could dump his girlfriend at the altar and then somehow win her back.

“Courtney Wallace is a little psycho if you ask me,” Brandon said. “I’m really tired of her messing with my car. Someone needs to teach her a lesson.”

“Whoa, wait a sec. I’m happy to have a little fun with her, but I’m not into teaching her a lesson.”

“A little fun? Bro, I want you to break her heart. Honestly, I’d throw another C note into it if you could assure me of that.”

Matt straightened on the barstool. “I can’t take that bet.”

“Why not?”

“Because I never lead a woman on. It’s one of my rules. I’m not into breaking hearts, Brandon. I’m into enjoying women.”

“Well, rule or not, I’d like to see that woman suffer. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get the smell of spoiled milk out of a car’s carpets?”

“No. And I truly feel your pain,” Matt said.

“So you’re not taking the bet?”



“Oh, I’m taking the bet, all right. I’ve had my eye on her for quite some time.” He stood up.

“You’re making a move now? But she’s sitting with Ryan Pierce.”

Matt shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m not worried by about the competition.” He snagged his beer and strolled across the bar’s dining room.

Brandon didn’t understand how this game worked. A guy looking for action needed to be ready at all times. The world was filled with hot women, and Courtney Wallace was the definition of hot. She had curves, lots of them, and a sweet little rack that was mouthwatering. Combine that with that wide-open, blue-eyed stare of hers. If you didn’t know better, you might think Courtney Wallace was sweet and naive.

But Courtney fell into the category of wise beyond her years. And that made her a special challenge.

Not that Matt usually wasted his time with women like Courtney when there were so many ready to tumble into his bed. Why waste his time on someone who’d built walls around herself and made it clear she wasn’t interested?

He had two reasons. First, he needed to show Brandon that any woman was fair game. It was a matter of attitude. Matt had once been where Brandon was now. Kind of dorky when it came to women. The guy needed inspiration.

And his second reason was entirely personal. If he was going to be stuck here in Shenandoah Falls, working for his father, he needed something adventurous to fill his time. This wasn’t Washington, DC, where the number of single, willing females was plentiful. This was little Shenandoah Falls. And Courtney Wallace probably ranked right up there as the hottest single girl in town.

And she just happened to be sitting with Ryan Pierce. Pierce knew a hot woman when he saw one. So taking a full-frontal approach wasn't going to work. Besides, he had some history with Courtney. She'd shut him down a couple of times already.

Instead he headed straight for Arwen Jacobs because he had something in common with her. They both worked at LL&K, and that gave him a hook. A reason to approach, something to say, and the appearance of spontaneity. All of which were crucial.

"Arwen, I see you're signed up for the open mic tonight. I didn't know you had musical talent."

She blushed, probably because she was embarrassed that someone from work was here to see her perform. He took a seat next to her, gave Courtney a quick glance, and then asked, "What kind of music do you sing?"

"She's a singer-songwriter," Courtney said. "And you probably should be careful because anything you say or do is likely to end up in one of her songs. She's got a talent for capturing the ups and downs of life as a single woman."

Score. Courtney just couldn't help herself. He turned toward her with a smile. "I guess I'll have to be careful, then."

Courtney leaned forward, cocked her head, and tossed her hair back. Bingo. That little hair toss was a giveaway. She was interested. But then, he already knew that. He'd danced this dance with Courtney before.

And that was the thing about Courtney Wallace that he couldn't quite figure out. Matt was exceptionally good at reading body language. He could tell when a woman was interested in a casual hookup. And for quite some time now, Courtney had been sending casual hook-up signals loud and clear.

But he'd never been able to close the deal. He'd tried for a while, right after Brandon had broken up with Laurie, but the wedding planner wanted Mr. Right even though she knew he didn't exist. Normally, a woman looking for Mr. Right wasn't looking for casual hookup. Courtney Wallace was an enigma and a challenge. She was also a beautiful woman. More than that really, Courtney was a babe.

"Arwen tells me you've moved back to Shenandoah Falls." Courtney gave him the tiniest of smiles, just a curl at the corner of her sweet mouth. By the spark in her eyes, Matt knew she was up to something.

"I'm working at my father's law firm for the moment while I reassess my career choices."

Her smile deepened. "I hope that means you don't plan to hit on Arwen."

She was so predictable. Standing there trying to protect her friends from the big, bad wolf. "Okay," he said with a smile. "But what are you doing on Saturday?"

"Saturday? Are you kidding? It's Memorial Day weekend. I've got three weddings on Saturday and another three on Sunday. And excuse me, but did you just ask me out?"

What a stupid blunder. He needed to remember that Courtney's busiest workdays were Saturday and Sunday. So no long walks up to the falls or anything like that. "How about dinner in Winchester on Tuesday?"

She drummed her fingers on the top of the table, a nervous tic that suggested she wasn't all that into him. And yet she'd cocked her head in a way that was most definitely a come-on. What else was new? Courtney was a master at sending mixed signals. A wiser man would cut his losses and move on. But for some reason, Matt didn't want to. Courtney intrigued him.

After a very long moment, she said, "Sure. I'll have dinner with you on Tuesday."

The moment Courtney agreed, Ryan Pierce sat up straight. “But—”

Courtney interrupted whatever Ryan was about to say with the gesture. “It’s okay, Ryan. I know what I’m doing.” She gave Matt a big smile. “I’d love to have dinner with you in Winchester.”

Matt paused for a moment, his gaze flicking between Ryan and Courtney. Was she trying to make Ryan jealous? Maybe. In some ways, she was a player too, and she definitely had an agenda. He’d need to proceed with caution.

But then again, it might be fun to discover exactly what game she was playing. He nodded and smiled. “How about the Union Jack, at six thirty?” he said.

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Ten minutes later, Arwen excused herself from the sparring match between Courtney and Matt. She headed to the café’s ready room, a large, concrete-floored area edged in metal storage shelves stuffed with paper products, giant-sized bottles of ketchup, and cans of tomato sauce. The room, which always smelled of French fries, doubled as a spot for musicians to relax and tune their instruments before they performed. A couple of beat-up sofas and a half dozen folding chairs occupied the space.

On open mic nights, the room got pretty crowded with a mix of serious musicians, wannabees, and amateurs, and it wasn’t all that unusual for Kent Henderson, who had an ego the size of Alaska, to initiate a jam session just to impress everyone by playing Doc Watson’s bluegrass version of “Tennessee Stud.” He always played it too fast and too loud.

But for some inexplicable reason, his rendition of “Tennessee Stud” made Kent the most popular performer with the Jaybird’s regulars. People listened to Kent even though he played the same songs week after week.

Arwen would be following Kent this evening, so of course, he was already in the back room playing his guitar so loud that no one else could possibly hear themselves, much less tune their guitars. Not that anyone else cared, since everyone, except Arwen, used electronic tuners.

Arwen had no problems with electronic tuners, but she used a variety of nonstandard, open tunings for her songs, which required frequent readjustments, so she'd honed the ability to tune her guitar by ear and to change the tunings on the fly. For that she needed to be able to hear herself.

She took her guitar out of its case and headed through the back door into the alleyway behind the Jaybird. A single streetlight dispelled the night like a spotlight. She stepped into it and adjusted the strap around her neck and shoulders. She tuned the guitar to open G and began practicing her new song—an ode to the rocking chair that used to sit on her grandmother's porch. This new song had nothing to do with love or relationships. It told a sentimental story about a chair found by the side of the road, restored and repaired and handed down. It was sweet and not remotely commercial, but it pleased Arwen because it made her feel warm inside when she sang it. She'd loved her grandmother, who had passed away in February.

She finished the last chord and was startled by the sound of a single pair of hands clapping. "That was sweet, lass."

She turned to find the Jaybird's main bartender, Rory Ahearn, sitting on the back stoop. The night cast dark shadows across his deep-set blue eyes and accentuated the dimple in his chin. The rolled-up sleeves of his Henley tee exposed a pair of matching tattoos in a Celtic knot pattern, which wound around his arms like a pair of snakes.

He took a long drag on his cigarette, holding the smoke inside and then exhaling. No, wait, not a cigarette. The breeze blew the pungent scent of weed in Arwen's direction.

“Want some?” he asked, holding the joint out in her direction.

She shook her head, her heart thundering in her chest. Was it some deep-seated need for adventure that had her second-guessing her response? Rory had been tending bar at the Jaybird for at least two years. He had a gift when it came to margaritas and a sexy-as-hell accent. He also listened when she played on open mic nights. She’d watch him going through the motions behind the bar, but she knew he paid attention when she sang. Which made him the only person, besides her friends.

And for that reason, she lived for the moment when Rory would look up and nod his head in approval. Still, she could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times she’d actually spoken to him, beyond ordering a drink.

They came from different worlds. She was a nice Jewish girl from the Washington, DC, suburbs who had never ever in her life broken any rules. And Rory gave every appearance of being a bad boy from across the ocean who truly didn’t give a damn. He had a dark Irish look that was at once both unsettling and deeply poetic.

Arwen had a weakness for poetry.

“You should give that up,” she said, nodding toward the joint.

That earned her a dark bark of a laugh. “Love, the occasional joint is the only thing that gets me through the day.” He leaned forward into the light, which sparked in the dark, endless blue of his eyes. “Just like the occasional margarita helps you over the day-to-day heartbreak of life as a single girl.”

That was the thing about bartenders. They knew everything. And of course, he actually listened to her songs. Which meant he knew all her fears and insecurities because she poured them into her lyrics.

She took a step in his direction. “I guess you’re right about me and margaritas. But the thing is, margaritas are legal in the Commonwealth of Virginia.”

“Aye, true enough. But I like to live on the wild side.” His half smile grew into a full grin. He was incredibly handsome with that scruffy black hair hanging down over the collar of his shirt and the shadow of stubble across his cheeks. She ought to write a song about him, but she wasn’t sure yet what it would be about.

“The wild side can get you in trouble,” she said, as much to herself as to him.

He nodded. “That’s a fact, lass.” He hauled in a big breath, stubbed the joint out on the brick step, and stood up. “Looking forward to hearing you sing tonight,” he said with a little wink.

And then he turned and slipped back into the café, leaving Arwen to wonder if Rory Ahearn had followed her out here to flirt, give her encouragement, or just to take his pot break.

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but she didn’t believe her encounter with him was entirely accidental.