

Excerpt

A Fairytale Bride A Chapel of Love Novella

Chapter One

Jefferson Talbert-Lyndon turned up his jacket collar and hunkered down in an easy chair by the front window of Bean There Done That, the trendy coffee shop in downtown Shenandoah Falls, Virginia.

He fired up his tablet, connected to the coffee shop's Internet, and scanned the headlines from the *Washington Post* and several cable news networks. Things had not improved since he'd left New York a week ago.

Jeff was still being pilloried by the president's political party for a series of articles he'd written for *New York, New York* about Joanna Tyrell-Durand, the nominee for the Supreme Court, and her husband's and brother's illegal lobbying on behalf of various oil and gas interests.

Jeff's stories had relied on information from Val Charonneau, a well-known climate-change advocate and one of Jeff's longtime friends. But it turned out Val's source of information, which included printouts of several damning e-mails, was the unreliable Helena Tyrell, the nominee's soon-to-be-ex sister-in-law.

So what had appeared to be a career-making scoop had turned into the blunder of the century, featuring a philandering husband and a vengeful wife. The embarrassment reached critical mass last week when Brendan Tyrell filed a defamation suit against *New York, New York*,

and on the same day, Jeff's father, Thomas Lyndon, the US ambassador to Japan, issued a statement saying that Jeff was a lifelong screwup who had no business trying to be a journalist.

Jeff had resigned from the magazine the next day and headed out here to the wilderness of the Blue Ridge Mountains in order to escape the carnage he'd unloosed on himself and his career.

He turned his tablet off. He needed to move on. But toward what?

If he wasn't a journalist and a writer, then who was he? The man his mother wanted him to become? The CEO of the Talbert Foundation?

He couldn't think of anything he wanted to do less than managing his family's money.

He returned his gaze to the picturesque town beyond the window. Despite the chilly spring rain, the town reminded him of a Norman Rockwell painting. The wrought-iron light posts lining Liberty Avenue were hung with American flags, in honor of the upcoming Memorial Day celebrations. Several of the storefronts were draped in red, white, and blue bunting.

His eye was drawn to the store across the street—a used bookshop called Secondhand Prose—which wasn't draped or decorated. Instead, like independent bookshops everywhere, this one had flyers for upcoming community events and a large orange "Help Wanted" sign taped to its front windows. The store reminded him of his favorite bookshop in Park Slope. He found himself smiling.

Until his gaze snapped to the dark-haired woman dressed in a blue raincoat and carrying a blue umbrella, standing at the corner in front of the shop.

What the hell was Aunt Pam doing in downtown Shenandoah Falls on a rainy Friday morning? Her husband, Mark Lyndon, was a US senator. Didn't they live in DC most of the time?

Oh, wait, the Senate had probably adjourned yesterday because of the holiday. Crap. He'd lost track of time up in his cabin. This was bad.

Aunt Pam was the only member of the Lyndon family, besides his father, who would recognize him on sight. Pam was the only family member who had remained a friend after his mom and dad's messy divorce. Although Jeff had a bunch of Lyndon cousins, he'd never met most of them. He'd visited the family compound at Charlotte's Grove only once in his life, when he was fourteen. That year his dad had been posted in Washington instead of someplace foreign.

Aunt Pam crossed the street and swept into the coffee shop as only Aunt Pam could—like she owned the place.

Jeff leaned his elbow on the table and planted his face in his hand. He stroked the patchy, one-week's growth of scruff on his face. He didn't have a lot of faith in his disguise.

He needed to get out of here. If Pam knew he was hiding out in Dad's fishing cabin, she'd tell Mom, and Mom would come running. Even worse, Pam would invite him to stay at Charlotte's Grove. Jeff couldn't think of anything more excruciating, especially after what Dad had done to him last week. Jeff might have Lyndon in his hyphenated name, but he'd never, ever been a member of Dad's family.

Jeff waited until Pam's attention was focused on the barista behind the counter. It was now or never.

He stood and scooted out the front door, then loped across Liberty Avenue, but had to wait for the traffic on Church Street before he could cross. The rain pelted him as he waited for the light to change.

Pam must have ordered black coffee because she came out of the coffee shop when he was halfway across Church Street.

He needed to hide. Now. He headed for the used bookstore, collar up, head down. A little jingle bell rang as he pushed through the front door.

Jeff loved the way old bookstores smelled, and this bookshop had a lot of old books on its shelves, which gave the place the aroma of bookbinder's glue and dry paper.

Jeff turned toward the window, intent on Pam's whereabouts, and discovered a cat tree, complete with a cat, sitting in the front window. The cat was gray and regarded Jeff with a pair of cool, amber eyes.

"Hello," he said in his most cat-friendly voice as he ducked down and glanced through the dusty window. Where was Pam going?

The cat arched its back and hissed.

"Shhh," he hissed back at the cat. Oh, good. Pam had gone into the real estate office across the way.

The cat growled.

"Sorry," Jeff said as he backed away.

He ought to leave the store, but the thought of going back to the solitary cabin on a rainy day left him slightly depressed. Besides, the only good reading material up there was a complete set of Hardy Boys mysteries, and he'd already been so desperate for entertainment that he'd plowed through all of them.

He had planned to download some reading material at the coffee shop, but Pam had put the kibosh on that. And now the coffee shop was officially off-limits. Maybe he should rethink. Maybe he should hunt down Val and wring his neck.

Or maybe he should just buy a couple of books.

He spent the next twenty minutes browsing the store. He selected four books on various aspects of American history, a couple of John Grisham novels that he found in a box in a dusty corner, and a clothbound edition of *Walden* that was shelved with a bunch of philosophy.

He'd been thinking a lot about Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau had spent years living alone and off the grid. Maybe the long-dead author had some tips for surviving cabin life.

Jeff headed for the checkout, where he stumbled over a second cat—a long-haired calico—intent on winding itself around his ankles. This one was like a puffball with legs. Jeff put his books on the counter and scooped the animal into his arms.

It settled, purring like the engine of his vintage Porsche 911—the car he'd reluctantly left in Brooklyn. He'd "borrowed" Mom's Land Rover from its garage at the house on the Hudson. He'd left a note so Mom wouldn't worry, but she would worry anyway.

He stood there a moment, stroking the cat, waiting for someone to arrive at the checkout, when he realized that he'd been browsing for almost half an hour without seeing another soul.

"Hello?" he called.

Crickets. The silence was almost deafening.

"Is anyone here?" He shouted a little louder this time.

Footsteps sounded from the back of the store, and a moment later a girl appeared, heading slowly in his direction with her face buried in a paperback. Dark, horn-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. Thick, curly chestnut hair tumbled around her narrow face like an untamed mane. She wore a T-shirt with a vintage book illustration of Cinderella under a faded orange plaid flannel shirt and rust-colored skintight jeans that showed her slender figure.

She looked up with a puckish smile. “Hello,” she said. “I heard you the first time. But I was at a particularly good part of the story.” She closed the book, marking the place with her finger.

He had to return the smile. “What are you reading?” he asked.

The girl’s pale cheeks colored. “Oh, just a paperback,” she said in an I-just-got-caught-with-my-hand-in-the-cookie-jar voice. She hid the book behind her back.

Then, with catlike grace of her own, she climbed over the box of books that blocked her path to the cash register and quickly transferred the secret novel to a shelf under the counter where he couldn’t see it.

“I’m sorry about the mess,” she said in a rush, her face growing pinker still. “The books are from a large estate sale, and I haven’t gotten around to cataloging and shelving them all.”

No doubt because she’d been spending her time reading paperback novels. What had she been reading? Mystery, suspense, *Fifty Shades of Grey*? He warmed at the thought.

Her eyes were the dark blue color of a fall sky, and the moment their gazes connected, he revised his estimation of her. She wasn’t just some girl in colorful clothing. She was older than he first thought, and behind those smart-girl glasses, she was stunningly beautiful.

Awareness jolted him right behind his navel.

He had all day with nothing to do. A crazy, halfway desperate idea popped into his head. “I saw the sign in the window,” he said as he gazed at the disorder around the checkout. “Guess you need some help, huh?”

She tilted her chin up a fraction. One eyebrow arched. “Do you know someone who loves books and is willing to work for nothing?” She had a low, sexy voice that did something strange and hot to his insides, while it erased his better judgment.

He rested his hip against the counter and, forgetting all about his recent troubles, he said,
“How about me?”