

*Virginia*  
WEDDINGS

THREE ROMANCES PERSEVERE  
IN THE COMMONWEALTH

LAURALEE  
BLISS



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## Chapter 1

Daphne Elliot cringed at the melodious sound erupting from the storehouse. Rodney was at it again, serenading his work with song. He burst into a merry tune the moment he arrived for work in the morning. It unnerved her to see him floating on a cloud with a song of love on his lips—and from a young man to boot. “Tweet, tweet,” she mumbled. “Love’s sweet song, blah. A pain in the pinfeathers, I call it.”

“I heard that, Miss Elliot,” said Rodney James, who came in carrying several bags of lawn seed on his shoulder. He plopped the bags on the floor of the garden center with a grunt. “Sounds familiar.”

“It’s from the wise old owl in *Bambi*. I don’t wear these glasses of mine just for seeing, you know. There’s great wisdom in age.”

Rodney leaned over the counter with a boyish grin plastered on his face. Shocks of wavy dark hair framed his thin face that boasted luminous brown eyes. To Daphne, these young people seemed to be getting younger all the time.

“The problem with you, Miss Elliot, is that you aren’t in love.”

“You’re quite mistaken, young man. I am very much in love.” She picked up a feather duster and aimed it at the store shelves brimming with planting supplies, seed packets, fertilizers, insect control, and decorative planters. “With this, and this, and finally”—she pointed to a box of plant food—“this.”

Rodney erupted into laughter, bringing a smile to Daphne’s lips, which were colored a deep wine with swipes of her favorite lipstick. Despite the songs of love that permeated his work, Daphne enjoyed having the young man around. Rodney was prompt and helpful and did more around the nursery than anyone else she had ever hired. And he did it all without complaining.

She sighed, staring at the Garden Center Nursery that had been a part of her life since she was a young girl. It seemed unbelievable that she was still able to run this place. Her father opened the center back in the early 1950s. Normally a son would have inherited the family business, but her older brother, Charles, would have nothing to do with it. He lived out on the West Coast, far away from her home in Virginia. In fact, Daphne rarely heard from him other than the annual Christmas card that included a picture of him, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. When Daphne looked at the picture of Charles and his flock, she often wondered why life had passed her by. Then she would come back to

the shop, work in the greenhouse, and find herself renewed. The feel of the cool dirt between her fingers and the flowers that bloomed from her efforts gave her a peace that this was where she was meant to be. Marriage and children were never a part of God's big plan for her life. This business was the plan, and the good Lord had prospered it far beyond her imagination.

Over the years, Daphne had many helpers come and go in the business. For a long time, she had a co-owner named Phyllis, an old friend from her high school days. She later became ill and had to leave. Daphne never once entertained the idea of a man becoming a co-owner. The men she preferred working at the shop had to be less than thirty years of age so they would do what she expected. They would be like sons receiving instructions from their matriarch, or so she liked to think.

By far Rodney had been the best of her previous employees. A lady at church recommended him. He had worked for Daphne in her garden shop just a short time before announcing his engagement to a young lady named Melanie. Six months later, they were married. A year had passed since then, and Rodney still carried a song of love on his lips. While Daphne disliked the connotation, she couldn't help but marvel at his beautiful singing voice. She informed him that he should try out for the summer theater program. Rodney only laughed and went off whistling another love song.

"There must be somebody I can fix you up with," Rodney said now, adjusting the sign advertising the lawn seed for sale.

With the spring planting season underway, Daphne made certain the store had a good supply of lawn seed. Many customers came in, complaining that the winter weather had killed their grass, the dreaded crabgrass had taken over like an invading army, or the heat of the past summer had steamed their lawns to a drab brown.

"How about in your church?" Rodney continued.

"Really, the only thing that needs fixing up around here is the sign for my store, which you promised to do yesterday."

"I'll go get the ladder. The hammer and nails are—"

"In the back on the workbench." Daphne returned to tidying up the counter after a long day of sales. Spring was the busiest time of the year, with everyone seeking to turn their property into bountiful gardens of flowers or fresh produce. Daphne had to bite her tongue when one customer came in asking for tomato plants. She patiently explained that it was too early to plant them now and she must wait for the last frost to be over. The bewildered customer chose packets of tomato seeds then and said she would grow her own. Daphne kept any further comments to herself. She was far too outspoken anyway.

At home she had no one to debate her daily struggles in life with but her

dog, Chubs. Most evenings, the dog lay at her feet with his mouth hanging open, waiting for her to scratch his belly or throw him dog biscuits. Daphne never thought she would live her life as a spinster, but that must be the way God wanted it. Perhaps He knew no one could live with her tongue. Yet she refused to believe the good things in life had passed her by, even when gazing at her brother's many children and grandchildren. *There's more to life than marriage and children*, she told herself. *It all depends on how you look at it. And I'm going to be content right where I am.*

The bell to the door tinkled at that moment. Daphne looked at the clock and frowned. She had forgotten to turn the sign on the door, signaling that the shop was closed for the day. In the door walked a typical farmer of the region, dressed in dirty overalls with grass sticking to his knees, wearing a straw hat. A strange scar lay near the corner of his right eye, encompassing the right side of his cheek and extending to his neck. She wondered what could have caused such a scar. He did not look her way but scanned the aisles as if trying to decide what he wanted. Daphne stood watching his uncertainty for a moment before asking if she could help.

"I want to plant a flower garden," he said, "but I don't know how."

*Oh dear. This is going to make me close up late. What will I do about Chubs who must be let out on time or he'll have an accident?*

At that moment Rodney came in, lugging a small stepladder. He struggled with it, nearly losing his grip and bumping the ladder into the farmer's legs. He managed a smile and headed out the door. Daphne wanted to inform the man that she was about to close up shop and ask if he'd come back tomorrow. Instead, she came out from behind the counter. "Follow me." She proceeded to point out the various materials he would need to prepare a flower bed—humus, peat moss, fertilizer.

"I need all that just for flowers?" he asked, scratching a mound of gray hair beneath the straw hat he wore.

"It's important if you want your investment to survive. If you want to dig a few holes in this awful soil we have and throw in a few plants, you'll have a garden for about a week."

He raised an eyebrow. "You've got a lot of spunk there."

Daphne felt the heat rise in her cheeks. *And you have a lot of nerve coming in here when I'm about to close.* She clamped her mouth shut to keep the words from escaping. "It's been a long day, and I'm closing."

"I'm sorry. You looked as if you were open, and the sign there says—"

"Yes, I know. I forgot to turn it." Daphne pushed back a wisp of gray hair. "If you would like any of the materials I was telling you about, Rodney here will gladly help load them into your car." She glanced over to see a rustic truck parked

in the lot, with mud up to the middle of the wheels. Wherever he lived, the place was hip-deep in mud, not uncommon with the spring rains. "Spring is actually an excellent time to put in a garden, with the soil nice and moist. I usually begin my flower seeds in February, replant them in small pots, then put them out in the greenhouse to harden them off. I have some excellent varieties here at the nursery that should do well, depending on where you wish to plant them."

The farmer crossed his arms and leaned against the side of the shop. "Well, I want to plant flowers in my front yard, you see."

"I'm certain your wife will enjoy looking at them out the window."

"I'm sure she would if she were alive. She died five years ago."

Daphne looked away. Rodney again peered at her, this time wearing a slight smile on his face. She could almost hear his thoughts. *Aha! An eligible widower and in your age range.* How she would love to shake that young man for grinning like a cat who nipped the canary, or more like Cupid ready to shoot the arrow. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you. I miss her, but I'm finding out the hard way that I can get along in life on my own."

She felt an internal sigh of relief creep up within her. At least he had not come here with some ulterior motive. She'd had a few customers in her day who sought more than just planting material or a healthy evergreen tree. They were also on the prowl. She would not soon forget Larson McCall a year ago. He had been congenial, offering her advice about her nursery, even taking her to the Hardware Store Restaurant for dinner. Only when Rodney found out the man intended to steal her business did she realize how close she had come to disaster, and all because of a yearning within her to enjoy the company of a man. Between the loss she'd suffered when she was young and the duping by Larson when she was older, she wanted to stay far away from any hint of a relationship. "Well, we have many varieties that will look wonderful in a garden spot. Of course, you also need to decide if you want annuals that only live a season or perennials that will bloom year after year."

"What would you say?"

"I like both. I plant different annuals each year. Perennials will come up in the same place I plant them. Since annuals live only a season, you can change the varieties." Daphne began showing him the different plants for sale. When she glanced up, she found his gaze centered not on plants but on her. Daphne felt her face grow warm and a strange flutter begin in her chest. Her heart was acting up again. Soon she would have to sit down and put her feet up, as the doctor had ordered on her last exam. "Excuse me, Mr.—"

"Jack McNary."

"Mr. McNary, I'm afraid I'll have to stop now. I'm getting a little tired. If you

want anything, Rodney will be glad to help you.”

A look of concern flashed across his rugged face, decorated with sparse wrinkles. His bushy gray eyebrows lowered over a set of ice blue eyes. “Are you all right?”

“It’s been a long day.”

“I’m mighty sorry. I’ll come back tomorrow. When do you open?”

“Nine a.m.”

He tipped his large straw hat at her. “Nine a.m.,” he said, as if setting up some kind of date, then strode off toward the truck.

Rodney came down from the ladder and whistled while twirling the hammer. “Miss Elliot, now that was a D.E. if ever I saw one.”

Daphne knew what he meant. *Divine Encounter*. In her eyes, she saw nothing divine about it—just a customer wanting a few posies to spruce up an otherwise dreary life. In fact, he was no different from her, though she hated to admit it. “Help me close up, Rodney. I’m feeling those chest pains again.”

“I’ll close up. You go on home and rest.”

She smiled her thanks. That was another good quality of Rodney. She could trust him with closing the store tighter than a drum and making sure the money was locked in the safe. She was thankful she had already finished the books for the day. Rodney offered to do the bookkeeping on his computer at home, but Daphne preferred the old-fashioned way, in a long memo book. In the back of the store, she kept her father’s books, etched in his stately handwriting. Occasionally he had allowed her to do the books as a young woman. Daphne marveled at how her writing had changed little with the passage of time, even if her heart acted up on her. At times she astonished young Rodney with her sharp memory when it came to ordering supplies for the store. Rodney told her she was a walking computer and could probably give the customers their change without using a cash register.

Daphne inserted the key into the door of her home, situated a mile from the nursery. Inside she heard Chubs barking his customary greeting, which also indicated his eagerness to go out. “Yes, I hear you,” she told him, taking the red leash off a hook near the door. The dog, a medium-sized mutt of mixed breeds with a stomach that sagged near the ground, wagged his tail furiously as she hooked the leash to his collar.

Outside, a cool spring breeze blew. From her porch Daphne could look out across the busy street to the wide expanse of the Blue Ridge Mountains stretched out lazily before her. She enjoyed these spring evenings when the mountains shone crystal clear, displaying all their glory. When summer came, the haze would often mar the view she had come to love since she was a child.

The property Daphne owned once belonged to the Elliot family, but now she was the sole proprietor with brother Charles off in another state raising his

family. Both her parents were long gone, as were numerous aunts and uncles. Daphne realized that with the passage of time came the pain of losing friends and family members once close to her. It gave her a deeper understanding of how fragile life could be and left her considering her own time remaining on earth. What would she do about the house and the business if she were to pass on suddenly? If she left it to Charles, he would sell it all in a heartbeat.

She then thought of ambitious, love-struck Rodney. He would make a fine businessman, if he could keep his head on earth and out of the clouds. If he took over the business, then he and his wife, Melanie, could live here instead of that crowded apartment. Daphne coaxed Chubs back into the small home. She would ask the young man about it. If he agreed, she would call her lawyer and make the arrangements.

Daphne went into the kitchen and looked in the cupboards, ready for her old standby—a can of soup—for dinner. It made no sense for her to cook elaborate meals when she was the only one to eat it. Sometimes she invited the ladies from church over for a meal and even once had Rodney and Melanie to dinner, but she found little interest in cooking for one person. *It's too much of a bother*, she would argue, and usually the argumentative side won out. Daphne reached for her favorite flavor, chicken and rice, and began heating it over the circle of blue flame on the gas stove.

The ruffle of fur at her legs sent her glancing downward at Chubs. He was wagging his tail politely. “No soup for you,” Daphne told him. She opened a can of dog food and spooned it into a plastic bowl, which Chubs downed in several healthy bites.

When the soup was warm, she carried it over to the table, pulled out the evening paper, and began reading. This was the typical nightly fare—a dinner of soup or some other quick dish, and the evening paper to go along with it. Then she would sit in the family room to work on a bit of embroidery while watching a game show, or she would catch up on a favorite mystery novel. Afterward she would read her Bible, then climb into bed promptly at nine. Nothing swayed her schedule unless it was a matter of life and death. Daphne had to be on a schedule, or those pains in her chest would rise up to remind her.

After glancing through the newspaper, Daphne washed out her bowl, then moseyed over to the sitting room and turned on a lamp. She looked at her embroidery and her mystery novel, but neither of them interested her. Instead, her gaze fell on several old photo albums collecting dust on the bookshelf. Her hand shook slightly as she reached out and withdrew one. Dust bunnies flew. Daphne settled herself in a worn chair and opened the pages with a slight creaking sound. The white background where the photos rested was now yellowed with age. She had put these pictures in the albums close to fifteen years ago. They had been a

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## AGELESS LOVE

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jumbled mess in her bedroom drawer until she'd finally decided one day to take them out and arrange them in the albums.

Now she began opening each page, tracing the people in the pictures with her finger. The Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. A yellow framed house. A harvest festival. She paused at a page and stared. Piles of lumber occupied the background. And there he was—young, handsome Henry Morgan, similar to Rodney with his enthusiasm for life and for love. He had bushy black hair, a trimmed beard, and blue eyes. And he loved working with the trees. Working as a lumberjack was his trade. He and the trees were similar—strong, able to withstand harsh storms, giving shade and protection when the fierce summer sun came forth. He was her shelter and her love until he was cruelly taken away one dreadful day.

Even after all these years, the tears still gathered in her eyes. How could he have died, leaving her alone to face life? She shut the book when a wave of pain filtered through her chest. Her hand fumbled on the stand for the bottle of medicine that the doctor had prescribed for these symptoms. She placed one under her tongue. *I can't keep doing this. It's been forty years, and nothing has changed. Henry is dead. . . even though I was never able to wear my wedding dress or hold his arm while walking up the aisle of the church. Our children died with him. I can't do anything but forget.* If only she could.