

With
This
Ring

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NONFICTION

The Gift of Love



With This Ring

Amy Clipston



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

With This Ring

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For my super-awesome, amazing, fabulous, talented critique partner, Kathleen Fuller. I'm beyond grateful for your precious friendship. You are the absolute best!





CHAPTER 1

Dakota swiped her hand over her forehead and moved the steamer over a wedding gown. Nearby, a dehumidifier and air-moving machine hummed. Her arm ached, but she ignored the pain and glanced around the large workroom at the back of her boutique, the Fairytale Bridal Shop. Several racks of gowns waiting their turn to be restored stared back at her.

It had been a month since late January, when the pipes had burst in her store. The leak had not only damaged the floor, ceiling, and walls but also waterlogged the first shipment of this year's spring line—a huge investment that had cost her thousands. And thanks to the twenty-three-page lease agreement she barely understood and the ridiculously high deductible on her insurance policy, her only choice was to steam and try to restore the gowns herself. She didn't even want to think about the money she'd lost on the ones that couldn't be saved, but she wasn't giving up. She would find a way to recoup as much as she could. She was a Jamison, after all, which

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meant she wasn't a quitter. She'd keep fighting, no matter the obstacles.

But first she had to work on getting these gowns back out on the floor. Trying on dresses was a vital part of the bridal shopping experience, and customers couldn't imagine a wrinkled gown being their dream dress. She was losing business, and if she continued to do so, she'd see her own dream—that of owning this boutique—go up in flames after only two years. Or maybe more accurately, in this case, the dream would go down the drain . . .

Dismissing her negative thoughts, she continued steaming the chiffon A-line gown before her. Its bikini neckline and asymmetric draped bodice had made it one of her favorites from the spring line. She was certain this was one gown that would sell as soon as she hung it back out front with the rest of her collection.

The bell on the front door dinged, and Dakota jumped with a start.

Customers!

She turned off the steamer and stowed it before brushing her hands down her gray top and black pencil skirt. Hoping she looked presentable, she hurried out to the front, where an instrumental version of Jason Mraz's "I'm Yours" serenaded her from the speakers placed throughout her boutique. She shook her head and smiled. She had tried to create the perfect romantic playlist, hoping it would give the customers warm feelings about the dresses in her shop. She'd always believed the little details of her store mattered. But now as she moved past the half-empty shelves of shoes and clutches, the sparse racks of wedding gowns and bridesmaids' dresses, the displays of tuxedos, and the elegant chairs and chaises arranged in front of the dressing rooms, she worried her limited stock would do just the opposite and discourage customers from purchasing.

"Welcome to Fairytale. I'm Dakota. How may I help you?"

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Her black stilettos clacked along the white tile floor as she came around the counter. Waiting for her were two young women who appeared to be in their midtwenties, clad in matching cranberry-colored puffer coats. Based on their similar facial structures, she assumed they were related—possibly even sisters. Their matching coats made them look cute and youthful.

One of the women held up a catalog opened to a page featuring a gown Dakota immediately recognized. The figure-hugging dress had a V-shaped neckline, long sleeves, a fine lace bodice adorned with sparkling beads, and a train that extended from the mermaid skirt.

This gown was supposedly going to be all the rage this season, and Dakota had planned to order at least two of them before the pipes burst.

“Do you have this dress?” the young woman asked.

Dakota’s attention was drawn to the young woman’s left ring finger, where a large diamond in a platinum setting sparkled. She did her best to keep a smile on her lips. “I don’t have that exact gown, but I have something similar.” She nodded toward the racks behind her and then took in the woman’s figure. “I would imagine you’re a six.”

The woman blinked with shock. “How’d you know that?”

“Lucky guess.” She’d always had a gift when it came to sewing, which included sizing up her clients on sight. “Would you like to see what I have?”

The bride-to-be and her companion shared a look before they followed her to her racks of gowns, where she located a satin dress with an organza ruffle mermaid skirt and a sweetheart neckline. Although both dresses featured a form-fitting bodice, this one did not have beading or a train.

“This gown is lovely and will be perfect on you,” Dakota told her. “It’s 30 percent off too. Would you like to try it on?”

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The customer frowned. “That’s not exactly what I’m looking for.”

“Isn’t that style out of season?” The other woman leaned toward her companion and whispered, “That must be why it’s on sale.”

Dakota did her best to hide her disappointment. It *was* out of season, but classic never went out of style. The mermaid shape was always a favorite, with or without sequins and beads. “I have a few others you might like.” She pulled out three more dresses, but the women shook their heads.

“Well, thank you for your time,” the bride-to-be said.

“I don’t know why Karen recommended this shop. What a disappointment,” the second woman muttered on her way to the door.

“I’ll have newer dresses soon,” Dakota called as the women stepped onto Main Street, sending a gust of late February air into the store. “I hope,” she added with a wince.

If only she had the means to purchase more of this year’s gowns. She needed to call the insurance company again to demand they reimburse her for her lost stock, if only so she could afford more inventory.

When the door burst open and the bell rang, another blast of cold air filtered in.

“Auntie!”

Dakota managed a smile as her niece barreled toward the front counter, her long dark ponytail swishing behind her. She dropped her backpack on the floor behind the counter and began shucking her black coat, revealing a light-pink sweater that complemented her gray skirt and black boots.

“Hey, Skye.” Dakota joined her at the counter. “How was your Monday?”

Her niece hopped up onto the stool behind the counter. “I’m so done with high school.”

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“Tomorrow is the first of March, and before you know it, June will be here and your junior year will be over.”

“I know, but everyone is so juvenile.” Skye leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “I told you last week that Ashley was obsessed with Tommy, right?”

Dakota nodded. Although she wasn’t a fan of teen gossip, she was grateful her niece trusted her and felt comfortable confiding in her.

“And today all she talked about was Bart.” She waved her hands around, flashing her coral-colored nail polish. “It was Bart this and Bart that all day long. She talked about him in the hallway between classes. She babbled about him during lunch. How cute he is. How he has the best smile. How he’s so funny and athletic.”

Skye yanked her sparkly fuchsia insulated water bottle from the side pocket of her rose-colored backpack and took a drink. Dakota smiled at how committed to pink her niece was. “I love Ashley like a sister, but she’s boy crazy. I sure hope I never act like that. I mean, we’re sixteen, but we can still be mature, you know?”

Dakota bit back a grin. Her niece was all grown up, or at least partway there. Gone was her little buddy who tried to do everything just like “Auntie Kota.” Instead, Skye was complaining about boys. At least one thing remained the same: Dakota was still a cool aunt in her niece’s eyes, and having Skye working with her at the bridal shop after school for the past year had helped them grow even closer.

Kayleigh, Dakota’s best friend, had always called Skye Dakota’s mini-me, and with the same dark hair, dark eyes, and height of five feet seven, Dakota agreed they resembled each other. In fact, they were often mistaken for sisters, which Dakota took as a compliment since they were fourteen years apart.

“Sweetie, you’re mature for your age, but sometimes girls just get caught up in the drama, you know? They get excited and let

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their crushes take over their lives. Someday you might meet a guy who sweeps you off your feet.”

“Sure.” Skye gave her a look of disbelief. “But I doubt that will happen when I’m in high school. What are the chances of anyone actually marrying their high school sweetheart?”

An image of Hudson Garrity filled Dakota’s mind. She could still see those bright-blue eyes that melted her insides, and she could even hear the deep baritone laugh that always made her toes curl. He’d been her crush in middle school and her boyfriend in high school and college—then her one big heartbreak and regret as an adult when he’d chosen a career in New York City over their plans, their life together.

She touched her naked finger where a small diamond engagement ring had once sat. Hudson had given it to her when they were twenty-one, and she could still remember how it felt to wear it. But it was a promise that had never come true. She shook her head, also trying to shake off the grief that suddenly appeared.

Why was the wound in her heart still so raw after seven years?

Skye’s voice brought her back to the present. “If you fall in love in high school, won’t you outgrow each other?”

Dakota knew there was a ring of truth to Skye’s words. At least for her and Hud.

“I mean, my parents met in college,” Skye continued, “and I bet you really find yourself during those years. That’s why, statistically, high school relationships are doomed to fail. It makes sense to me.” She shrugged and took another sip of water.

Dakota bobbed her head in agreement. “Right.” Then she cleared her throat. “So, I had a customer in shortly before you got here, but it didn’t go the way I’d hoped.”

As Dakota shared the story, Skye’s pretty face transformed into a frown. “I’m sorry she didn’t like the mermaid dress.”

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“That’s why I need to keep steaming the damaged dresses I can salvage. We need more variety available for customers.”

“Can’t you pay Miller’s next door to do it instead?”

“I wish, but it’s too expensive.” Dakota’s savings were nearly gone, and her credit card was maxed out thanks to the burst pipe and her lousy landlord. Though she knew Mr. Miller would dry-clean the dresses for her at reduced cost, she couldn’t even afford his help at a discount.

When her phone dinged, she pulled it from her skirt pocket and found a message from Parker Bryant.

Hey, just wanted to tell you I had a great time Saturday. Hope you’re having a good Monday.

“Mr. Bryant texted you?”

Dakota looked up and found her niece leaning over the counter, straining to read over her shoulder. “Hey, Miss Nosy Pants!” she teased. “I don’t try to read your text messages.” She dropped her phone back into her pocket and started toward the back of the store. “You cover the counter while I go work in the back, okay? Call me if you need me.”

“Whoa, Auntie.” Skye trailed after her. “You didn’t come to Nana’s yesterday for supper, so I never got the details from your date.”

Dakota shook her head as she walked through the doorway to where her small office, a sewing and workroom, a restroom, and a small break room were located. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“That can’t be true,” her niece whined. “I deserve to hear the details. I set you up with Mr. Bryant because you need to get out and have some fun. All you’ve done since the pipes burst is work long hours in here, cleaning up and steaming gowns. You need to have a life, Auntie.”

Dakota picked up the steamer and turned it on. “Dating isn’t a

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priority right now, Skye. You know I'm trying to get things back on track so I don't lose my boutique and my house."

"But you haven't been in a relationship for, like, three years."

Dakota spun to face her. "That's not true."

"When was the last time you had a boyfriend?" She rested her hands on her slim waist.

Dakota's mind drew a blank.

A grin spread on Skye's face, and she pointed a finger at her aunt. "See? I told you. The last guy you dated was the one who rear-ended your car after he dropped you off at the apartment complex where you used to live."

"How on earth did you remember that disaster?"

Skye lifted her chin. "Because I'm the observant sister. Aubrey is the whimsical sister. You're the fun aunt. Dad just kills the vibe. We all have our roles in the family—and don't change the subject!" Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "I bet you hit it off with Mr. Bryant. He's, like, the best teacher we have at Flowering Grove High. The best art teacher, at least."

"He was . . . nice." Dakota had liked him. He was polite and funny, and he had an easy sense of humor. In fact, she had no complaints about the date at all. It truly had been nice. A nice date with a nice guy at a nice coffee shop followed by a nice walk. Their conversation had flowed fairly easily, and Parker was certainly easy on the eyes with his dark eyes and strong shoulders.

Even so, the spark was missing. He was her type to a T—good with kids, attentive, laid-back, polite. So why did the date leave her feeling so lukewarm?

"And . . . ?" Skye folded her hands and bounced on the balls of her feet. "Are you going to see him again?"

Dakota hesitated. Although she'd liked Parker, she couldn't see herself in a relationship with him. Besides, when would she fit a

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relationship into her busy schedule? Not only was she trying to get her business back on its feet, but she also taught skating lessons on Friday and Saturday nights at the Flowering Grove Rollerama. Oh, and her house was a disaster too. She didn't even have time to clean—let alone date.

“Come on, Auntie. I know he's, like, nearly forty, but you have to admit he's good-looking, even for an old guy.”

Dakota guffawed. “First of all, he's only thirty-three, and second, forty is not ancient, young lady. Your dad is forty-two, and your mom is forty-one.”

“Yeah, and they're old. But Mr. Bryant is so nice.” Her eyes seemed to search Dakota's. “At least tell me why you don't like him.”

Dakota began steaming a gown while she considered the question. “I do like him.”

“Then what's the problem?”

Dakota shrugged. “I just don't have time for a relationship.”

“Ugh!” Skye rolled her eyes. “You always say that, but if you want something, you can make time for it.”

“It's not that simple,” Dakota said, moving the steamer up and down the gown's lace bodice.

“But you sell wedding gowns, for goodness' sake. Don't you want to get married and have a wedding of your own? Have a family?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well, that won't happen if you don't make time for a relationship.”

Dakota wished it were that simple. She loved helping brides dress for the wedding of their dreams, which was why she opened this boutique. Witnessing the pure joy glowing on her customers' faces when they found the perfect gown felt almost magical. In fact, she eventually wanted to have a place where she could not only sell gowns but also host weddings. An all-inclusive wedding venue

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with a boutique and a large restored building—such as a barn or an old mill where couples could have their ceremony and reception—would be perfect. Perhaps one day she'd find a farm to purchase, but first she'd need the funds to open the place . . .

Until then, she'd continue to sell gowns and help brides plan their dream weddings and their happily ever afters. After all, she believed in fairytales for the brides-to-be who shopped with her, though she didn't believe she'd ever experience her own. She'd just have to live vicariously through her customers instead—which meant getting the restored gowns out to the floor as soon as possible.

She turned her attention back to her niece. "Would you please go out front in case we have customers? I have that bell on the door, but it's more appealing to be welcomed by someone in the showroom."

"You're just deflecting because you know I'm right." She pointed to Dakota's pocket. "Are you going to text Mr. Bryant back and ask him out?"

"Maybe later, when my hands aren't occupied." She pointed to the dress.

Skye moved to the doorway, then turned to face her aunt again. "You really should text him back. I think you two would make a super-cute couple."

"I'll think about it," Dakota promised.

"Good." Skye's smile was back. "By the way, have you thought about playing more hip music here?" She pointed to the speaker above her. An instrumental version of "All of Me" by John Legend was barely audible above the hum of the dehumidifier and air-moving machine, which were supposed to be helping rid the store of its water damage smell.

Dakota sighed. "Studies have shown that bridal shop patrons are more apt to purchase a gown and other accessories if classic romantic music is playing in the boutique."

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Her niece seemed unconvinced. “Well, this is Flowering Grove, after all. I think the customers would appreciate hearing a Kirwan song every once in a while since the lead singer married a local.”

“Skye . . .” Dakota’s voice held an undercurrent of warning.

“Fine, fine. We’ll keep playing the boring old-people music, but I’m singing a Kirwan song in my head.” With a flourish she disappeared from the doorway, her footfalls sounding on her way back to the front.

Dakota set down the steamer and yanked her phone from her pocket. Then she placed it on the table beside her. Maybe she’d think about texting Parker back later. *Maybe.*

Hudson stared at his computer screen in his dark office. Horns blasted and traffic hummed from the Manhattan streets below. The sounds had become comforting to him since he’d moved to the city years ago.

A tap sounded on the doorframe, and he looked up just as Darren Jensen, his best friend and business partner, leaned in. “Hey, Hud. Don’t you know what time it is?”

Hudson glanced down at the bottom right-hand corner of his screen. “It’s 8:38.”

“That was rhetorical,” Darren deadpanned. “Why are you still here?”

“For the same reason you are—working.”

“Yeah, but we worked until nine every night last week. Get outta here and get a life.”

Hudson gave him a wry smile. “You’re the one with the life, so *you* get outta here. The only thing waiting for me at home is the television, and I’m not even streaming anything right now.”

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“Man, that’s your own fault. You could have all the dates you want, but you picked being married to the company instead.”

“And it worked out well for both of us, huh?” Hudson leaned back in his chair, and it groaned in response. Their company, D&H Software Solutions, had finally been sold—and once the deal was complete, Hudson and Darren would have to decide what to do next.

Darren’s phone pinged, and his hazel eyes moved to the screen.

“Lauryn?” Hud asked.

Darren swept his fingers over his stubble, the light-brown hair barely visible in the dim office lighting. Meanwhile, Hudson’s own five o’clock shadow probably could’ve been seen from the street below. “Yeah. I promised her I’d meet her at seven. This is the fourth time she’s texted me.”

“So quit talking about it and leave.”

Darren turned toward the doorway, then turned back and pointed his phone at Hudson. “You should seriously consider Bahrain.”

Hudson grimaced. “I don’t know . . .”

“It’s a great offer, Hud. We could whip that company into shape, help sell it, and move on again.”

“What about Lauryn?”

Darren smiled. “I’m going to ask her to go with me. You need to say yes.”

Hudson shrugged. “Maybe I will.”

When Darren’s phone started to ring, he held it up. “Gotta run. See you tomorrow.”

Before Hudson could respond, his best friend was gone, talking on the phone as he hurried down the hallway. Hud yawned and rubbed his eyes, then got up and stretched his legs.

He walked to the window and peered down at the headlights illuminating the streets of Manhattan. Taxis and cars moved past,

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horns blaring every once in a while. He smiled. After so many years of hard work, he finally felt he had accomplished something.

It had been seven years since he'd left his hometown of Flowering Grove, North Carolina, and moved to New York City to chase his dream of running a software company. He'd started out at the bottom of the first company that hired him, then worked his way up to the top. He'd met his business partner, Darren, along the way, and together they had taken a chance and started their own firm. After only four years, they now had a sale and more money than Hudson ever could've dreamed of.

He walked back over to his desk and sat down, taking in the neat piles of papers. He was grateful for his financial gains, since they had allowed him to take care of the two people who meant the most to him—his baby sister, Layla, and his aunt Trudy. His aunt had raised him and Layla after their parents died in a car accident, when Hudson was eight and Layla only a year old. Thanks to his success, he'd been able to pay off Trudy's house, allowing her to retire. He'd also paid for Layla's college education.

But now he was at a crossroads and had to figure out what to do. Although he'd enjoyed living comfortably, he had no ties to New York. No family and definitely no girlfriend. But he was too busy providing for his aunt and sister to worry about that. His parents would've wanted him to take care of them, and they were the only family he needed.

As he hit the button to power down his computer, his cell phone started to ring. He picked up and saw his little sister's name on the screen.

"Hey, Layla," he said.

"Hud!" The excitement in her voice was palpable. "I have news."

He hit the speaker button on the phone and grabbed his coat. "Do tell, baby sis."

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"I'm engaged!"

Hudson froze, his coat half on. Surely he hadn't heard her correctly. "You're *what*?"

"Engaged. I'm getting married." She giggled with joy.

He let his coat drop to the floor, then sat down on his chair. He clutched the phone and switched off the speaker. "To who?"

"To my boyfriend, of course. You met him when you came home for Christmas."

Hudson searched his memory, trying to recall meeting Layla's boyfriend. Then a vision of a skinny, nondescript guy filled his mind. "Shawn?"

She expelled a frustrated puff of air. "It's *Shane*. You need to pay better attention, Hud."

He brushed his hand down his face. Now he remembered talking to the guy during Christmas dinner. He clearly recalled thinking Layla could do much better. "He mows lawns, right?"

"No, he's a landscaper," she corrected him. "You have to see what he did for Aunt Trudy's backyard. The flowerbeds look awesome, and he added a cute little birdbath in the corner. He put in a bench and a path too. He's very talented."

Hudson couldn't stop his snort. "Do landscapers make enough money to support a family?"

"Of course they do."

He ignored the irritation in her tone. "Don't you think you're rushing into this?"

"Not at all. Today is our three-month anniversary, and we've known we wanted to get married since our first date. Remember how we reconnected at the coffeehouse? We were both there on our lunch breaks. I saw him and recognized him from high school."

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“Wait a minute,” Hud said as his conversation with Shane returned to him. “Didn’t he mention at dinner that he was always in trouble in high school?”

“Yeah, and we laughed about it. He’s changed just like I have.” She paused for a moment. “He earned his GED and got his life together. He’s a really hard worker, Hud.”

“That’s great and all, but three months isn’t long enough. Marriage is a serious commitment.”

“I *know*, Hud,” she muttered. “We’re both ready to commit.”

He rolled his eyes. “But you’re only—”

“Don’t you dare tell me I’m too young to get married,” she snapped. “I’m almost twenty-three, and you got engaged at twenty-one.”

“And look how well that turned out. Please don’t make the same mistakes I did.” He pressed his lips together as a vision of Dakota Jamison gripped his mind. He closed his eyes and tried to stop the familiar heartbreak from creeping into his chest.

Dakota had been the love of his life. At least, that was what he’d believed—until she dumped him without any explanation.

“Did you hear what I said, Hud? We’re getting married in June.”

Her statement brought him out of his thoughts. “June?”

“Yes, June,” she said firmly.

Hudson glowered. “Layla, I don’t approve of this.”

She sniffed on the other end of the line. “I don’t need your approval, Hud. You don’t have to be such a jerk all the time.”

“I’m just looking out for you—”

Click.

Hudson stared at the screen. As moments ticked by, worry sifted through him. He shook his head. He knew what he had to do.

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The sale of the company would take a few months before it was final, which meant he could come and go from the office as he pleased. He would pack up his essentials and head to Flowering Grove.

He shrugged on his coat, grabbed his laptop, and called a cab.

It was his job to take care of his baby sister—and he wasn't about to let her make the biggest mistake of her life.