



## Groom Under Fire (Shotgun Weddings Book 1)

By Lisa Childs

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### **I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU...BODYGUARD AND WIFE?**

When her real groom is kidnapped, Tanya Chesterfield convinces bodyguard and all-time crush Cooper Payne to marry her in order to fulfill the terms of her inheritance and secure a possible ransom. But when there are no demands for money, only attempts made on Tanya's life, Cooper's protective instincts go into overdrive. Nearly losing her makes Cooper realize he never stopped loving her, and their pretense as husband and wife resurrects the passion between them. Cooper has vowed to honor and cherish her, and he is determined to find the truth—even if it means in the end he must let Tanya go.

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

Award-winning author Lisa Childs writes romantic suspense, dark paranormal romance and women's fiction for Harlequin/Silhouette. She lives on thirty acres in west Michigan with her husband, two daughters, a talkative Siamese and a long-haired Chihuahua who thinks she's a Rottweiler. Lisa loves hearing from readers who can contact her through her website, [www.lisachilds.com](http://www.lisachilds.com) or snail mail address, PO Box 139, Marne, MI 49435.

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"You're messing with me," Cooper Payne accused his older brother. He hadn't been gone so long that he'd forgotten how they all handled any emotional and uncomfortable situation—with humor and teasing.

"I'm giving you an assignment," Logan said, but he was focused on the papers on his desk as if unwilling to meet Cooper's stare. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

After his honorable discharge from the Marines, he had come home to River City, Michigan, in order to join the family business. The business his brother had started: private security protection. Not his mother's business: weddings.

"I want a *real* assignment," Cooper clarified as he paced the small confines of Logan's dark-paneled office. "Not some trick our mother put you up to."

"Trick?" Logan asked, his usually deep voice rising with fake innocence. "Why would you think it's a trick?"

Frustration clutched at his stomach, knotting his guts. "Because Mom's been trying to get me to go to this damn wedding before I even got on a plane to head back..."

"Home," Logan finished for him. "You're home. And Tanya Chesterfield and Stephen Wochholz are your friends. Why wouldn't you want to attend their wedding?"

Because the thought of Tanya marrying *any* man—let alone Stephen—made him physically sick. He shook his head. "We were friends in high school," Cooper reminded his brother and himself. "That was a dozen years ago."

And as beautiful as Tanya was, it was a miracle that she wasn't already married with a couple of kids. It wasn't as if she would have been pining over him. They hadn't shared more than a couple of kisses in high school before agreeing that they were better as friends just as she and Stephen were. But now she was marrying Stephen...

They made sense, though. More sense than he and Tanya ever would have. She was a damned heiress to billions and he was an ex-marine working for his big brother.

Maybe.

Logan was focused on him now, studying him through narrowed blue eyes. Cooper looked so much like Logan and his twin, with the same blue eyes and black hair, that people had often questioned if they were

actually triplets. But Cooper was eighteen months younger than Parker and Logan. And they never let him forget it.

Finally Logan spoke, "Stephen still considers you a friend. He requested you be his best man."

"How do you know that?" he asked. Before his brother could reply, he answered his own question, "Mom..." As much as he loved her, the woman was infuriating. "She's obsessed with this damn wedding!"

"Weddings are her business," Logan replied with pride.

For years their mother had put all her energy and love into her family—taking on the roles of both mother and father after her police-officer husband had been killed in the line of duty fifteen years ago. But when her youngest—and only girl—had gone off to college, she had found a new vocation—saving the church where she and Cooper's father had been married from demolition and turning it into a wedding venue with her as planner.

"And *security* is our business," Cooper said. His brother had promised him a job with Payne Protection the minute his enlistment ended. He had even brought him directly to the office from the airport, but that had been a couple of days ago and he had yet to give him a job. Until tonight...

"That's why you need to get over to the church," Logan told him.

"For security? At a wedding?" He snorted his derision.

"Tanya is the granddaughter of a billionaire," Logan needlessly reminded him.

As if Cooper hadn't been brutally aware of the differences between her lifestyle and his, her grandfather had pointed out that a fatherless kid like him with no prospects for the future had nothing to offer an heiress like Tanya. Benedict Bradford had wanted a doctor or lawyer for his eldest granddaughter—a man worthy of her. He hadn't considered a soldier who might not make it through his deployments worthy of Tanya. Neither had Cooper. The old man had been dead for years now, but Benedict Bradford would have approved of Stephen, who had become a corporate attorney.

"Being a billionaire's granddaughter never put her in danger before," Cooper said. Or his mother definitely would have told him about it. And if that had been the case, he wouldn't have waited until his enlistment ended before coming home.

Logan lifted up his cell phone and turned it toward Cooper. "This might say otherwise."

Coop peered at a dark, indiscernible image on the small screen. "What the hell is that?"

"Black roses," Logan replied with a shudder of revulsion. "They were delivered to the church today."

"That doesn't say danger," Cooper insisted. "That says mix-up at the florist's."

Logan shook his head. "The wedding's tomorrow, so the real flowers aren't being delivered until morning."

Cooper arched an eyebrow now, questioning how his brother was so knowledgeable of wedding policy and procedure.

"It's *Mom*," Logan said. "Of course we help her out from time to time. Like now. You need to get to the church."

"You just said the wedding's tomorrow."

"So that means the rehearsal's tonight," Logan said with a snort of disgust at Cooper's ignorance.

But he'd already been gone—first to boot camp and then a base in Okinawa—when their mother had bought the old church. He had no knowledge of weddings and absolutely no desire to learn about them.

"So if someone wants to stop the wedding from happening," Logan continued, "they'll make their move tonight."

*Someone* wanted to stop the wedding. But Cooper had no intention of making a move. Nothing had changed since high school. There had been nothing between Tanya and him then but friendship. And there was less than nothing between them now. He hadn't talked to her in years.

But if she was in danger...

Her hand shook as Tanya lifted the zippered garment bag containing her wedding gown toward the hook hanging on the wall of the bride's dressing room. It wasn't the weight of the yards of satin and lace that strained her muscles but the weight of the guilt bearing down on her shoulders. *I can't do this! It's not right...*

But neither was her grandfather's manipulation. Even a decade after his death, the old man hadn't given up trying to control his family. A couple of decades ago, he had bought off Tanya's father, so that he had left her mother and her and her sister, forcing them to move in with her grandfather.

That place had been the exact opposite of the bright room in which Tanya stood now. The bride's dressing room was all white wainscoting and soft pink paint. That house had been cold and dark. She shuddered at just the thought of the mausoleum. But then she smiled as she remembered who had called the drafty mansion that first. Cooper Payne.

He had kissed her there—after he'd pushed her up against one of the pillars of the front porch. That kiss had happened more than a dozen years ago, but her heart beat erratically at the memory. It had never pounded that hard over any other kiss. Her very first kiss.

Maybe that was why it had meant so much. Maybe that was why, even though it had been years since she'd seen him, she thought so often of Cooper Payne. It was probably good that he'd turned down Stephen's request to be his best man. Good that he wasn't going to be standing there when she followed through with this charade.

She wouldn't be able to utter her vows—to *lie*—with him looking at her. Not that he'd ever been able to tell when she was lying.

He had believed her when she'd agreed with him that the kiss—and the few that had followed it—had been a mistake, that they were only meant to be friends. She had nodded and smiled even while her teenage heart had been breaking.

Maybe it was the memory of that pain that had kept her from ever falling in love again. But then there had

also been those threats. Stephen was convinced they were empty. But what if they weren't?

Should she risk it, as Stephen had advised? Or should she forfeit her inheritance?

She glanced into the antique mirror that stood next to where the garment bag hung, but she quickly turned away from the image of blond hair and haunted green eyes. She couldn't even look at herself right now. If she followed through with this farce, she would never be able to look at herself again.

She breathed a ragged sigh. She wouldn't miss the money; it had never been hers anyway. But she'd had plans for it—good plans, charitable plans.

Her grandfather had never practiced any charity—not even at home. Benedict Bradford had really been a mean old miser. So giving away his money would have been the perfect revenge for how he'd treated her mother and her and her sister.

But a wedding shouldn't be about revenge. Or money. Or even charity. It should be about love. And while Tanya loved her groom, she wasn't *in* love with him.

"I—I can't do this..."

Not the wedding. Not even the damn rehearsal. She crossed the room and jerked open the door to the vestibule and nearly ran into Cooper Payne's mother. Petite and slender with coppery-red hair and warm brown eyes, Mrs. Payne was exactly the opposite of her tall, dark, muscular sons. Only the youngest—her daughter—looked like her.

"What's the matter, honey?" the older woman asked as she gripped Tanya's trembling arms. "Are you all right?"

Tanya shook her head. "No, nothing's right."

"I know the rest of the wedding party hasn't shown up yet, but there's no rush," Mrs. Payne assured her, her voice as full of warmth and comfort as her eyes. "Reverend James and I—"

She didn't care about the rest of the wedding party. "Stephen—is Stephen here?"

Mrs. Payne nodded. "I showed him to the groom's quarters a while ago, so that he could stow his tux there for tomorrow, like you've stowed your dress. Then you'll have less to worry about for the ceremony."

There was not going to be a ceremony. But Tanya couldn't tell anyone that until she'd told Stephen. He'd concocted this crazy scheme in the first place because he was her friend, because he'd always been there for her. But she couldn't take advantage of that friendship, of him.

"Where are the groom's quarters?" she asked.

"You need to wait until the others show," Mrs. Payne said. "So that the rehearsal can proceed just as the ceremony will tomorrow."

"No, I—I need to talk to Stephen," she insisted. "Now." Before the farce went any further.

Mrs. Payne's brown eyes widened. But after having worked with so many happy couples over the years, she must have realized something was off with them—that Tanya was hardly an ecstatic bride. "The groom's quarters are behind the altar."

Tanya crossed the vestibule and opened the heavy oak doors to the church. Since night had already fallen, the stained-glass windows were dark. The only light came from the sconces on the walls, casting shadows from the pews into the aisle. So she didn't notice that the red velvet runner was tangled. She tripped over it, catching herself before she dropped to her knees. That was weird—usually Mrs. Payne never missed a thing. No detail escaped her attention.

The wedding planner had worked so hard that guilt tugged at Tanya. She hated to disappoint the woman. But she couldn't go through with a lie.

Stephen would understand that. It wasn't as if he thought of her as anything other than a friend either, so he wouldn't be hurt.

The door to the room behind the altar stood ajar. She pushed it open to darkness. "Stephen?"

Had he changed his mind, too? She didn't blame him, but she doubted that he would have just left without talking to her first. She fumbled along the wall, feeling for the switch, when her fingers smeared across something wet. That wasn't something Mrs. Payne would have missed either. The chapel was spotless.

Tanya flipped on the switch, bathing the room in light—and discovered it had already been bathed in blood. It was spattered across the floor, the couch and the wall. Panic and fear rose up at the horror, choking her, so that she could barely utter the scream burning her throat.

Cooper heard it. Even though the scream wasn't loud, the sheer terror of it pierced his heart. He ran past his mother, who was already halfway down the aisle of the church—and toward the danger. Years had passed since he'd heard it, but he had instinctively recognized Tanya's voice.

"Stay here," he ordered his mother as he reached beneath his leather jacket and pulled his weapon from the arm holster.

She pointed behind the altar, to the room from which light spilled. And Tanya. She backed out of the doorway, her hand pressed across her mouth as if to hold in another scream. As he rushed up behind her, she collided with Cooper. Then she pulled her hand away and screamed again.

He spun her around to face him. "It's okay," he assured her. "It's me."

Her green eyes, damp with tears, widened, and then she clutched at him, pressing against his chest. "Cooper! Thank God it's you!"

Her slight body trembled in his arms that automatically closed around her, pulling her even closer. She fit perfectly against him. But he was just comforting her, just making sure she was all right.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, and her silky blond hair brushed against his throat. "No, no."

He peered over her head into the room, and then he saw it. All the blood.

So much blood.

Despite his order to stay put, his mother joined them. "What's wrong—" she started to ask but gasped when she saw it, too.

"Call 911," Cooper said, thrusting his phone at her.

Then he stepped inside the room to look for the body. With that much blood, there had to be a body.

A dead one.

## **Users Review**

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