

CRAZY
LITTLE THING
CALLED
LOVE

• • • a destination wedding novel • • •

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For Sonia, Shari, and Mary, my Preferred Readers:
Writing novels is easier knowing the three of you have my back.
Just remember: I called “dibs” first!

• • •

Friends . . . they cherish one another’s hopes. They are kind
to one another’s dreams.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817-1862),

AMERICAN AUTHOR



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ONE



What we once enjoyed we can never lose.
All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.
—HELEN KELLER (1880–1968), AMERICAN AUTHOR

Thousands—even millions—of women had routine choose-a-church, select-a-dress, plan-a-reception kinds of weddings.

For some unknown reason, she was not one of those women.

Vanessa scanned the brochures spread out across the scarred top of her mission-style coffee table, her plate of Chinese beef and broccoli shoved to one corner. Photographs of white sandy beaches curving around sparkling oceans presented an enticing mirage for a destination wedding. And then she reread the list of medical workshops her husband-to-be would be attending two days after they exchanged *I do's*.

TIAs AND STROKES: STATE OF THE ART APPROACH
ADVANCED AIRWAY ENDOSCOPY COURSE
HOT TOPICS IN PEDIATRIC EMERGENCIES

Not the typical themes for a honeymoon following a romantic destination wedding. She'd be lounging on a tropical beach, sipping a refreshing drink flavored with pineapple and coconut, adorned with a tiny paper umbrella. Meanwhile, Ted would be

safe from the sun's rays, watching PowerPoint presentations, and earning Continuing Medical Education credits.

Ted leaned forward, shuffling through the pamphlets, his brow furrowed behind his silver wire-rim glasses, his dark hair flopping onto his forehead. With a well-practiced motion, he smoothed it back with the palm of his hand.

"Where's the one I'm looking for? Bahamas . . . Hawaii . . . Aha! Florida." He opened the trifold paper, laying it on top of all the other brochures with a flourish, as if he were presenting some previously undiscovered medical cure. "There. I know it's not as exotic as the other locations, but it offers the best selection of workshops for CMEs."

Vanessa took a sip of her soda, her glass of Coke flavored with a squeeze of real lemon carrying the punch of caffeine she needed. The "Knife and Gun Club" had been out in full force last night, and she'd seen familiar faces for the full twelve hours of her paramedic shift. Some of the same instigators who'd been at the bar brawl she'd reported to at the beginning of the evening also showed up at the subsequent knife fight in an alley and again at the shooting at one of the seedier Denver apartment complexes. After more than five years as a paramedic, she shouldn't be surprised by anything. And, most days, she wasn't.

She needed to concentrate, which was a challenge when all she wanted was to give in to her body's demand for sleep. Picking a destination-wedding site based on what medical conference to attend cued discordant background music in her mind—an off-key version of "Isn't It Romantic?" Vanessa understood the need to multitask, but was it necessary to coordinate their wedding with the needs of Ted's medical career?

"Can't we just stick with the original plan?" She indulged in a morsel of her seasoned beef before continuing. "Get married

in our church here in Denver like we talked about? Keep things simple?”

“Don’t you see how perfect this is?” Ted waved his chopsticks at the brochure, somehow managing to not drop any sauce on his chinos. “I’m always behind on my education credits. It’s almost October, and look how I’m scrambling to get some before the end of the year.”

“Well, yes.” Vanessa resisted the urge to say, *Tell me something I don’t know*. Both their schedules wreaked havoc on their romance. “But won’t a destination wedding cost more than a local one?”

“I’m going to have to travel to a conference anyway, right? We’ll kill two birds with one stone . . .”

Vanessa rubbed her temples, a few more notes of “Isn’t It Romantic?” interrupting Ted’s logic as his words lobbed a verbal rock at her wedding plans.

“. . . combining the cost of the travel for the wedding and the conference. What’s our projected guest list? About one hundred thirty people? Destination weddings are expected to be much smaller—even as few as thirty guests. And we don’t pay their travel costs.” Ted settled back on the couch, a smile spreading across his face. “What do you think, Nessa?”

This was one of the things she loved about Ted: he was practical. But sometimes maybe a little too practical. She leaned one elbow on the table, running her fingers through her hair, which she’d released from its customary braid. She stopped when the still-unfamiliar engagement ring snagged in the strands and twisted around her finger. The classic-cut round diamond set off on either side with six smaller diamonds was just a half-size too large. When would she find time to get it resized? She was either on the clock for four days straight, or off—and recovering. Trying to sleep or catch up on paying bills, maybe clean her

apartment, while checking her in-box to see if she'd received any response to her applications to physician assistant school.

And now she was planning a wedding. Or rather, replanning a wedding.

"I guess it makes sense—"

"Of course it does." Ted reached for his water, draining the last of the liquid from the bottle. "Our schedules are crazy, and I don't want to be behind on CME next year, too. By planning the wedding for the April conference, I'm getting a jump start on credits."

Brilliant. A bit lacking in the relationship category, but she hadn't fallen in love with Ted because of the way he'd swept her off her feet with flowers and chocolates and Hallmark cards. Unlike their adrenaline-fueled jobs, the pace of their romance had been slow, Ted's patience enabling their friendship to ease into a love that would last through whatever the future held for them.

"So where in Florida is this meeting?"

"It's in the Panhandle, I think." Ted flipped the colored flyer over. "Let's see . . . oh, that's right. Destin. We'd fly from Denver into Atlanta and then—"

Destin?

No.

Vanessa stiffened as if she were in the middle of a childhood game of freeze tag. Ted's verbal "touch" dragged her into the past and turned her into an ice sculpture. She needed to tell Ted no . . . and no . . . and no. But she needed to be able to breathe to form words.

As if in slow motion, she curled her fingers into fists. Forced one inhale. One exhale. Her gaze landed on the potted philodendron, wilted from neglect, which sat on her dining room table. What had the well-meaning ER nurse said when she'd

handed Vanessa the plant for her birthday months ago? “*Everyone needs a plant or two in their home—and it’s almost impossible to kill a philodendron.*” Imagine that—she’d performed the impossible.

Vanessa twisted around to face Ted where he sat on the couch, popping a piece of spicy shrimp into his mouth.

“We need to pick another medical conference. Another location.”

“But this is the best one.”

Vanessa tapped her fist against her mouth. She was only going to say this once. Once would be enough. “Ted, I was married before, remember? In Florida? And Destin is near where I lived—where I was married.” Vanessa moved aside the top brochure and studied the others. Ted would understand. He always did. Maybe they could plan a nice destination wedding on a beach overshadowed by a dormant volcano? “Let’s find another conference location for our destination wedding—”

“Is that all that’s bothering you?” Ted interrupted her, reaching down to pull her away from the coffee table and up onto the couch with him, ignoring how the pamphlets scattered onto the floor. “Nessa, that was years ago. You’re not that impulsive teenager anymore. You’re a grown woman, in love with me. You don’t have to be afraid of your past.”

“I’m not *afraid* of my past.” She maintained eye contact. Kept her voice level. See? She was calm. “I just prefer not to have a second wedding in Florida.”

“Babe, you haven’t told me a lot about what happened, but I know it was some kind of shotgun wedding—”

Vanessa pushed away from him. “Not *shotgun*. I wasn’t pregnant!”

“Sorry. Wrong word choice. I meant *whirlwind*. Crazy. Look, I don’t care about your first marriage. We’re having a real

wedding this time.” Tugging her back into his arms, he kissed the top of her head. “Don’t you see how even more perfect this will be? You go back to Florida and have the wedding you always wanted. We’ll go down a few days early with the wedding party and a few close friends and family and do some fun things. Snorkel. Parasail. Whatever you want. Have a one-of-a-kind wedding—our wedding.”

Vanessa settled against Ted’s shoulder, snuggling closer as his arm wrapped around her waist, and inhaled the faint musky scent of his aftershave. Listening to Ted, she could just begin to imagine going back to Destin. To get married. Again.

“I haven’t been to Florida in years—not since I left for college, really. Well, except for my brother’s high school graduation. And occasional holidays.” But how could she explain to him that she’d never made time to drive over the Mid-Bay Bridge, to walk along the beach in Destin? That yes, she was afraid of ghosts. Specifically, of one particular ghost she might see when she strolled along the shore.

Could she do it?

“Trust me, Nessa.”

Wasn’t that exactly why she was marrying Ted? Because she trusted him enough to say yes when he proposed?

“Maybe you’re right.” She picked the medical brochure up off the floor and gazed at the tranquil photo of white sandy beaches again. “*Where* we marry isn’t the most important thing—it’s *who* we marry. And who we are when we get married.”

“Exactly.”

But could she do it?

She’d been an immature eighteen-year-old girl reacting to circumstances the first time she said, “I do.” Now? She was twenty-eight. She knew who she was. What she wanted. Why she was getting married—and whom she was marrying.

There was nothing rash about marrying Ted. Nothing at all.

“And if I get in a few CME credit hours, all the better.” Ted sounded as if it were all decided. “I won’t be in classes all day. We can walk along the beach, ride Jet Skis, eat at some nice restaurants. Destin will be a great place to honeymoon.”

Vanessa chose to focus on the “it’ll be a great place to honeymoon” part of Ted’s comment. “When’s the conference?”

“The first week in April.”

A little more than six months from now. Absolutely doable. “We’ll have to cut down the guest list.”

“Saving money, remember?”

Vanessa swallowed her groan, chasing it with a gulp of her lemony cola. Ted wasn’t turning their wedding into a low-budget bridal event. She’d already gone that route once—her first wedding had cost less than a hundred dollars, including the motel room. She was all for practicality, but her parents had provided them a generous budget. They could afford a few splurges.

“Ted, I’m agreeing to combine the wedding with your conference. But, like you said, this is my chance—our chance—to have the wedding we want. So, yes, it will be small. Probably no more than thirty or forty guests. But I want our wedding to be beautiful. Elegant.”

“Absolutely, babe. I want you to be happy. I’ll handle the conference registration, but before I do, why don’t you call the hotel—” He circled the phone number with ink. “—and make certain they can accommodate a small wedding? Wait a minute . . .”

“What? What are you thinking?”

Ted tapped the end of the pen against his chin. “Don’t you have a vacation week coming up?”

“Ye-es. I have the week after next off. To relax. *R-e-l-a-x.*”

“This is perfect. You can fly down to Destin and talk to the wedding coordinator face-to-face. Check out florists . . .”

Of course his plan sounded perfect to him—he’d be back here triaging emergencies in the ER while she hopped on a plane and handled the wedding details on her own, all the while dodging her past.

“I’ll think about it.” She forced a smile, hoping she looked like a happy bride-to-be, eager to plan their wedding. “Let’s keep making a list. What else?”

“Invitations—and maybe those things they do nowadays . . .”

Vanessa scrawled a numbered list on the back of the take-out receipt from the Chinese restaurant. “Save-the-date announcements?”

“Yes, those.”

Vanessa wrote down the number three and circled it. “I also want to do engagement photos.”

“Engagement photos? How expensive are those?”

“Ted, you cannot ask ‘How much?’ every time we talk about wedding details. Most photographers have wedding packages, and engagement photos are included. I’ll look into it. And—” She held up her hand, fending off his next question. “—I’ll outline a basic budget, okay?”

“I was going to ask if you think the photographer would come to the hospital and take photos of us there.”

Vanessa dropped the list, pushing away from Ted, gathering up their plates and disposable chopsticks. “Not funny.”

“Who said I was kidding?” Once in the kitchen, Ted leaned against the white tile counter while she rinsed the dishes under scalding hot water and loaded them into the stainless steel dishwasher. “I’m not saying we have to wear scrubs. But you’ve got to admit the hospital is our life. We could get a picture by the ambulance or the nurses’ station. It’d be fun.”

Proof that she needed to let go of the idea of a normal wedding. Again. But was this worth fighting about? Probably not. After all, marriage was about compromise, right? Planning the wedding was giving her plenty of opportunity to practice. Creative engagement photos, check. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Ted bent to open the cabinet beneath the sink, talking over his shoulder. “So, with a small wedding, we’ll both have just one person in the wedding party, right? I’ll have a best man, and you’ll have a maid of honor.”

“Sure.” Even the simplest of weddings were complicated—not that she hadn’t learned that inescapable truth years ago. Now to figure out who could be her bridal attendant. Somebody. *Anybody*.

Nobody.

She retrieved another can of soda and a slice of precut lemon from her container in the fridge, along with a bottle of water for Ted. “Why don’t we skip the whole best-man-for-you, maid-of-honor-for-me tradition?”

“Really?” Ted looked up from loading soap into the dishwasher. “I should ask my brother to be my best man. Tradition, right?”

“Oh.” Right. Tradition. Vanessa shrugged. “I’m sure I can think of someone.”

Because, somehow, some way, getting married for the second time would be easier than the first. It had to be—even if she had to hire someone to be her maid of honor.