

**STACEY WEEKS**



**THE**  
**Builder's**  
**Reluctant**  
*Bride*

**HE WANTS A SECOND CHANCE  
SHE SAYS THERE'S NO GOING BACK**



# The Builder's Reluctant Bride

Stacey Weeks

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## **The Builder's Reluctant Bride**

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2016

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-689-7

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

Dedicated to God my Father, in thanks for seeing fit to grant me this dream, to my husband Kevin, who loves me, encourages me, and never complains about the little things that go undone when a deadline looms, to Kaitlyn, Jonathan, and Nicholas, who love generously, laugh easily, and remind me not to take myself too seriously, to Mom and Dad and mother-in-law Linda for encouraging me to believe in my dreams and never give up, to Jenny and Jessica, the readers of the horrible early drafts and to fellow author, critique partner and super friend, Sandra Orchard.

May I always take seriously the awesome responsibility that comes with proclaiming God's truth.

To God be the glory.





# 1

What if Jenna never forgave him?

William's feet stuck to the bottom step of the Bayview, Michigan farmhouse. A torn flap of wire mesh waved from the screen door as if bidding him closer, encouraging him to cross the final barrier.

He shook his head. This was silly. Get in. Get the signature. Get out. She wouldn't be more than his business partner this time.

Besides, she must be OK with the proposed partnership. Tucker wouldn't have invited him here otherwise. Still, his foot refused to lift from the bottom stair and take the next step onto the porch. So much rode on this meeting. If she refused to work with him, if she was still angry...

The large dining room window framed her perfect form as she waltzed around her brother's table, placing cutlery beside each plate. Her long dark hair swayed as harmonious words flowed from her lips and out the screened window. The simple domestic action suited the career-driven woman, and it pleased him too much.

Just. Business. Partners.

"Hey, man. What'cha doing standing out here watching my little sister like some stalker?" Tucker smirked as he sauntered up the sidewalk with a paper grocery bag tucked in one arm.

William ignored him.

"Well?" Tucker's grin split his face.

William denied the pleasure that Jenna's flowered dress and her loose hair brought him. Especially his pleasure over the possibility that some country remained inside the self-proclaimed city girl. He stepped off the bottom step and met Tucker on the sidewalk. "I'm not watching her. Not like that."

"Ya, right!" Tucker hooted and slapped his thigh with his free hand.

William's face burned. He didn't have the time or the desire to rekindle a romance with his high school sweetheart. And even if he did, she'd never go for it. Not after what happened between them. "Quiet down, she'll hear you."

"So?" Tucker cocked an eyebrow. "You're here to talk. Let's go inside and get this party started."

William stepped into Tucker's path and stopped his buddy from brushing past him. "You told her that you hired *me*, right?"

"Well..." Tucker reached up and scratched the back of his head.

A rush of adrenaline sent every muscle in William's body pulsating. "You didn't tell her?"

"Let me explain." Tucker scampered back a few steps, putting some space between them.

"Then explain." William took a controlled breath and lifted his chin, taking advantage of his six-foot-two frame to look down on Tucker. William only had an inch on him, but it was still an advantage. His erratic pulse throbbed in his neck, and he made a face that always served him well managing his sometimes unruly construction crew.

Tucker looked away.



William brushed past Tucker, leading him from the front of the house and back the way Tucker had just come. As soon as they cleared the bushes, William lit into him. "You know how much I have riding on this job. If this doesn't go well, I could lose Paul's farm. I promised him I would take care of Linda and David. I promised." His words caught on the lump swelling in his throat. He had to keep the last promise he made to his brother. He had to.

Tucker flinched and jammed his hands into his front pockets. "I told her, I really did. I told her Scott and Company was handling the rebuild."

William sagged. She wouldn't connect the names.

Tucker swiped the back of his hand across his forehead then wiped his palms on his jeans. "I didn't think about clarifying things with Jenna until Becky mentioned it yesterday. I assumed she'd connect the last name and know it was your company. Everyone from around here knows you're the 'Scott' in Scott and Company."

"But she hasn't been home in years. Maybe she thinks Scott is some guy's first name."

If only Tucker's wife would have mentioned it sooner. Maybe there would have been time for damage control, time to properly prepare Jenna. To not only see him again, but consider working with him. He sneaked a look back toward the house. He could barely see her through the shrubbery flanking the stairs. She had no idea what was coming.

*Help me, God.*

William studied Jenna's brother, looking for sincerity. They were best friends. Partners on the volunteer fire team. He trusted Tucker with his life. It had to be an oversight. Unless—was he—*matchmaking?*

Tucker was crazy to believe Jenna might look twice at him. Not that he wanted her to. After losing his mother to breast cancer and his brother to a farm accident, he steered clear of all romance. He wouldn't lose a wife or leave one behind. Not after seeing the heartache death had caused his father and sister-in-law. He didn't know how they'd survived.

"It's an honest oversight." Tucker dragged his fingers through his hair.

"Really? It's a pretty big oversight." William curled and uncurled his fingers hoping the question fell with the weight of the physical blow he did not dare throw.

"Honest."

Tucker's simple declaration deflated William and he wiped a hand down his face. "OK."

Tucker perked.

William slipped his hand into his back jeans pocket and fingered the folded contract tucked inside. "I assumed Jenna knew I was the builder, but this could change everything. She might not want to work with me. What then? What if she refuses to sign the contract? What's plan B?"

"Ah," Tucker shifted his grocery bag to his other arm, "there is no plan B." He shrugged. "We'll have to convince her that partnering with you is a good idea. A good career move."

"I need this job to go well in order to get the television series. You know that Tucker. How could you let this happen?" His dream of hosting the new renovation reality show slipped away.

"Look, Jenna is a professional. She's not going to tank this for you. She'll see it as an opportunity, and her contributions will help you land the series. You'll

see.”

“I wish I could be as sure as you.” William spanned the back of his neck with his hands and pressed his fingertips into his tight muscles.

He wandered back toward the house where he could see Jenna through the window playing the role of homemaker, arranging napkins and pouring water into tall clear glasses, as if she set her brother's dinner table for five every night. His confidence bolstered. Maybe everything would be OK. He'd never expected the big city columnist slash designer to return after shaking her hometown's dust from her feet—yet here she was.

“What can I do?” Tucker asked from behind. “Anything. Just say the word.”

Jenna's lilting soprano threaded musical notes and the words from “Amazing Grace” through the window's screen netting.

“Pray.”

Tucker's hand landed heavy on William's shoulder. “I've been praying since the day I called Jenna home. It's time she had more than her lonely condo in the city. It's time she felt wanted, loved, and safe.”

William flinched. He had his chance to make her feel all those things ten years ago, but he'd messed up big time. His part in a humiliating scheme sent her running from Bayview. He tried to save her, but it came too late. His failure left her vulnerable to that brute of a man she eventually married. Nope, he wasn't looking for a second chance at romance any more than she likely was. If Jenna needed those things, she'd have to find them in the God she'd walked away from. William had enough troubles of his own.

He closed his eyes and offered up a quiet prayer. “‘Amazing Grace’?” He turned around and raised an eyebrow at Tucker.

“Yeah, I know. An odd choice considering she doesn’t know what to believe about God anymore.” Tucker worked his jaw back and forth.

“What happened to her, Tucker?”

“When you spend years praying for relief that never comes, it wears you down. It makes you question everything.” Tucker’s eyes glistened.

William had heard about her less-than-perfect marriage, about how she survived years of escalating abuse, and eventually widowhood.

“Loss changes a person,” Tucker said.

William sighed. He had suffered enough loss to know a person doesn’t emerge from it the same. His eyes found their way back to her. His pulse quickened. Each curve of her body, the flush of her face, and her slow smile dimpling both cheeks roused intense memories of the year they dated. A year better forgotten.

“It might help her to know that you understand. And that you’re sorry for—you know.”

The November breeze held its breath. A sliver of Lake Superior reflected dusky moonlight back into the night sky. All creation seemed to wait for William to respond.

He was sorry. More than she knew. But he wasn’t foolish enough to believe a few cheap words could repair the wreckage his wild youth had created. But God could.

Her song of hope for the hopeless flooded through him. He needed hope more than anyone else he knew. If Jenna felt tricked into working with him, it would

ruin everything. And the odds of her hanging around long enough to discover he was a changed man were doubtful.

He drew in a final breath of night air. This was suddenly about more than keeping his promise to Paul. Jenna needed something too. She needed his remorse and his overdue apology. And her acceptance of that didn't hinge on his talents as a carpenter or his business sense. It all hinged on her ability to throw some amazing grace his way.

~\*~

There wasn't enough oxygen in the room to slow Jenna's racing heart. She was meeting her new partner tonight. She placed the last piece of cutlery onto the fabric napkin and smoothed her shaky hands down the front of her dress. She wasn't usually so jittery, but ever since her abusive husband had died, she had been second guessing her ability to make good choices. She had married him, after all.

But Tucker vouched for her new partner and he wouldn't steer her wrong. He'd been hovering like an over-protective mother goose for over a year now. One by one he debunked the lies Parker had pounded into her. She had begun to see glimpses of her former self in the mirror, the woman she used to be. After a long and dormant season, she was finally poking through the frosty ground, fragile and weak, but full of promise and hope.

This job opportunity was Tucker's latest attempt to nudge her from the nest toward independence. He promised her that everything would be fine. What would she have done this past year without her

brother?

A sudden gust of wind gripped the storm door. Its wooden frame slammed the side of the house then bounced back into place. Jenna turned around and her eyes slammed into Bill's for the first time in almost ten years.

Words of grace died on her lips.

Icy air warred with the sudden heat burning through her insides. What was he doing here? An invisible pull dragged her gaze to his lips where an impromptu smile made dangerous promises. His muscular frame continued right into his worn work boots. She grabbed the chair back to steady herself. After all these years, he still had the ability to curl her toes.

"Hello, Jenna." He cocked his head to the side in a subtle challenge.

"Bill?" Her lips curved into the same scowl she gave intruding insects.

"I go by William now," he corrected.

Not fair. The slight crinkling around his light blue eyes added character to his face while her wrinkles added years. She traced her fine lines. Could he see them?

His eyes, still focused on her, sparkled with the same brilliance she'd succumbed to years ago. The familiar charismatic twinkle beckoned her closer, but experience made her wise enough to resist.

"Tucker?" She called out for her brother while still clutching the chair.

"Right behind him." Tucker moved past Bill, ushering him into the room, and plopped the grocery bag onto the table.

She backed into the wall, the trim digging into her

spine. *Breathe.*

She thrust out her chin and lifted her face in a practiced move of indifference. A move she mastered while married to a controlling, manipulative man. "What are you doing here? I'm supposed to be meeting my partner on the renovation job."

"Tucker invited me." Bill took a few cautious steps toward her but stopped when their gazes collided. He turned away and swallowed hard.

She fanned her napkin before her warm face. When did it get so hot? She expected to see a raging blaze in the fireplace, but the cold kindling mocked her flushed skin.

"What's going on?" Becky walked through the doorway connecting the dining room to the kitchen, holding a damp dishcloth in her hands. "Hi, William. I didn't hear you arrive."

Her sister-in-law's chatter provided Jenna a much-needed minute to collect her thoughts.

Becky reached around William and shut the front door. "Can I take your coat? Dinner is almost ready." She tossed the wet towel toward Jenna and held out her hand for William's coat.

Jenna snatched the rag from the air mid-flight. What was happening? She spun toward her brother who corrected his calculating expression a few seconds too late. "You invited him? Why?" She resisted the urge to let her knees buckle. Independent, successful women did not fall apart at the sight of an old boyfriend—or refuse great work opportunities. She straightened and kept her back toward dating-mistake number one—a mistake she didn't intend to repeat on the heels of freedom from mistake number two.

"He's the builder on the project. I told you that."

Tucker held his arms out in front of him, feigning nonchalance.

“What?” How could the man standing before her be the honorable upstanding partner Tucker raved about? Tucker had vouched for her new colleague’s strong sense of morality, his technical and business expertise, and personal integrity.

Bill couldn’t be *that* man.

“Do you have a problem with me?” Bill’s provoking tone reminded her of that day, years ago, when they’d stood side by side at the precipice of cliff jutting out over the lake and he’d dared her to jump first with the same irritating lilt.

She slowly turned, still trying to get her bearings. William stood in the foyer, ignoring Becky’s request for his coat and raised an eyebrow.

“I’d have to care to have a problem.” She hated how her voice wobbled. “And if I knew *Bill Scott* had any connection to this project, I would never have accepted the job.” She would have stayed in the city and told her editor to forget it. Syndicating her column wasn’t worth whatever ulterior motive Tucker had stuffed up his sleeve.

“It’s William now and I have a contract.” He held up a folded piece of paper between his index and middle fingers.

Jenna squeezed her eyes shut. Her editor had demanded she accept the job the minute she had overheard Tucker and Jenna on the phone. She said syndicated columnists did not refuse opportunities that promote their name. And, according to her editor, the angle of returning to her hometown and working at her former church was golden, like a decorating Cinderella story.



A soft sigh escaped before she could sensor it. If she was ever going to pay back the folks Parker had ripped off in his questionable business deals, she needed to make some extra cash. Syndication would provide it.

Jenna opened her eyes, focused on Tucker, and nailed him to the wall with her gaze. "Why didn't you tell me you already hired Bill?"

"I did. I told you I secured Scott and Company for our construction needs."

"You knew I wouldn't connect the names." Her jaw ached as she forced the words through clenched teeth. She fought to maintain the control she felt slipping away.

Tucker threw up his hands in mock surrender. "It was an accident. OK? An oversight." He tried to laugh it off as he moved to stand in front of Jenna, but it came out awkward and unnatural. He gripped her upper arms and gently squeezed them. "It'll be OK."

Jenna's eyes slid closed. Ten years ago suddenly felt like yesterday. She needed this job. She needed to right Parker's wrongs, but letting Bill Scott learn she needed anything from him would be disastrous. Lawyers assured her she had no legal obligation to repay the families, but no one had been able to erase her moral obligation.

Her body sagged against the wall. A wet nose nudged her wrist and she twisted it, opening her hand to welcome a moist, swampy lick from Tucker's black Labrador retriever. Probably the best kiss she'd had all year. She turned her palm over and scratched behind the dog's ear, murmuring platitudes. If only people were as loyal as pets.

Her mind spun. What was Tucker's motive here?

He wouldn't shackle her to another loser so soon after Parker. He was helping her improve her life. Making it better. Safer.

Out of all the emotions shooting through her veins, safe wasn't one of them.

"This changes everything." She kept one hand on the dog and pressed her index and middle fingertip of the other against her temple and rotated them in small circles. The dampness from the dishcloth oozed into her hair.

"Not for me." William's sandpaper voice rubbed her in all the wrong places. There was a time his gravelly voice had weakened her knees, but no longer. "I have a contract, remember?"

"Come on guys, we can work this out." Tucker outstretched one arm toward Tucker, his other still hovering by Jenna's upper arm.

She had no more patience for her meddling brother. If only looks really could kill...

"So?" William wiggled the paper in his hands. "What's it gonna be?"

She straightened, cracking her spine into place as if donning protective armor. "Do I have a choice?"

Bill's eyes softened and his voice dipped in an all too familiar way. "There is always a choice, sweetheart." His former endearment for her stung decade-old wounds. "But, if you're unhappy with the partnership, you'll have to pass on the job. I'm counting on this project too."

She studied him, weighing her strength and determination against his flirtatious charm and constant need to have a woman on his arm. He'd stolen enough from her ten years ago. He wasn't going to steal her chance to send her column nationwide and

make something from the ashes of her life. She'd tangled with worse and survived. She'd survive this, too. Even better. She'd thrive. "Pass on the job? Not a chance."

## 2

Jenna narrowed her eyes at her brother's reflection in her rearview mirror as he pulled his truck into the Bayview Community Church parking lot behind her. A fitful night's sleep did little to relieve her restlessness. Tucker insisted Bill had tried to stop and didn't profit from the prank against her back in high school—no matter how bad it had looked back then. Was Bill really a different man than she assumed—like Tucker claimed—or was a camouflaged wolf sneaking into the fold?

She huffed out a breath, lifting her bangs high off her forehead. She almost started to pray, but stopped. It never helped before, so why bother?

"I guess it's time to be a grown-up and see what I've gotten myself into." She wasn't thrilled when Tucker informed her of Bill's request to meet this morning, and was less thrilled when Tucker accepted on her behalf. If this partnership was going to succeed, she and Bill—and Tucker—were going to have to set some boundaries. The last thing she needed was the two of them ganging up on her and dictating her job.

On her right, the adjacent cemetery sat protected behind an iron gate inscribed, "Garden of Remembrance." She recalled youth group, church picnics, and family outings. They played like a movie reel that suddenly fast-forwarded to yesterday's fiasco.

She left the sanctuary of her car, slammed the door

on the memories of last night's ruined dinner, and pulled her sweater tight, overlapping it in the front and belting it closed. Thankfully Bill had declined dessert and high-tailed it out of there as soon as the meal ended. She'd signed his precious contract after a brief hesitation. The tiny part of her that needed to be in control to feel safe had loved how her pause had made him squirm. But only for a minute.

She suspected he needed her more than he let on. Her rib-punching dead husband had railroaded her enough times during their marriage that she recognized a man pulling a fast one. What she didn't know was who to blame for keeping her in the dark.

She bit the inside of her cheek and welcomed the painful distraction. Bill claimed innocence. Tucker claimed ignorance.

Neither was completely believable.

While she waited for Tucker to find a file in his briefcase and join her, she shielded her eyes from the blinding sun that contradicted the cooler fall air. She noticed a lone figure standing in the center of the overgrown graveyard, filling the right side of the neglected property. Her heart dipped.

Bill.

Bill's face, tilted heavenward, forced his wavy blond hair to fold back over the collar of his denim jacket. She stared a moment longer than necessary, wishing for a millisecond that things could be different between them. Stirred up in an intimate dance between the dust and wind, an unwelcome yearning grew for what could have been.

"William!" Tucker stepped up beside her and gently squeezed her elbow as the wind carried his greeting into the graveyard. "Come on."