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By Cara Lockwood

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She lives lonely nights.

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I Do (But I Don't) By Cara Lockwood Bibliography

- Rank: #2295332 in Books
- Brand: Cara Lockwood
- Published on: 2003-06-01
- Released on: 2003-06-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x 1.00" w x 5.31" l, .67 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Cara Lockwood is also the author of *I Do (But I Don't)*, which was made into a Lifetime movie, as well as *Pink Slip Party* and *Dixieland Sushi*, and *Every Demon Has His Day*, all available from Downtown Press. She was born in Dallas, Texas, and earned a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Pennsylvania. She has worked as a journalist in Austin, and is now married and living in Chicago. Her husband is not a rock star, but he does play the guitar -- poorly.

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Chapter One

I have seen two brides trip and fall down the aisle; one topple into a reflection pool; one whose violent sneeze catapulted her tiara into the front row during vows, gashing the eye of the father-in-law to be. I have witnessed one groom run from the altar, one bride run from the altar, one father of the bride fall asleep, and one flower girl whose nose bled the entire length of the ceremony. That's not including several fistfights, a half-dozen drunken and slightly insulting toasts from best men, and one collapsing tent in the middle of a seven-course dinner reception.

I am a wedding consultant, which means that despite all of my firsthand knowledge, I'm expected to reassure you that everything about your wedding will be absolutely perfect. And although you might not believe me, I'll tell you that usually, despite little snags (ahem), everything typically does work out all right at the end of the day. *Most* of the time.

And, let's face it, that's why I do it. You can't help but get a heady little rush when you see two people, obviously in love and happy, stand up before all their friends and family and pledge to make a go of it in a world where most people are divorced twice before they see grandkids. And just because I've heard the wedding march somewhere in the neighborhood of 324 times (four times on bagpipes) doesn't mean that I still don't get goose bumps when I hear it, just a little bit, because, well, I think in some sense it symbolizes hope and happiness, and, of course, love, if you'll pardon the string of sappy clichés. (I mean, we are talking about weddings, for goodness' sakes. Sappy clichés come with the territory.) In my experience, during every wedding, even the ones involving catastrophic blunders of the fainting kind, there's a moment, or even two, when everything bad in the world is suspended and you see pure, unadulterated goodwill. That's what keeps me coming back like a junkie, really, knowing that I had a hand in creating that second or two of perfect harmony.

Although, to be fair, I probably should say that for a rather small minority, a second or two of harmony simply isn't enough. It's odd, really, that so many people who don't strive for perfection in any other arena of their lives (professional or personal) have no qualms about demanding a flawless, magical ceremony celebrating (more often than not) a rather imperfect union, witnessed by two less than functional families. (It's a universal truth that relatives will not be on their best behavior just because you've spent ten thousand dollars on food. If that were the case, then psychologists would prescribe surf and turf instead of Prozac.) At a wedding, the smallest thing (a misplaced step, a bit too much wine, the appearance of a long-lost, estranged relative) can turn everything into a drunken, humiliating mess.

Weddings, by their nature, are fraught with peril.

This is why you need me.

Because I worry and fret for you. I troubleshoot, problem-solve, and (on occasion) work miracles (I intercept the drunken maid of honor before she blurts out her undying love for the groom or separate bickering divorced parents). I straighten that errant bridal train, shore up the leaning third tier of the cake, and fix that broken heel.

Being a wedding planner requires far more than just a flare for planning a shindig with champagne. I don't mean to sound snooty or anything, but I believe it takes a certain kind of person to be a wedding planner. Organized, yes. Patient, certainly. But a planner must also possess an unnamed quality: the ability to laugh in the face of a looming crisis.

I won't go so far as to say I possess all that, but I do strive for those qualities.

But then again, my ex-husband always said I had a flare for melodrama. Oh yes, I'm divorced. Did I mention that? Separated a year ago this month, and divorced officially six months ago (not that I'm counting or even paying attention, mind you, I just happen to know that it's been exactly 182 days and six hours since I signed the divorce papers).

Speaking of once-in-a-lifetime occasions, no one ever thinks about divorce in that way (you definitely don't have to worry about whether or not your slip is showing when you sign those papers). I certainly didn't pay a photographer \$350 an hour to come and take my picture at the courthouse. If I had, I would've been immortalized forever as a red-nosed, blubbering, pathetic loser, because I was a bit unhinged at that particular moment. I suspect I even had a bit of Haagen-Dazs fudge on my chin, since I ate nothing but pints and pints of the stuff the weeks leading into the finalization of the divorce.

Not that I was sorry that I divorced Brad. (I'm not in the least bit sorry!)

I was sad more for the fact that marriage had not turned out the way it was supposed to (or the way I hoped it would). It didn't help that my parents had been married thirty-three years, and my mother took every opportunity to remind me that no one in our family except her cousin Louise in Houston (a notorious flirt) and I ever got divorced. Of course, my parents are absolutely miserable, so it's not like I had a great relationship model there. Somehow, I resisted the very pessimistic idea that in order for a marriage to succeed one had to be completely wretched. Can you blame me for holding out hope for a fairy-tale ending? I mean, for goodness' sakes, I'm a *wedding planner*, so you know I've got a bit of the romantic in me (that or I very much like a high level of stress and abuse, but I prefer to think of myself as a romantic optimist).

I should say that perhaps I was a bit hasty to marry Brad (and that's as far as I'll go to admitting fault on my part). But, you have to understand, I was attending a wedding a week, and the brides seemed to get younger and younger, and, well, I just kept thinking more and more: *Why not me?* I was twenty-six (in my head, I was closing in on thirty), and my mother had begun hinting that she'd like some grandkids soon, and Brad seemed to be willing (at least with a lot of forceful persuasion on my part; that, too, I admit perhaps was wrong of me, but for the very first time in my life I really, *really* wanted to be married).

And, had I not been required to actually live, talk, or interact with Brad, marriage would've worked out just fine.

I suppose I should have been suspicious of his spending habits from the first. But when we were dating I thought it refreshing that he had expensive taste and took care in the way he dressed. Now, I realize that as a

general rule you should always question a man who has more shoes in his closet than you do. But I was "in love," or thought I was, and he was incredibly handsome, or at the very least very stylish, and what he lacked in brainpower he certainly made up for in smoothness. Without a doubt, he was a charmer.

It just so happened that he didn't like to work so much, or pay bills, or do anything except borrow my MasterCard and go to the mall. He had a particular affinity for all things Kenneth Cole, especially when they were frightfully expensive and magnificently impractical. He owned no fewer than three leather jackets, although it's common knowledge that here, in Austin, Texas, winter temperatures rarely get below 40 degrees, and you're never more than two weeks away from a 75-degree day even in the middle of January.

It didn't help our relationship, according to *him*, that I was such a detail-oriented and organized person. (So sue me if my idea of bill paying includes actually sending the payment in on time.) Then there's the little issue of the house payment, as in, I paid it. All of it. Every single month. Brad would do charming things like forget to pay the phone bill (the one responsibility I hadn't taken away from him), and then act outraged when the phone company shut down our line. He also held the infuriating belief that credit-card statements were simply suggested payments and not actual bills. "Minimum Payment" to him was nothing more than a polite, unbinding request for money, like a solicitation from the March of Dimes. So, you can understand that I was glad when he finally moved out. Relieved, really. At least he stopped eating all the food I bought, turning up the air-conditioning I paid for, and sleeping in the house I owned.

So I wasn't sad to see him go, but I was very disappointed in how the marriage thing had turned out (even if, admittedly, I hadn't been the best judge of character). Any wrong I did, I've more than paid for it, believe me. Shattered dreams and the fifteen thousand dollars I spent on the ceremony and reception aside, there's the daily occurrence of a client or an acquaintance learning that I'm divorced, and then the inevitable exclamation: "But, you're so young!" As if bad judgment and horrible marriages are reserved for people aged thirty-five and over. It's not like I worked all my life to be part of the exclusive "Divorced Under Thirty" club. (Trust me, the dues are way overpriced and the perks are lousy.)

You might assume I'm a bit bitter, but I like to think I'm a bigger person than all that. Just because Brad monopolized the three years of my life that I could actually squeeze into a size 6 doesn't mean I can't let bygones be bygones. I won't say it has been easy to hold back telling young, nervous brides and terrified grooms to run for the door while they still have their dignity, but I have managed, so far. My boss, Gennifer Douglas, who owns the consulting company I work for (Forever Wedding), has her own doubts (has actually had nothing but doubts since she hired me three years ago, given that she thinks that anybody under the age of forty must by default be an idiot).

So. I'm sure you're curious. About my job, that is. My "office," if you want to be so generous as to call it that, is situated in the small breakfast room of an old antique house. As I mentioned, our business is located in Austin, perhaps not nearly so glamorous or sophisticated a place as, say, New York, but a city where women take their weddings very seriously. ("We don't do just any weddings," G likes to say, "we do *Southern* weddings.") Our office sits on an old residential street that's slowly been converted to law offices and shops. We're located about a half a mile from the University of Texas campus and two miles from the heart of downtown. On clear days, you can see an unobstructed view of the campus tower, which is often lit up in burnt orange (the university's unfortunate color). I once did a wedding for a couple who were very loyal alumni, so much so that the bride insisted her bridesmaids wear burnt orange (this is a color, mind you, that was never fashionable, except perhaps in the seventies). The pictures, as you can imagine, didn't turn out very well, as the bridesmaids all looked particularly disgruntled. Not that I blame them.

G's office sits upstairs in what used to be the master bedroom, which is almost but not quite out of earshot of

my little corner. G prefers bellowing down the stairs when she needs me. We have phones, you know, but she doesn't use them. My personal theory is that the Transfer and Hold buttons intimidate her.

Anyhow, back to my cubbyhole. I sit behind a little writing desk, wedged into the corner, and wispy curtains filter the sunlight, which is actually quite bright in the mornings. I have a computer (albeit an ancient one...predating the invention of Windows of any kind), which isn't good for much except making me crazy. I keep a huge appointment book (one must if one is to keep up with a number of clients) and a color-coded file system under which I systematically divide our clients by color choice, season, and, of course, name.

I did tell you I'm a bit of an organizational nazi, didn't I? You have to be in my line of work, but I know what you're thinking, of course. I'm one of *those* neat freaks, the iron-my-pajamas, match-my-underwear-with-my-shoes types. The kind of person who spends Saturday nights on her knees in the bathroom, scrubbing tile with a toothbrush. (For the record, I only did that *once* and you wouldn't believe the grout buildup. I *had* to do it.) You're thinking that I am probably impossible to live with, that it's no wonder I'm divorced at twenty-nine. I mean, *what did I expect?* A husband who leaves the toilet seat down? Who doesn't drape his dirty black tube socks across the couch and coffee table? (It so happens that Brad did leave his dirty pairs of briefs in various corners of our apartment, but that's not really why things didn't work out. Really.)

And for the record, it *was* a mutual parting. He didn't want to go on living with me and I didn't want to go on supporting his Tommy Hilfiger habit, and that was that. Just because the man happened to be the last one to ever see me in a bikini on a public beach doesn't mean I'm bitter. Or at least, not *that* bitter.

What was I talking about again? Oh, yes. Neatness. I'm not that bad, really. Honestly, I'm not. I am organized, yes. I am neat, that's true. My closet right now is color-coded and divided by season. My bed is made, with a chorus of matching pillows and shams piled high. I own a handheld carpet cleaner (and I don't even own an animal that might poo on the carpet, making such an appliance necessary). I admit that it bothers me when people put the toilet paper on the roll with the sheet facing inward, and I will fix that hanger that is hung up backward, against the grain of all the other hangers in the department store. But these are things I simply can't help, and I try not to inflict them upon perfect strangers. I am not the kind of person who will honk at you if you throw a cigarette butt out your window. I do not think neat people are in any way better than messy, disorganized people. I don't pass judgment on the woman at the grocery store checkout counter, the one pulling out crumpled coupons from her fat, torn, overstuffed wallet.

I prefer to see my borderline obsession with neatness as a small neurosis that can actually be a positive thing for busy people who hire me to try to instill order in their messy lives. Besides, being neat is really a necessity working where I do. If I misplace a single invoice, G is likely to make me pay for the catered salmon dinner for five hundred. That's probably half of what I earn in a year, since G is a little stingy with the money I earn her. I put her annual income at somewhere in the comfortable six figures, while mine barely has a toehold in five. But, to be fair, she has been in this business for twenty years and has had to survive close to three thousand psychotic and semipsychotic brides, so she probably deserves it (this won't stop me, however, from complaining loudly and often).

But, I digress. And there is a point to all this, so I'd better get back on track.

On a recent rainy and extremely humid Friday morning I was sitting at my desk, in my tiny cubbyhole, cursing at my computer, since it had crashed again for the third time that morning, taking with it all the files and schedules I had yet to save.

G took this moment to yell down the stairs something I couldn't quite understand, forcing me to get up and

trudge up the stairs to her office. Now, G has an expansive office with plush ivory carpet, dark blue velvet curtains, and an old mahogany desk whose chair is so large it could pass for a loveseat. On this gigantic desk of hers sat one new laptop (why, I don't know, as she never takes it anywhere or even turns it on as far as I know) and three stacks of papers (her profits for the year, her bridal magazines, and her pile of *Cat Fancy*). G looked like a cartoon villain, complete with a white shock of spiky hair, bloodred Revlon lips, and big, gaudy rings on her fingers. She even owned a suitably evil white Persian cat, Whiskers (original, I know), who loved to perch on one of the loveseat's plump arms, lazily swinging her fluffy tail back and forth. Whiskers and I do not get along, as said animal has a habit of pooping underneath my desk when she's let loose to run about the house. On seeing me, Whiskers leapt down from her lofty perch and slinked purposefully from the room. I resisted the urge to step on one or another of her paws as she passed me.

"Lauren, dear," G began, and I knew I was in trouble, because G never called me "dear" unless there was a very ugly job to be done. "I need a favor from you. A very old and very close friend of mine has a daughter who is getting married in three months, and I'm afraid their old consultant made rather a mess of things and they need someone to help them sort things out."

A wedding in three months?! Impossible.

G apparently didn't think so. She seemed perfectly calm about the whole thing -- naturally, since she wouldn't be doing any of the real work.

G continued.

"My friend is coming in an hour and I want you to meet her. And for goodness' sakes, girl, do something about that hair of yours!"

My hand went up to my head, where I could feel the dark strands hanging loose from the clip I had naively thought would hold the Medusa-like mess atop my head. I smiled uneasily and began tugging and poking at the thick wavy wires as I backed slowly from her office.

At that moment, the corner of the door jumped up from nowhere and slammed into my elbow. I yelped. G only clucked at me, raised her eyes heavenward, and shook her head. G always had a knack for making me feel like a fourteen-year-old with her jeans pockets stuffed with shoplifted lipsticks, and as a result, I always bumped into things when she watched me. It must be her critical scrutiny that makes me so uncomfortable. I'm not usually so clumsy.

I padded down the hall rubbing my elbow (it really did hurt) and ducked into the master bath to fix my hair. G could hardly expect me to do so in the tiny little half bath near my cubbyhole, now, could she?

The master bath had the best lighting, but unfortunately also had six mirrors in a semicircle, which enabled me to see my entire butt all at once (not exactly a sight anyone wants or needs to see, let me assure you). I wasn't sure how G stood the glass shrine of self-doubt (as I liked to call it), being slightly plump in the hips, even for a healthy fifty-five-year-old. I assumed her incredible powers of self-actualization made such petty self-esteem issues moot. I wished I had more of a talent for self-delusion.

But then, I haven't told you what I look like, so you don't know. I suppose I could lie to you. Tell you that I'm a younger, shapelier Cindy Crawford. But I'm afraid I simply wouldn't be able to pull off *that* ridiculous lie. I mean, if my life story were ever turned into a made-for-TV movie, it's not like there would be a host of A-list stars lining up to play me, if you know what I mean. The best I could hope for would be Shannen

Doherty. Diane, one of my best friends, says Minnie Driver or Andie MacDowell would be better fits, but I think she's just being nice and lying like good friends are supposed to do.

I'm of average height, dark-haired (jet black, really), and very white-skinned. It's appalling how little I actually tan (I consider wearing shorts a danger to society, since my stark white legs have been known to blind passing motorists). I've got big brown eyes and thick eyelashes, admittedly my best features, a nondescript, forgettable nose, an average mouth that's neither pouty and sexy nor sleek and thin. I have straight teeth, thanks to two sets of braces in adolescence that probably did more harm to my self-esteem than a slight overbite ever would. I am, I guess, reasonably average in weight, but not thin by any means. I have one of those bodies that simply failed to respond to exercise of any kind. I'm convinced I could run a marathon and still weigh exactly the same. My muscles, if I do have them (and that's a fact in serious contention), don't understand the concept of self-improvement. They staunchly refuse to tighten up, grow stronger, do anything but sit there, all soft and formless, craving potato chips and French fries.

And then there's my hair. My own mother called it a bird's nest all the while I grew up, partly because she couldn't get a comb through it despite all her best efforts. If a bird had taken up residence there, I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to find it, as my hair is so thick and curly that shampooing it effectively takes an hour. Using clips or pins is a losing battle, but one that I never really had the heart to stop fighting.

I looked into one of the six mirrors and assessed the hair situation. It had sprung free of the new assortment of clips I had used to clamp it down, and was hanging in curly handfuls here, there, and everywhere. These weren't pretty, perfectly formed curls, mind you; these were straggly, frizzy, half-dead snakes. I looked like a member of Poison after a night of debauchery. I sighed, shook my hair free, wrestled it back into a knot at the back of my neck, and barely managed to contain it with a rubber band. "Stay," I told it sternly, though it never listened to me, no matter how often I threatened to cut it all off.

Back at my desk, I found Whiskers had left me one of her presents, a particularly large and gruesome specimen, and I only just managed to get it cleaned up before G's friend arrived.

Her name was Missy Davenport. I am surprised to say that I liked her almost immediately, but not for any of the reasons one should like a person. Ms. Davenport was abrupt, bossy, and, technically, rude. And she wore fur, for goodness' sakes. (Ludicrous on two counts: 1. It was June and 95 degrees outside, and 2. Hadn't wearing fur pelts long since gone the way of leg warmers and frizzy perms?)

I didn't think anybody remotely with a conscience wore fur, but then again, I also couldn't imagine anyone finding the courage to douse this old lady bulldog in red paint. She looked just like the sort who ate Greenpeacers for breakfast.

Ms. Davenport was taller than me, stouter for sure, and had an amber-colored, shellacked helmet atop her head, which I figured must be hair. Her face, stern, wrinkled, and absent of humor, reminded me strongly of the football coach from my high school, and at any moment I thought she might tell me to drop and do fifty.

Instead, she barked, "You must be Lauren."

"Ur, yes -- " I began, but she cut me off.

"Quit babbling, girl," she huffed, impatiently whipping her mink stole around her large and, I must say, manly neck. "I don't have time for empty-headed remarks."

Empty-headed? I was shocked and prepared to dislike her immensely, when Whiskers ran into the room, catching her eye.

"You again," she said, turning to the animal. "I haven't forgotten what you've done to my Persian rug you little ninny." Ms. Davenport stomped her foot hard against the floorboards near where the cat was standing. Whiskers let out a frightened hiss and burst from the room as if she'd been electrocuted.

"Thanks," I said, smiling. "You probably saved my desk from another desecration."

Ms. Davenport grunted in what I thought might have been amusement, and then bellowed up the stairs: "When are you going to get rid of that filthy thing, G?"

When no answer came, Ms. Davenport yelled again.

"G? Where are you? Get down here!"

G poked her head around the corner at the top of the stairs and smiled.

"Missy! How good to see you."

"Stuff the nonsense, G. I really can't take any more today."

I admit that what I liked most about Ms. Davenport was how she put G and Whiskers in their respective places. It's terrible, I know, but I have such few pleasures at work, you must allow me this one.

"How's your daughter?" G said, changing the subject. "Is she looking forward to her wedding?"

"Daughter? Wedding?" Ms. Davenport looked baffled for an instant, then recovered. "G, you've got it all mixed up again. It's not Jenna who's having the problems; it's Darla, my niece, who's had the wedding from hell. Lord, G, I don't know how you ever got this agency off the ground with you mixing up everything like you do."

G flushed slightly, and Ms. Davenport let out a gruff laugh. I thought she might lean over and punch G good-naturedly in the shoulder, like Coach Sanders would, but she didn't. "I'd say you're losing your memory faster than any of us, if you had a memory to lose!"

I understood immediately that G realized it had been a mistake to have Ms. Davenport here in my presence. It went a long way toward undermining G's authority. G managed to amble on uncomfortably, sending me out of the room whenever she could, to fetch coffee or albums or some other such nonsense, so I only managed to hear bits and pieces of the conversation.

The problem, as Ms. Davenport explained it, was the world was full of idiots, her niece and niece's fiancé included. I don't know exactly why she thought they were idiots, because I was sent out of the room to find an old photo album, but I do know that they had hired and fired one wedding consultant so far, for reasons I didn't get to hear. I became suddenly wary, because people who have a habit of firing wedding consultants aren't exactly the ideal clients, especially if they're related to an old and dear friend of one's boss. Needless to say, I had a very bad feeling about the whole situation.

By the end of Ms. Davenport's visit, it was decided by G that I would call the niece and set up lunch with her

within the week, tomorrow if possible, as time was running out, if we were to bring about a wedding in three months. Meanwhile, at the mention of lunch, Ms. Davenport declared that she wanted an early one. As it was 10:30 in the morning, I couldn't imagine where they might find a restaurant open, but with the will of the two ladies, I was confident they would succeed in bullying some poor waiter into tossing them a salad.

Left alone, I decided it would be best to make the dreaded call to Ms. Davenport's niece, Darla Tendaski. Darla, according to Ms. Davenport, might be an idiot, but she was a successful and very wealthy idiot, being the founder of her own public-relations firm, one of the youngest such executives in the nation at twenty-eight. A graduate of Harvard, Darla came from a successful family, her father being a U.S. senator and her mother a famous philanthropist who had been profiled in *Vanity Fair*. I tried very hard not to hate her on principle.

"Ms. Tendaski's office, how may I help you?" A deep male voice answered her number. She had a male secretary? I stomped down another tiny surge of envy. I imagined him looking like a Hugo Boss model: broad chest, tight black T-shirt, dark hair, chiseled chin, sexy tortoiseshell glasses.

"I'm Lauren Crandell, from Forever Wedding. Ms. Davenport suggested I call..." I didn't get to finish.

"Yes, Ms. Crandell, Ms. Tendaski has been expecting your call. She would like to have lunch with you today, if your schedule allows."

"Well..." I hesitated. G would be furious if she was left out of the meeting.

"Ms. Tendaski has quite a busy week this week and next. We have a major promotional campaign with Dell to finish by next Friday, and I'm afraid today is the only time she'll be able to meet with you."

"In that case..." What choice did I have? "Where would she like to meet?"

"The Four Seasons at noon."

I pulled into the Four Seasons' driveway downtown, and stepped out of my tiny Honda hatchback, sheepishly handing the keys over to the valet, a clean-cut college student who probably made more in tips in one Friday night than I made in one week picking through bridal veils. I sighed.

Inside, the lobby was impressively intimidating, with thick marble tables and pretty tiled floor, and it smelled like rich-people smell, all leather and cinnamon. The only things that made it bearable were the design attempts at being rustic and Texan -- the chandelier made of steer bones, the longhorn orange leather couch in the foyer. It's impossible for the rich to be snobby while sitting on a couch with deer antlers for feet, I decided, and felt better about the whole place.

The hostess in the dining area smiled at me, recognizing one of her own, I thought, as she had hair almost as wild as mine, except hers was red with icy blond, Farrah Fawcett streaks. I smiled back. "I'm here to meet someone, a Ms. Tendaski."

"Oh, you mean Darla!" The hostess beamed. "Follow me."

Hmmm. The bride-to-be was on a first-name basis with the hostess at the Four Seasons? I didn't know what to think about that.

The hostess led me to a table outside, in a shady part of the patio, with a nice view of Town Lake and the perfectly manicured lawn of the hotel.

Darla Tendaski sat with one slim, tan leg crossed over the other, with a cell phone pressed against one ear and her Executive Palm Pilot on her lap. I knew before I saw her that she had to be pretty, because incredibly successful and wealthy people are almost always better-looking than average, but Darla was more than pretty, she was beautiful, the kind of tall, thin, enormous-cornflower-blue-eyes beautiful that put Gwyneth Paltrow to shame.

"The thing of it is," she was saying into her cell phone, "is that we just can't wait that long on the proofs, Joel." She motioned for me to sit down, then ran a hand through her ridiculously shiny and bouncy blond hair. She looks like she could be in the middle of a shampoo ad, I thought bitterly.

"I'd consider it an enormous favor, Joel, if you could get the proofs to me this afternoon," she continued, oozing charm from every syllable. I could feel Joel melting on the other end of the line. She broke into a warm smile that I'm sure Joel could feel through the phone. "I knew you could come through for me, Joel. You're the best!"

She flipped her phone closed and turned her full attention to me, studying me without distraction for the first time. I squirmed under the scrutiny, imagining my hair poking out in all directions and the pallid complexion of my skin looking wan and washed-out in the sunlight. She, of course, wore a healthy, golden tan.

"Lauren," she said sweetly. "It's nice to meet you. I've heard good things about you."

She extended a well-manicured hand, and shook mine firmly and with confidence.

I smiled, feeling tongue-tied and awkward. Good-looking people always made me think I was back in high school, sitting at the band table in the cafeteria with the other clarinet players, hoping no one would throw food at me.

"I heard you've had some troubles with the wedding planning," I blurted without much grace. God, where did that come from? If G were here, she would be rolling her eyes at me, stumbling over herself to apologize to Darla.

Darla, however, laughed. "Have I ever!" she said, leaning forward. "Let me tell you one time..."

Before she could finish, her lap started ringing. I thought it was her cell phone. It was her electronic organizer.

"Oh! I forgot about my twelve-thirty," Darla said, peering at the tiny screen. "This thing has saved me more times than I can remember!"

I didn't have a Palm Pilot. Not because I didn't want one. I knew, as an organization freak, that I really *ought* to have one. G, however, didn't pay me enough to buy brand-name cereals, much less the latest gadgets.

"Basically, Lauren," Darla said, leaning forward, "my fiancé and I need help. We've already bungled one ceremony and, well, we need someone who will just make things happen."

"Bungled?"

"Botched," Darla said, whipping her shiny blond bangs from her eyes. "If I had more time I'd tell you the whole story, but it would take a half hour alone."

I found myself staring at the perfect eyeliner line across the top of her eyelids. How did she keep it from smudging like everybody else? By the end of the day, I always found dark smudges in the crease of my eyelid, and sometimes, on a particularly humid afternoon, it would seep and run out the corners, slipping into the laugh lines or underneath the bottom fringe of my eyelashes.

"Do you think you can help us?" Darla said, blinking her two perfectly lined lids.

"Of course," I said, with the sure confidence of someone who doesn't really know any of the details.

Darla reached down below her chair and pulled out a filled-to-bursting portable accordion file and dumped it with a clang on the glass-top table.

"If you really think you can do this," she said, "take a look at these files and they'll bring you up to speed on where we are with planning. The new date of our ceremony is June twenty-eight."

I did a quick calculation. Five weeks? Was that right? There was no possible way I could pull this together in little more than a month!

Darla just looked at me.

"Is that going to be a problem?" she challenged.

"Er, no. No," I said, smiling feebly. It was so going to be a problem.

"Is there anything special...?" I trailed off, not really sure what I was asking, and I was distracted by the disorganized and crumpled papers seeping out of the file. I couldn't stand to see the wrinkled corners sticking this way and that. The urge to open the case and start rearranging the papers right there at the lunch table was almost overpowering.

"Oh, sure, it's all in the file. The last consultant working on this made quite the report on my likes and dislikes, right down to shoes the flower girl should wear."

Darla's lap rang again, but this time it was her cell phone. "Don't say it, Joel," Darla said. "Don't tell me what I think you're going to tell me. Stop right there. Joel? Joel! I said stop talking. I'm coming over."

Darla snapped her cell phone shut and let out a deep sigh. "I'm going to have to go, everything's gone to hell. Doug, my assistant, can help you with anything you need. Oh, and Lauren..." She paused. "Good luck."

Why did I suddenly feel like I would very much need it?

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Blake Nixon:

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