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Written by Beth Moran

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The Name I Call Myself

BETH MORAN



LION FICTION

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For Joseph –
Who makes me sing



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Chapter One

When, in my younger days, I idly contemplated the time I might one day go wedding dress shopping, it never crossed my mind that it would be a covert operation, accompanied by oversized sunglasses and a floppy hat. Or that I would be the one to cry. And that if I did, those tears would be a combination of stress, fear, loneliness, shame, and feeling buried alive in a gold mine.

It was Marilyn's idea. She bullied me into it. Currently drowning in the domesticity brought on by nine-month-old twins, and representing the closest thing I had to a best friend at that point – or any point in my mixed-up, disaster-strewn, battle-scarred life – she ignored my protestations that it was a waste of time.

"No arguments, Faith. I need some romance! I'm going to remind myself what life was like before existing on four hours' sleep a night and leftover mushed-up vegetables. And you need to show that bag of Botox Larissa who's boss. Get your jacket."

Marilyn and I had met three months earlier, at my first meeting with the Houghton Country Club Committee, known to its members as HCC. Most of the sleek, silky, skinny women greeted me with patronizing smiles, before dismissing me as irrelevant. None of them recognized me from my time serving on the other side of the bar, but they had no doubt heard the gossip. Marilyn, on the other hand, grinned at me across the table. "Nice to meet you, Faith. Although, I have to say the service in here isn't what it used to be. Someone told me their best waitress ran off with a millionaire playboy."

I smiled, and declined to comment. I didn't know if Perry was a millionaire or not, but he certainly deserved the playboy reputation. Until now. I hoped.

After two hours discussing such grave matters as, at the top of the list, whether or not to ban non-organic cucumber in the cricket teas, Marilyn invited me for coffee at her cottage of chaos. I accepted, consuming enough cheesecake and hilarious HCC committee stories to send me home with a stomach ache and sore ribs. And now, here we were, sneaking through Nottingham Lace Market on the hunt for a wedding dress.

The assistant in the first boutique we stopped at smoothed out my skirt, before standing back to reveal my reflection.

I gazed at the woman in the mirror, at her dark auburn hair peeking out from a vintage-style veil and her miraculously cinched-in waist. It looked perfect. The neckline just high enough to cover the scar running underneath her collarbone. Shimmer and shine to deflect attention from the wan, sunken eyes and hollow cheekbones.

I didn't deserve this dress. I never expected or even hoped for it. People like me don't get dresses like this. In wonderment and awe, forgetting the complicated reasons behind the whole need for a wedding dress in the first place, I stepped out of the changing room to show Marilyn, who was lounging on a stripy sofa with a glass of Buck's Fizz.

"Hooten tooten, Faith. You. Are. Beautiful." She screwed up her round face and let out a honking sob. At that point I too burst into tears, pressing my fingers against both cheeks to prevent hot, salty water dripping onto the most beautiful dress in the world.

Marilyn blew her nose, producing more honks. I thought about the frightful, flouncy frock hanging up in its layers of protective wrapping in my wardrobe, and cried even harder. Thick, hiccupy, non-bride-like gulps. Sheesh. I had to pull myself together. I hadn't cried in eight years. Where was this coming from?

My friend wiped her eyes, before offering me her orange, baby-food-stained handkerchief. With a look of horror, the shop assistant

dived to intercept, handing me a pure white tissue from a lilac box. Marilyn shook her head. "You have to have this dress. Or another one like it. The last one you tried on, or the one before that. Even the dress in the window with the purple bow and the weird frilly train. All of them are better than the Ghost Web. You have to do this, Faith! If you can't stand up to her, destroy it! Rip it! Burn it! Spill red wine on it! Give it to Nancy and Pete!" Nancy and Pete were Marilyn's twins, currently being looked after by her sister. "I'll do it for you. I'll destroy the Ghost Web."

The Ghost Web is Marilyn's name for my future mother-in-law's wedding dress, because it droops like a sorry, lonely ghost and is covered in peculiar grey net like a cobweb. I know this dress well because, despite having only met my mother-in-law-to-be Larissa four times, she has decided that sometime next year I'll be gliding – or shuffling, one or the other – down the aisle in it. That is, the aisle of her choosing. That is, the aisle of the Houghton Country Club. No, I didn't know either that anyone in twenty-first-century Nottinghamshire belonged to country clubs, until I got a job there a few years ago.

The dress is too long, as at barely five foot three I am seven inches shorter than the original owner. The bodice also needs serious alterations, as I have what fashion stylists call an hourglass figure, and what my charming mother-in-law terms "nothing a bit of hard work and self-control couldn't rectify". The reasons why Larissa insists I wear it are manifold, layered like an onion. The layers include control, selfishness, family pride, and superiority. I wonder if at the centre of this onion is the hope that when her son sees me walk down the aisle in that dress he'll do a runner out the side door.

Perry, my fiancé, wants to think it is a touching gesture, symbolizing my warm welcome into his family.

He hasn't seen the Ghost Web.

* * *

Mission accomplished, Marilyn and I stopped off at a nearby tea shop. She sighed, shaking the equivalent of about six teaspoons of sugar into her full-fat latte. "What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It's only a dress. I'll talk to the seamstress doing the alterations and see what changes she can make."

"That's not the issue here, and you know it. If this woman decides your dress, she's going to be hovering over you the rest of your marriage. Like a ghost. Or a spider in a web. You have to stop this now! You need your own wedding dress, or how are you going to be your own woman?"

I did. I needed my own dress. The problem was I had no money to buy my own dress and no idea what kind of dress I even wanted. The truth? I had lost control of my life a long, long time ago. I still had the scar on my stomach from the last time I pushed to be my own woman.

"I'll talk to Perry, see what he says."

"You do that. Bat those gorgeous eyelashes at him. Now, what's next on the list?"

Next on the list was a church. I would rather get married in a wheelie bin than HCC. Having slept in a wheelie bin once, it might be more appropriate. Except nobody on the face of this earth except me and a drunk old man knows I slept there.

"Brooksby."

An hour or so later, pressing on with the fake wedding plans, we drove into the village where I spent the latter part of my childhood. Avoiding the road passing the House of Hideous Memories, Marilyn parked in the tiny car park next to the central square of shops. Houghton's poor neighbour, Brooksby had grown rapidly since the initial slump following the pit closure. Well on the way to becoming a commuter town, the old, independent shops were being slowly replaced with high street chains – a bakery, a chemist, a newsagent, and two decidedly non-super supermarkets. Coming to a stop outside the tiny chapel, I paused to look at the dark red brick, the one stained-glass window, and the ugly car park.

Marilyn frowned at me. "Here?"

I nodded. "It was my mum's church."

"She got married here?"

"No. She never got married."

"Will it fit an Upperton wedding?" Perry's family, the Uppertons, would be planning an extravagant guest list.

"Well, given that this is my fantasy wedding, in which the sum total of guests equals five, including your family, I think we'll manage it."

She nodded her head. "Excellent. I need plenty of room since my body seems to have forgotten that it no longer requires the space for two extra people inside it. Let's have a butcher's."

Marilyn must have been curious about my lack of fantasy wedding guests, and why four-fifths of them were made up of a family I had only known for a few weeks. But she didn't ask. She never asked. And I loved her for it.

I tried the front door, which was locked. We could see lights on, however, in the adjacent hall, so after knocking and waiting for a couple of minutes we walked round and rang the bell by the side door. A moment later it opened, and an older woman with hair like a shiny black helmet, a black pencil skirt, and a starchy cream blouse stood in the doorway. She looked us up and down, then at the path behind me.

"Is it just you?"

"Um. Yes."

"There isn't anyone else?"

"I don't think so." We checked behind us, to be sure.

"No one at all?" She sounded incredulous now, her face stiff, lips barely moving. "Well, you'd better come in. The others are waiting."

She turned around and marched off. Slightly at a loss, we followed her up the steps, through a dark porch, and into the church side hall. It had been redecorated since I had visited as a young girl. The cracking plaster had gone, exposing soft pink brickwork covered in bright paintings of outdoor scenes. Instead of the tired

carpet the floor now gleamed with light oak boards, and the rows of chairs lined up in the front half of the room were no longer cheap plastic but a combination of wood and red-cushioned seats. The woman strode to the front of the room, coming to a stop next to an upright piano. About a dozen other people sat dotted along the first three rows.

"Well, come along then. You've already missed the warm-up. Find a seat please."

"Excuse me?" I asked, as Marilyn plonked herself down on one of the chairs, shuffling about to get comfortable as she winked at the person beside her.

The helmet woman ignored me, addressing the wooden beams above our heads. "Everybody back in positions. From the beginning, Rowan."

An older teenager, presumably Rowan, cleared her throat. As the rest of the room stood up, Marilyn gestured for me to move next to her before opening her bag and pulling out a packet of toffees.

Helmet woman blew out a large puff of air. "When you're ready, Rowan!"

Rowan, five foot two inches of scrawny nothing, jerked her head at Marilyn, who offered her a toffee. "Who's that, then? I don't wanna do it with them gawpin' at me."

Helmet closed her eyes, momentarily. "You know this is our open afternoon. Would it make you feel better if our new recruits came to the front and introduced themselves? Then perhaps we can start. *Seven minutes late.*"

I answered from where I was. "Um, sorry, but we're not here for this. We wanted to look at the church. I'm getting married."

She stared at me for a good long moment, eyes hovering on the massive chunk of rock I wore on my ring finger before seeking out Marilyn. "You – put that disgusting bag away. No food until we're finished. None of that fake food *ever*. Now, repeat after me." She let out a long, high, clear note that bounced off the stained-glass window and rattled our eardrums.