



## The Man You'll Marry

By *Debbie Macomber*

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It's all because of that so-called magic wedding dress with its absurd legend: the first man you meet when you receive this dress is the man you'll marry.

But Jill Morrison doesn't want to marry a man like Jordan Wilcox. A man so obsessed with his career that his marriage will always come a distant second...

Falling in love has nothing to do with it!

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Debbie Macomber, the author of *Hannah's List*, 1022 Evergreen Place, Summer on Blossom Street, 92 Pacific Boulevard, and *Twenty Wishes*, is a leading voice in women's fiction. Three of her novels have scored the #1 slot on the New York Times, USA Today, and Publishers Weekly bestseller lists. Debbie Macomber's *Mrs. Miracle* was Hallmark Channel's top-watched movie for 2009. Winner of the 2005 Quill Award for Best Romance, the prolific author has more than 140 million copies of her books in print worldwide.

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It had been one of those days.

One of those nightmarish days in which nothing had gone right. Nothing. Shelly Hansen told herself she should have seen the writing on the wall that morning when she tripped over the laces of her high-top purple running shoes as she hurried from the parking lot to her dinky office. She'd torn a hole in the knee of her brand-new pants and limped ingloriously into her building. The day had gone steadily downhill from there, with a package lost by the courier and—worst of all—the discovery that her bank account was overdrawn because a client's check had bounced.

By the time she returned to her apartment that evening she was in a black mood. All she needed to make her day complete was to have her mother pop in unannounced with a man in tow, convinced she'd found the perfect mate for Shelly.

She could only hope that wouldn't happen, but it was exactly the kind of thing Shelly had come to expect from her dear, sweet *desperate* mother. Shelly was twenty-eight now and still single, and her mother tended to view her unmarried status as a situation to be remedied. Since her father had decided not to retire, and her two brothers were both living out of state, Shelly had become the focus of her mother's obsessions. Marriage, closely followed by grandchildren, were the first and second items on Faith Hansen's agenda for her only daughter.

Never mind that Shelly felt content with her life just the way it was. Never mind that she wasn't interested in marriage and children...at least not yet. That time would come, she was sure, not now, but someday soon—or rather, some *year* soon.

For the moment, Shelly was absorbed in her career. She was proud of her work as a video producer, although she continually suffered the cash-flow problems of the self-employed. Her relaxation DVDs—seascapes, mountain scenes, a flickering fire in a brick fireplace, all with a background of classical music—were selling well. Her cat-sitting DVD had recently caught the attention of a major distributor, and she couldn't help believing she was on the brink of real success.

That was the good news.

Her mother hounding her to get married was the bad.

Tossing her woven Mexican bag and striped blue jacket onto the sofa, Shelly ventured into the kitchen and sorted through the packages in her freezer until she found something that halfway appealed to her for dinner. The frozen entrée was in the microwave when the doorbell chimed.

Her mother. The way her day was going, it *had* to be her mother. Groaning inwardly, she decided she'd be polite but insistent. Friendly but determined, and if her mother began talking about husbands, Shelly would simply change the subject.

But it wasn't Faith Hansen who stood outside her door. It was Elvira Livingston, the building manager, a warm, delightful but insatiably curious older woman.

"Good evening, dear," Mrs. Livingston greeted her. She wore heavy gold earrings and a billowing, bright yellow dress, quite typical attire. She clutched a large box protectively in both hands. "The postman dropped this off. He asked if I'd give it to you."

"For me, Mrs. L.?" Perhaps today wasn't a total loss, after all.

Elvira nodded, holding the package as though she wasn't entirely sure she should surrender it until she got every bit of relevant data. "The return address is California. Know anyone by the name of Millicent Bannister?"

"Aunt Milly?" Shelly hadn't heard from her mother's aunt in years.

"The package is insured," Mrs. Livingston noted, shifting the box just enough to examine the label again.

Shelly held out her hands to receive the package, but her landlady apparently didn't notice.

"I had to sign for it." This, too, seemed to be of great importance. "And there's a letter attached," Mrs. Livingston added.

Shelly had the impression that the only way she'd ever get her hands on the parcel was to let Mrs. Livingston open it first.

"I certainly appreciate all the trouble you've gone to," Shelly said, gripping the sides of the box and giving a firm tug. Mrs. Livingston released the package reluctantly. "Uh, thanks, Mrs. L. I'll talk to you soon."

The older woman's face fell with disappointment as Shelly began to close the door. Obviously, she was hoping for an invitation to stay. But Shelly wasn't in the mood for company, especially not the meddlesome, if well-meaning, Elvira Livingston.

Shelly sighed. This was what she got for renting an apartment with "character." She could be living in a modern town house with a sauna, pool and workout room in a suburban neighborhood. Instead she'd opted for a brick two-story apartment building in the heart of Seattle. The radiators hissed at all hours of the night in perfect harmony with the plumbing that groaned and creaked. But Shelly loved the polished hardwood floors, the high ceilings with their delicate crystal light fixtures and the bay windows that overlooked Puget Sound. She could do without the sauna and other amenities, even if it meant occasionally dealing with an eccentric busybody like Mrs. Livingston.

Eagerly she carried the package into the kitchen and set it on her table. Although she wondered what Aunt

Milly had sent her, she carefully peeled the letter free, then just as carefully removed the plain brown wrapper.

The box was an old one, she noticed, the cardboard heavier than that currently used by stores. Shelly gently pried off the lid. She found layers of tissue paper wrapped around... a dress. Shelly pushed aside the paper and lifted the garment from its box. She gasped in surprise as the long white dress gracefully unfolded.

This wasn't just any dress. It was a wedding dress, an exquisitely sewn lace-and-satin wedding dress.

Surely it couldn't have been Aunt Milly's... No, that couldn't be... It wasn't possible.

Anxious now, her heart racing, Shelly refolded the dress and placed it back in the box. She reached for the envelope and saw that her hands were trembling as she tore it open.

My Dearest Shelly,

I trust this letter finds you happy and well. You've frequently been in my thoughts the past few days. I suppose you could blame Dr. Phil for that. Though now that I think about it, it may have been Oprah. As you'll have gathered, I often watch those talk shows these days. John would have disapproved, but he's been gone eight years now. Of course, if I wanted to, I'd watch them if he were still alive. John could disapprove all he wanted, but it wouldn't do him a bit of good. Never did. He knew it and loved me, anyway.

I imagine you're wondering why I'm mailing you my wedding dress and what Dr. Phil and Oprah have to do with it. (Yes, that is indeed my infamous wedding dress.) I suspect the sight of it has put the fear of God into you. I wish I could've been there to see your face when you realized what I was sending you. No doubt you're familiar with the story; everyone in the family's known about it for years. Since you're fated to marry the first man you meet once the dress is in your hands, your instinct is probably to burn the thing immediately!

Now that I reconsider, I'm certain it was Dr. Phil. He had a show recently featuring pets as companions to the elderly, lifting their spirits and the like. The man being interviewed brought along a cute little Scottish terrier and that was when the old seamstress drifted into my mind. Her name was Mrs. McDonald—or was it McDonnell? At any rate, I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew the six-o'clock news was on.

While I slept I had a dream about you. This was no ordinary dream, either. I saw you plain as day, standing beside a tall young man, your blue eyes bright and shining. You were so happy, so truly in love. But what astonished me was the wedding dress you were wearing.

Mine.

The very dress the old Scottish woman sewed for me all those years ago. It seemed to me I was receiving a message of some sort and that I'd best not ignore it. Neither should you! You're about to embark on the grandest adventure of your life, my dear. Keep me informed!

Believe me, Shelly, I know what you're thinking. I well remember my own thoughts the day that seamstress handed me the wedding dress. I'd ordered something completely different from her—a simple evening gown—so I was shocked to say the least. Marriage was the *last* thing on my mind! I had a career, back in the days when it was rare for a woman to attend college, let alone graduate from law school.

You and I are a great deal alike, Shelly. We value our independence. It takes a special kind of man to be married to women like us. And you, my dear niece, are about to meet that one special man just the way I did.

All my love,

*Aunt Milly*

P.S. You're only the second person to wear the dress. Never before have I felt anything like this.

Perhaps it's the beginning a new tradition!

With hands that trembled even more fiercely now, Shelly folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope.

Her heart was pounding, and she could feel the sweat beading her forehead.

The phone rang then, and more from instinct than any desire to talk, Shelly picked up the receiver.

"Hello." It hadn't dawned on her until that moment that the caller might be her mother, wanting to bring over a man for her to meet. Any man her mother introduced would only add to the growing nightmare, but—

"Shelly, it's Jill. Are you all right? You sound... strange."

"Jill." Shelly was so relieved that her knees went weak. "Thank heaven it's you."

"What's wrong?"

Shelly hardly knew where to begin. "My aunt Milly's wedding dress just arrived. I realize that won't mean anything to you unless you've heard the family legend about my aunt Milly and uncle John."

"I haven't."

"Of course you haven't, otherwise you'd understand what I'm going through," Shelly snapped, then felt guilty for being short-tempered with her best friend. Making an effort to compose herself, she explained, "I've just been mailed a wedding dress—one that's been in my family for over sixty years—with the clear understanding that I'll be wearing it soon myself."

"You didn't even tell me you were dating anyone." Jill hadn't managed to disguise the hurt in her voice.

"I'm *not!* And I'm not getting married, either. If anyone should know that, it's you."

"Then your aunt intends you to wear it when you do get married."

"There's more to it than that," Shelly cried. "Listen. Aunt Milly—who's really my mother's aunt, a few years older than my grandmother—became an attorney just after the Second World War. She worked hard to earn her law degree and had decided to dedicate her life to her career."

"In other words, she'd planned never to marry."

"Exactly."

"But apparently she did."

"Yes, and the story of how that happened has been in the family for years. It seems Aunt Milly had all her clothes professionally made. As the story goes, she took some lovely white material to an old Scottish woman who had a reputation as the best seamstress around. Milly needed an evening dress for some formal event that was coming up—business-related, of course. The woman took her measurements and told her the dress would be finished by the end of the week."

"And?" Jill prompted when Shelly hesitated.

"And...when Milly returned for the dress the old woman sat her down with a cup of tea."

"The dress wasn't ready?"

"Oh, it was ready, all right, only it wasn't the dress Aunt Milly had ordered. The Scottish woman said she was gifted with the 'sight.'"

"She was clairvoyant?"

"So she claimed," Shelly said, breathing in deeply.

"The old woman told my aunt that when she began the dress a vision came to her. A clear vision that involved Milly. This vision showed Milly getting married. The old woman was so convinced of it that she turned what was supposed to be a simple evening dress into an elaborate wedding gown, with layers of satin and lace and lots of pearls."

"It sounds beautiful," Jill said with a sigh.

"Of course it's beautiful—but don't you see?"

"See what?"

It was all Shelly could do not to groan with frustration. "The woman insisted my aunt Milly would marry within the year. It happened, too, just the way that seamstress said, right down to the last detail."

Jill sighed again. "That's the most romantic story I've heard in ages."

"It isn't romance," Shelly argued, "it's fate interrupting one's life! It's being a...pawn! It's destiny whether you like it or not. I know that seems crazy, but I've grown up hearing this story. It was as though my aunt Milly didn't have any choice in the matter."

"And your aunt Milly mailed you the dress?"

"Yes," Shelly wailed. "Now do you understand why I'm upset?"

"Frankly, no. Come on, Shelly, it's just an old dress. You're overreacting. You make it sound as if you're going to marry the next man you meet."

Shelly gasped audibly. "How'd you know?" she whispered.

## **Users Review**

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