



The Unintended Groom (Love Inspired Historical)

By Debra Ullrick

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A Perfect Partnership

When Abby Bowen's dream of love is dashed, she pursues a new dream: opening a dinner theater in Hot Mineral Springs, Colorado. There's just one hitch; she needs a male business partner. The handsome father of twins who answers Abby's ad is perfect...perhaps too perfect. Working with someone like Harrison Kingsley—without losing her heart—will be harder than Abby anticipated.

It's a good thing Harrison's arrangement with Abby is strictly business. Because with her kind soul, smiling blue eyes and gentle way with his boys, he could easily fall for her. But the longer he works with Abby, the more Harrison realizes that the Lord might have an entirely different partnership planned for them.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Debra Ullrick is an award winning Christian romance author. One of her novellas made the New York Times bestseller's list. Debra is happily married to her husband of thirty-eight years and has one daughter. For over twenty-five years, they lived and worked on cattle ranches in the Colorado Mountains. One of those ranches is partially owned by a famous movie star and her screenwriter husband. When Debra's not writing, she's reading, or feeding wild critters.

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Hot Mineral Springs, Colorado
1888

"What do you mean, I can't?" Abby Bowen fought to keep from slamming her hands on her hips and glaring down at the rotund man seated in front of her.

"I'm sorry, miss," the mayor and head chairman of Hot Mineral Springs, Mr. Prinker, said as his cheeks flushed.

"Why didn't you tell me this before I bought the place?" She clenched her teeth as hot anger boiled inside her. There was no excuse for this. None whatsoever.

"We didn't know what your intentions were for the building. We assumed you wanted to open a dress shop or a restaurant or even a luxurious mineral spa for women. We already have one for men, you know." He grabbed the lapels of his jacket and puffed out his chest like a zealous rooster who was full of himself. "Any one of those would have been allowed. However, we—" he glanced around the large rectangle table at each of the seven town committee members"—cannot allow a single woman to open a theater. Why, something of that nature would be quite scandalous and ruin our town's fine upstanding reputation. Not to say your own, young lady." He shook his forefinger at her.

Abby wanted to latch onto his meaty finger and shove it up his bulbous red nose. But that attitude would get her nowhere, much less please the Lord. She quelled her anger as she searched for another option. Why some townspeople thought women who ran a theater were of questionable repute, she didn't understand. In other towns, people did it all the time, and it was not considered a scandal.

"It's too bad that your name is not *Mr. Bowen*," Mr. Prinker said as if in deep thought. "For if it was, we might consider your proposal. However, as it stands, we will have to refuse the license required by our town to open such an establishment."

Such an establishment? What did that mean? Whatever it meant, she didn't care. She just wanted to make sure she understood him correctly. "Let me see if I get this straight. Are you saying if I was a *man*, I would be able to obtain this license?"

"In a manner of speaking, that's precisely what I'm saying. However—" he rubbed his double chin for the longest moment of her life"—there is one other alternative."

"And what, pray tell, is that?" Abby didn't even try to keep the sarcasm from her voice. She'd about had

enough of these men and their preposterous accusations.

"If you were to take on a male business partner, a gentleman with an outstanding reputation, then we would consider allowing you to open your theater. Isn't that right, gentlemen?"

They all nodded their heads.

What?! Surely these buffoons weren't serious. Were they? Abby gazed at each man to see if they indeed were. Their stoic faces confirmed her assessment. She shook her head at the utterly and completely outlandish idea. "So you're saying, *if I obtain a male*—" she emphasized the word male with abhorrence—"business partner, then you will allow me to open my theater? Correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. We feel it's the only proper way. I am certain, ma'am, that you will find there are many upstanding men in our community who would be more than willing to help you with your business adventure. Including any one of us here in this room." The mayor's horse teeth overtook his supercilious grin.

Oh, how she wanted to reach over and whip that arrogant smirk right off his thin lips. Humpft. As if she needed their help running a business. There wasn't one person in this room with whom she'd ever consider doing business with. They all looked shiftier and greedier than a gang of bank robbers.

"Excuse me a moment, gentlemen." She all but choked on that last word. These men were no gentlemen.

"Of course." Mr. Prinker's smile couldn't get any phonier than it was right now.

Abby stepped outside the room and slipped around the corner so she could be alone a few minutes. She paced up and down the sparkling-clean hallway, wringing her gloved hands. With each step she took on the polished hardwood floor, her button-up shoes echoed, her pink silk bustle gown swished and the pink plume on her hat danced.

She couldn't believe this whole ludicrous thing was even happening. After spending the last year and a half going to plays and even participating in a few, she knew what she wanted to do with her life. That desire had only escalated when her ex-fiance, David Blakely, had broken their engagement—the very day she had told him she could never bear children. After that, every time she'd seen him with his wife, the woman he had married two weeks after he had ended their engagement almost one year ago, and their newborn son, the dagger of rejection plunged deeper into her heart. That's when she had plotted her escape from the Idaho Territory. Eventually, as she worked on her new life, the pain had gone away, and her focus turned completely to fulfilling her dream, a dream that was about to die before it even got started. All because of a room full of portentous, dishonest, stodgy old men.

And if she were honest with herself, her own stupidity, as well.

Why hadn't she listened to her brothers? Haydon, Michael and Jess had warned her about buying a building without seeing it first. But no, she had assured them the ad stated the mansion at the edge of town was previously owned by a prominent family, so therefore, it had to have been well taken care of. They weren't convinced. But she refused to let that stop her. Her stubborn exuberant way took charge as did her dream of life outside the confines of her family. Thus, she let them know she had prayed about the whole thing and was confident in her decision to go ahead with her plans.

The theater was third in her line of dreams, but it was all she had left to dream about. So using the money her

father had left her, money he had intended for her and her siblings to use to fulfill their dreams, she'd gone ahead and purchased the place sight unseen. What a mistake that turned out to be.

The very day she arrived in Hot Mineral Springs, Colorado, she quickly discovered her brothers had been right. No maintenance had been done on the home since the owner had moved back east years ago. Because of the mansion's abandoned condition, there was no way for her to sell the place and get her money back so that she could move somewhere else. Someplace where she would be allowed to open up her business.

Abby stopped pacing. For a brief moment she closed her eyes and sighed. No, like it or not, she was stuck with the place.

She flicked her thumbnail with her teeth as she tried to come up with a plan, but nothing came to mind.

Oh, if only she could have opened her dinner theater back home in Paradise Haven, but she couldn't. They already had one, and the town wasn't big enough for two. Not only that, she had to move away.

She just had to.

Being at home constantly reminded her of the two things she wanted most out of life but could never have—children of her own and the love of her life, David. What she needed to do now was to expunge the past and its painful memories. She'd start now by forcing her mind to take a turn in another direction, to figure out a way to make her business adventure work. Operating a theater would not only keep her busy, but it would give her life meaning. Something she desperately needed.

With a new resolve, Abby determined it would be a hot day in a shed full of ice before she would allow anyone to throw away her opportunity for happiness and fulfillment. No one, not even these men, would steal those things from her. There had to be a way to fulfill her dream.

There just had to.

It was in the next moment Abby remembered that it was God who had led her here. And it would be God who would solve the obstacles before her. She sent up a quick prayer for wisdom, and within seconds a plan formulated in her mind. It was a drastic one, but it just might work. Knowing it would be strictly for business purposes, she would place an advertisement for a business partner. A male one. She rolled her eyes at that one. But she'd do it. That would fix these pompous men's wagons fine enough.

Satisfied and feeling somewhat pleased with her scheme, she headed back into the boardroom. Abby put on her best acting face and eyed each man with a sweet smile. "Gentlemen, I've decided to do what you have asked. I will take on a *gentleman* business partner."

Their faces lit up and greed ravished their eager eyes.

"But—" she held up her hand "—it won't be with anyone here. Good day, sirs." With those words, she whirled on her heels and breezed out of the conference room, leaving each man with his mouth hanging wide open.

Now all she needed to do was make haste and find a gentleman who would be willing to become her partner. Was there such a man? One who would agree to the terms she'd already started formulating in her mind?

Outside, the light breeze brought with it the smell of sulfur from the hot mineral springs. She'd been here two months now and she still hadn't gotten used to the rotten-egg odor. To think that people actually bathed in that smelly water made her shudder. How revolting.

She'd been amazed to learn that Indians believed the waters to be sacred. That they relaxed in the natural hot mineral pools here, believing it healed their minds, bodies and souls.

To think that the mayor actually thought she would want to open a women's spa utilizing that water. Did women actually bathe in that stinky stuff, too? She wrinkled her nose, then hiked a shoulder. If they indeed did, she might have to consider opening a spa. Something she would have to discuss with her business partner. Or would she? Could she do one on her own and the other with him? Whoever he was.

The very idea of having a partner, someone who would have a say in how things were run, was about as pleasant as the thought of a million spiders crawling all over her. Over the past two years, she planned exactly how she wanted to run her dinner theater. What it would be like. What meals would be served. What plays would be staged. What furniture and place settings she would use. All of it. Down to the very last detail. Would her new business partner, if she found one, try to change those plans? What was she thinking? She shook her head at her own silliness. Of course he wouldn't. She wouldn't let him.

Maybe the man would agree to split the business 60/40. That way she would have controlling interest of how things were run. Mr. Barker, her new stepfather back in Paradise Haven, whose business-savvy mind she'd questioned almost daily over the past year and a half all the way up until the day of her departure, had taught her that. But.. She sighed. Where would she find such a man who would be willing to do that? She didn't know, but God did. Her lips curled upward with the knowledge that God was in control and that He would work it all out.

Abby gazed up at the clear, blue sky and sent up her prayer request. When she finished, she thanked God for the answer. After all, that's what living by faith was all about. Trusting Him for the answer before it ever came. Two scriptures popped into her mind. Hebrews 11:1 *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* And Philippians 4:6 *Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.*

Confident she had done that very thing, her attention slid downward toward the tall mountains surrounding the eighty-five-hundred-feet-above-sea-level town. The high altitude had taken some time getting used to. At first, breathing the thin air had been difficult, and she had gotten a lot of headaches. Drinking more water seemed to help. Eventually, she had gotten used to the thinner air, and the headaches were gone. Because of that, she now loved living in these majestic mountains. Mountains unlike any she'd ever seen back home in Paradise Haven in the Idaho Territory.

Back there, the land was much different from here with its rolling hills, bunch grass, tall wheat and rich volcanic ash soil. Here there were large hay meadows, oodles and oodles of sagebrush and high mountains covered with aspen, blue spruce and ponderosa pine trees. Hidden in those breathtaking mountains were running brooks of crystal clear water, concealed waterfalls, wildflowers, caves, bears, mountain lions, bobcats, foxes, coyotes and lots of lots of deer and elk. Her favorite things in this remote mountain town were the hummingbirds, the tiny striped ground squirrels and the itty-bitty chipmunks. Each brightened her day with their cute antics.

The desire to stay in this beautiful town snuggled cozily into her. Only one way to make that happen, though. She'd better get to it. And now. Anxious to get home so she could word her advertisement carefully, and post

it as soon as possible, she picked up her pace, sending up yet another prayer. "God, send me the right man. And make it quick."

Harrison Kingsley sat at his deceased father's massive mahogany desk and re-read Abigail Bowen's advertisement for the fifteenth time.

Wanted: Business Partner.

Prosperous business opportunity for the right gentleman. Guaranteed full return on investment within three months, including interest. If interested, please contact newspaper for more information.

At first he'd thought the ad had been some kind of prank, but his gut told him it wasn't. Years ago, he'd learned to follow his gut instincts and to trust in them, so three weeks ago he had contacted the paper. They informed him all correspondences would be made through them.

Within a week of responding to the advertisement, he'd received his first reply and was shocked to discover the advertisement had been written by a woman, a woman who had asked many questions about his life. Such as, how old he was, what he did for a living, where he was from, why he was interested in becoming a business partner and many more. Harrison answered each one honestly, and even asked some of his own. The hardest one to answer was, "Why are you willing to invest?"

Need. That's why. He glanced at the legal paper lying on his desk mere inches from his fingers. With a heavy sigh, he picked up his father's will and re-read the final stipulation, the very one he had memorized by now.

Notwithstanding anything contained herein, in order for my son, Harrison James Kingsley, to receive his full inheritance as set forth above, he must first prove that he is capable of operating my businesses. As proof of such capability, Harrison must start his own business, which business may be in any manner of industry or trade but which (a) must be located in a community other than Boston and specifically in a community in which he is unknown to the other residents, and (b) must show a profit of at least 1,000 dollars before his twenty-fifth birthday. If he fails to satisfy the foregoing requirements on or before his twenty-fifth birthday, all my assets will be divided equally between the following charities...

Anger bubbled up inside Harrison as it did every time he read that section of his father's will. He tossed the paper onto the desk, pinched his eyes shut and pressed the bridge of his nose with his fingertips and thumb. How could his father do this to him? Give him so little time to accomplish this? Did his father really hate him that much? Or was he still punishing him for the death of his mother? Harrison didn't know. But what he did know was that his father still controlled him, even from the grave.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Brian Roberts:

Do you one among people who can't read pleasurable if the sentence chained from the straightway, hold on guys this particular aren't like that. This The Unintended Groom (Love Inspired Historical) book is readable simply by you who hate the perfect word style. You will find the details here are arrange for enjoyable reading experience without leaving actually decrease the knowledge that want to provide to you. The writer regarding The Unintended Groom (Love Inspired Historical) content conveys the idea easily to understand by many people. The printed and e-book are not different in the articles but it just different as it. So , do you

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Annette Spafford:

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