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Contemporary Inspirational Romance

HAPPY ENDINGS, INC.
by Katherine Nell Dacus

Falling in love with a client could cost this wedding planner her business; learning the true identity of the groom could cost her everything.

When professional wedding planner **ANNE HAWTHORNE** first meets mysterious Englishman **GEORGE LAURENCE**, she wonders if God has finally answered her prayer for a husband. However, four days later, he arrives at the office of Happy Endings, Inc., with a much younger woman for their initial wedding consultation. Anne's hopes are not just dashed, but crushed when she recognizes Courtney Landry, a girl she used to baby-sit years ago. Feeling as if God is punishing her for some unknown sin, Anne swallows her disappointment and puts on her professional persona to try to make it through the meeting.

A personal assistant for a wealthy man who wishes to keep his identity—and his engagement—private, George has come to Bonneterre, Louisiana, to play the role of groom as required by the contract his employer makes him sign. George is not a good actor but excels at event planning, and before long, he finds himself drawn to Anne Hawthorne, admiring her abilities . . . and her charm. When he sees his young charge with her overbearing mother, he does whatever he can to make Miss Courtney's life a little better, including moving her into his employer's Civil War-era Greek-revival mansion.

One of the first people in Bonneterre George becomes acquainted with is Forbes Guidry, his employer's local lawyer, who also turns out to be related to the wedding planner. George

relies on Forbes as a touchstone of reality—and as someone who knows Anne well. Forbes assures George everything will be fine if he can just hold on for five weeks until the engagement party and press conference when the truth will be revealed. But George has a hard time reconciling what he's being asked to do with his Christian ethics and morals.

Anne notices George treats his “fiancée” more like a daughter, and considers dissolving the contract when she discovers he has moved Courtney under the same roof. But Courtney Landry has grown on her. Anne has planned weddings for two of Courtney's older sisters and knows what their overbearing mother can be like, so is pleased to know George is protecting Courtney.

When Courtney makes a sudden trip to New York, Anne is forced to work one-on-one with George. She enjoys chatting with him, working on plans, and just listening to that British accent of his. She begins to feel herself in real danger, though, when she discovers he does a nearly perfect imitation of her favorite singer, Dean Martin. George fits every criteria she's ever prayed for in a husband. Now, she prays like never before, begging God to take away her growing attraction for a man she thinks she can never have.

The more George is around Anne, the more he admires and is attracted to her. This is complicated when Forbes invites George to have dinner with him and several relatives, including Anne. Seeing her in a social setting only cements the knowledge that she is the woman God has created for him.

One afternoon, a few weeks after their first meeting, Anne is in the storage room above her office working and listening to music. Caught up in the rhythm of a waltz, she dances about the supply room only to be caught up in George's arms. He dances her about the room and at the end nearly kisses her. She pulls away and tells him she can no longer be his wedding planner.

Having been prompted by Forbes, George confesses his deception and tells her he is not the groom but employed by the groom. He cannot reveal his employer's true identity as he not only gave the man his word of honor, but signed a contract as well. Anne is hurt and angry at being lied to and disappears, worrying George and her family. But then he remembers her telling him of a bed and breakfast where she likes to go to get away from the world. He finds her the next morning and tells her as much as he can, begging her forgiveness.

Anne spent most of the previous night in fretful prayer, and knowing he has been as truthful as possible, forgives him on two conditions: that he is always honest with her from here on, and that they will take it slow so she can rebuild her trust in him.

Separated from his own family when he went to work full time at age sixteen, George enjoys spending time with Anne and Forbes and their family. He learns Anne's parents died in a plane crash—which she survived—and was raised by her large extended family. They generously include George in family events and he begins to feel like he's finally found a place to call home.

After Sunday dinner the week he reveals his secret to Anne, he overhears her telling one of her younger relatives that, ten years before, she had been engaged to Cliff Ballantine, now one of the most famous actors in Hollywood, and that he'd used her and hurt her deeply. The next day, he confronts Forbes, demanding the lawyer tell him why he'd never told George Anne had been engaged to Cliff—George's employer. Forbes explains that he sees Anne's planning Cliff's wedding as her way of getting back all the money she gave him while they were engaged—with interest. As the plans are now too far underway for George to stop the proceedings, he goes along with Forbes' scheme. But knowing all too well how Anne feels about dishonesty, he worries how she'll react to the revelation. He doesn't want to lose her.

Having been hurt in the past by falling in love with someone before she knew him very well, Anne knows she must keep some emotional distance between herself and George until she can work through her emotional scars and forgive Cliff. She knows that until she can find a way to forgive him, she'll never be able to give her whole heart to George.

The night before the engagement party, when his employer's identity will finally be revealed, George and Anne can no longer repress their emotions and admit, after a romantic dance to Dean Martin's "That's Amore," to their feelings for each other.

The next day, when Anne comes face to face with her ex-fiancé with no warning, she is incensed with George for not telling her. She stewes about it all evening, debating whether or not she should drop the contract, until a close friend points out she can't blame George for keeping his word to his employer—especially since his being a man of honor is one of the things she finds most attractive about him. Now it is her turn to apologize and ask forgiveness, which George gladly gives.

After the engagement party, Anne is counseled by her best friend and cousin, Meredith, that before she can build a relationship with George, she must not only forgive Cliff, but must go deeper than that and forgive her parents for leaving her at such a young age and God for taking them away. She spends an afternoon of soul-searching—and reliving the vivid memories of the plane crash that stole her parents' lives and left her scarred and physically ill at the thought of ever stepping foot on a plane. Finally, she is able to look beyond all the pain and loss she's suffered to see the blessings God brought about in her life. Now she is ready to move forward with George.

She knows she is losing her heart to him and fears she may be hurt again, as George, although he exhibits his love for her, never says the words *I love you*. She's especially confused

after a conversation when he persists in getting her to admit that the best marriages are based on mutual respect and admiration and don't necessarily require being madly in love.

Then, he calls to tell her that Cliff has been offered the role of a lifetime, and the wedding must be moved up from October to August, putting everything—including their relationship—on hold. But the frantic pace of trying to pull together the wedding of the century in just a few weeks shows Anne and George aspects of each other's personalities they might not otherwise have seen.

The morning of the wedding rehearsal, Courtney asks George if he will walk her down the aisle in place of her father who died more than ten years before. George agrees, feeling closer to Courtney than anyone else, except Anne. He loves to watch Anne with the young bride, seeing in her the future mother of his children and the greatest blessing God has ever bestowed on him.

Busy with preparations for the rehearsal of the outdoor wedding at Cliff's antebellum home, Anne is surprised when Cliff approaches her and asks for a private word. In the seclusion of the library, Cliff tells Anne he did love her and wanted to marry her, but when he was offered the role that split them apart, the publicists and producers decided they could make him into a bigger star if he were single. Cliff wrote a letter and his publicist offered to mail it, along with a check cut from Cliff's advance for the total amount of money Anne had lent him over the years they dated. Anne tells him she never received the letter or the check, and Cliff realizes the publicist lied to him to sever the relationship to ensure Cliff's single status. Cliff goes on to tell her that a few years later he tried to get in touch with her through Forbes, but Forbes told Cliff to leave well-enough alone. All of Anne's remaining bitterness at Cliff dissolves, and she can now truly forgive him. Forbes, on the other hand . . . But before she can let her anger with her meddling cousin get the better of her, Anne sees to the business of getting Cliff and Courtney

married.

At the reception, George makes a phone call overseas to his brother to tell him of his plans to ask Anne to marry him, and they joke about George's marrying Anne to stay in the country. Later, he finds Anne and proposes to her, wanting to join his life forever with the woman he loves. Anne says no, she can't marry a man who just wants to use her, and compares his actions to what she'd always thought Cliff had done to her. This angers George, and even when he realizes she overheard and misunderstood his phone conversation, he lets her walk away.

Once George is over his own hurt feelings, he explains the truth of the situation to an irate Forbes, who has heard only Anne's side of the story. Forbes tells George the only way he can prove himself is to leave—to give up his dream of becoming a citizen, thus proving it is Anne he truly wants, not a green card. George concurs and agrees to go to Paris, where he will set up Cliff's house for Courtney to come live after their honeymoon. He leaves his travel itinerary with Forbes, along with a letter for Anne.

Furious with George and Forbes—because in her view both have been dishonest and manipulated her—Anne throws herself into work and avoids her family as much as possible for the next week. When Sunday rolls around, Forbes finally confronts her and gives her George's letter. When Anne reads George's apology and learns he is leaving for at least the next six months, she knows she must go after him or risk losing him forever. The problem is, his plane has just taken off from Bonneterre. Fighting her overwhelming fear of flying, she allows Forbes to call his younger brother, the pilot of their parents' company jet, and ask him to fly her to Memphis.

Boarding the small luxury commuter plane is agony, but not as much as the thought she

might never see George again. When she arrives in Memphis, she finds the ticket counter for his airline and asks them to page George. But his flight has already pushed back from the gate. Knowing she cannot let him leave, she books the next flight into Atlanta, where George has a two hour layover before boarding a flight to Paris. She hopes she can find him at the gate waiting for his flight. Her flight is delayed leaving Memphis, and when she arrives in Atlanta, she doesn't have time to get from the A concourse where she is to the E concourse from which George's flight leaves. She asks the airline to page him to meet her at her gate. Half an hour later, the gate agent tells her the agent at George's gate said no one got off the plane when they paged him.

Convinced she's let the best thing that ever happened to her walk out of her life, she buys a ticket home and sits down to wait. After sitting there fighting tears for a while, she hears someone who sounds like George singing Dean Martin's ballad "Return to Me." It isn't him. Then someone comes up behind her and sings the rest of the song in her ear. She turns and touches George's face to make sure he's really there.

After he kisses her, he tells her he'd resolved to go away until he could prove to her that he did truly love her, but once he was away from Bonneterre, he knew he couldn't bear to be parted from her. He was returning to stay by her side and court her until she agreed to marry him.

Through tears of joy, she tells him she has a question she wants to ask him. Will he become her business partner? At his crestfallen expression, she adds it's contingent on his agreeing to become her husband—the happy ending she's been praying for.