

THE BLUE WILLOW BRIDES • BOOK 5

# PERFECTLY MATCHED

A NOVEL

MAGGIE BRENDAN



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Maggie Brendan, *Perfectly Matched*  
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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brendan, Maggie, 1949–

Perfectly matched : a novel / Maggie Brendan. — First Edition.

pages cm. — (The Blue Willow Brides ; Book 3)

ISBN 978-0-8007-3464-0 (pbk.)

1. Mail order brides—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3602.R4485P47 2013

813'.6—dc23

2013018513

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13 14 15 16 17 18 19      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Jody, KatyKat, Amelia, and Snowball, my pets, and, of course, Moose, the dog in this story who has joined them in heaven. To the ASPCA, for their dedicated service to all animals everywhere.

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed.

Proverbs 31:8 NLT



# 1

## Denver, Colorado Fall 1888

“Do you, Anna Olsen, take Edward Parker to be your lawfully wedded husband?” Reverend Buchtel cleared his throat and peered over the spectacles resting on the bridge of his large nose. After a moment of silence, he shifted his feet, and the hardwood floor moaned loudly under his weight. He sighed.

Anna stared out the narrow church window, open to provide cross ventilation in the warm sanctuary, and watched a monarch butterfly flit across the sun-kissed lawn. She wished she were outside to catch it. She’d been reading up on wildlife and plants common to Colorado before leaving Cheyenne. A moment later, a black-chinned hummingbird paused to dip its tongue into rose-colored salvia. Oh, how she longed to paint the scene for Catharine’s twins!

She turned her attention to her groom. Edward was quite dashing in a cutaway and four-in-hand stretched over his starched white collar. His gray-striped trousers were sharply creased above his polished shoes. The only thing he was missing was a top hat, but Anna bet if it were evening, he’d be

wearing one. He cleared his throat and dabbed his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief, then pulled out his watch, and she noticed it was a fine gold timepiece before he slid it into his coat pocket. He turned to face her, his eyes resting on her.

Reverend Buchtel coughed loudly. The sound snapped Anna back from her woolgathering. “If you care to join us now in this ceremony, Miss Olsen, I asked if you take Edward Parker to be your lawful husband,” he said in a clipped tone. His warm gray eyes narrowed in question, and his voice conveyed his dismay.

The handful of witnesses snickered, and Anna’s face flamed in embarrassment when she glimpsed Edward’s face. Her silent bridegroom stared at her in open apprehension. He stood ramrod straight, giving her an annoyed look through narrowed eyes. He seemed to be very serious about everything. She could tell that the moment she’d met him yesterday, when he’d told her the ceremony was already set and planned down to the last detail.

How could she let herself get distracted when Edward was here next to her? He seemed to be perfect . . . perhaps just a little too perfect? His letters, though few, had been careful but not fastidious. Now Anna was beginning to wonder if he ever relaxed. And did he ever laugh?

“I—well, of course I do,” she muttered, barely loud enough for Edward and the reverend to hear. She looked down again at the wedding gown that Clara, Peter’s mother, had insisted she take when she’d left Cheyenne. Created from the finest Belgian lace over ivory sateen, it fit Anna like it was made for her. However, she knew that it wasn’t the latest fashion, and from the looks of Edward’s clothing, he would think it was terribly quaint indeed. Anna smoothed her hands over the bodice. It was a dear gift, and it was simply amazing Clara

had parted with it at all. A true testament to the depth of their relationship.

“Very well. Let’s continue on then,” the reverend said.

Anna nodded. How she wished Clara was with her now! Clara, who was like a mother to her, had tried to dissuade her from leaving Cheyenne. But Anna felt stifled in her sister Catharine’s farmhouse, and she wanted her own home and family and a chance for adventure. After all, Greta and Catharine both were mail-order brides and quite happy with their new lives. Why couldn’t she find the same thing? Leaving Holland had been hard enough, but the experience had given her courage to spread her wings.



Edward watched as his new bride tilted her chin up to meet his kiss after their vows were spoken. He supposed he was nervous as any typical bridegroom. He hesitated briefly. Yesterday, when she’d stepped off the train, he’d been completely taken by this beautiful Dutch woman—slender, graceful without effort, with the most unfathomable blue eyes he’d ever seen. How in the world had he gotten so lucky! He could hardly wait to get her home.

As he leaned down to meet her lips, a spark shot through his bones and threatened to completely undo him. Her full lips were luxuriously warm, sweet, and so deliciously soft that he had to stifle a groan that threatened to slip out. Quickly he took hold of his senses and pulled away, but Anna reached for his hands. Hers felt small in his larger ones, and while he stood smiling at her shyly, he suddenly felt he needed fresh air. It was terribly stuffy in the old church.

The reverend caught his eye and then gave them both a gentle nudge, so Edward turned Anna toward the aisle. They

walked past the handful of friends he'd invited, their warm wishes following them down the aisle out into the sparkling fall afternoon. He now had a wife, a helpmeet, a true partner. Life was proceeding according to plan!

Edward was determined he would be a better husband than his father had been to his mother. The shame he felt was one of the reasons he'd decided to seek a mail-order bride, someone who didn't know a thing about his family history—all the drunken brawls, his father's disappearances for long periods of time, and Edward having to work after school at a young age because their pantry was empty. He sighed. Beyond that, he hoped a wife would be a big help with keeping the home tidy, giving him more time to design his timepieces.

Today he would think on his bright future with his lovely bride. He did wonder, however, what other surprises were in store with Anna in his life. When he'd picked her up from the hotel to drive her to the church, she'd been more than fifteen minutes late to receive him. Her face was flushed, and her wedding dress was apparently borrowed. It looked old and a tad yellowed, and while it had a certain prettiness, it was definitely too snug for her womanly curves. He didn't want others staring at her shapely form, but he held his tongue.

From her letters, he knew that she had a good upbringing and her family had once been well-to-do. Perhaps after they got to know each other better, he could guide her in American customs and perhaps influence her manners concerning tardiness and her slightly rumpled look. All in due time, he thought. He just hoped she wouldn't get homesick. He didn't want a baby on his hands, and she looked so young and innocent. It must have been her luminous blue eyes. She'd wound her blonde hair into intricate braids about her head

in an artful fashion of which he'd never seen the like. He wondered if her hair was long and hung to her waist. He'd soon find out. He swallowed hard.



The pungent smell of fir and pine—a purely pristine Colorado scent that Anna was now familiar with—refreshed the outdoors. Its bracing effect only added to the anticipation coursing through her. From the time they left the church until they arrived at his sister Ella's house for the reception, Anna felt Edward's eyes on her. The reception was a small gathering, but Anna could tell that Edward was trying to make her feel at home.

"I hope our reception meets with your approval, Anna," Edward said. His eyes held hers briefly. "I had a little help from Ella in the planning."

"Then I'm impressed, Edward. Thank you for making this day special." Anna smiled at him.

"Come on, you two. It's time to cut the wedding cake," Ella ordered. She nudged them in the direction of the table, then handed Anna a knife.

Anna laughed. Slicing cake evenly was not her expertise, but with Edward's hand over hers, she managed to cut the first big slice of white cake. "Open wide," Anna teased as she allowed Edward the first taste of cake.

His eyes lingered on hers. "Your turn now," he said, gently bringing the cake to her lips.

Her sister Greta had told her the symbolism of sharing the first piece of wedding cake—it promised a special bond between the bride and groom. In her heart, Anna prayed it would be so.

The guests clapped, then waited for Anna to slice the cake before Edward handed the slices around.

He'd planned both the ceremony and reception with the aid of his sister. Not at all what she'd expected from her groom. Anna nibbled on her wedding cake and looked at the perfect table setting. Delicate pink roses adorned the center of the oval table, and a crisp white linen tablecloth was set with gleaming crystal dessert plates and silver utensils.

"Ella, everything is just beautiful. Thank you for doing all of this," Anna said.

Ella smiled, then confided, "Oh, goodness! Edward did most of the shopping and the work. I just offered my home. Most of this was his doing, not mine. He's a thoughtful person and kept telling me he wanted everything to be perfect for you."

Anna's heart squeezed. He'd been thinking of her? How sweet. "Well, just the same, I appreciate your helping Edward."

"It was no trouble at all, Anna," Ella said with a wave of her hand. "I pray you will come to enjoy living in Denver. It's an exciting town. If there's anything you need at all, remember, I'm only a couple of blocks away. *If* my brother can bear to part with you!" Her lighthearted laughter followed her tease.

"I'm sure I'm going to like Denver. I think living in the city will be more exciting than the stillness of the Wyoming prairie. I rather enjoyed the hustle and bustle of city life, even when we went to Cheyenne to shop. It's so invigorating."

"Then I think we shall become good friends." Ella grinned.

Anna touched Ella's arm. "I would very much enjoy your friendship," she answered. Ella was friendly and reminded Anna of her sister Greta, and Anna immediately felt at ease.

Edward came and stood next to them. His hand firmly cupping her elbow, he gently guided Anna toward a small group who chatted away. "Anna, I'd like to introduce you to a few of my friends. This is Harvey Thompson."

Anna looked up to an affable older fellow with a beard and a sagging jawline. He greeted her warmly. "I'm so happy to meet you," he said.

Edward paused for their handshake. "And this wonderful lady is a librarian. Mrs. Pearl Brooks."

Pearl stood about an inch shorter than Anna, her ample figure squeezed into a teal day dress almost the same shade as her eyes. "Congratulations on your marriage to Edward. We've been matchmaking for years to no avail." She smiled through tight lips.

"*Dank U wel*—thank you," Anna murmured under the scrutiny of Pearl's narrowed gaze.

"Oh, you have a strong accent!" a woman with honey-colored hair said, extending her gloved hand rather stiffly. "I'm Callie Holmes, and I'm delighted to meet you." She turned to the gentlemen standing next to her. "And this is Daniel Moore and Christopher Maxwell."

Anna nodded and extended her hand to each of the men. Daniel was tall and good-looking and looked as though he could crush a bear if need be, despite his fancy church clothes. He shook her hand with a firm grip.

Christopher bowed slightly and tweaked his impeccable mustache between his forefinger and thumb, his eyes sweeping over her in appraisal. "You may call me Chris, Anna. If Edward gives you the slightest problem, let me know." He winked at Edward. "His ways can be . . . a little disconcerting."

While she considered a response, Edward took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I hardly think that we'll have any problems, but thanks for your consideration." Edward shot Chris a look, and Anna wasn't sure if he was teasing or not. "We'd better see to our other guests before we leave. Come with me, Anna."

“It was nice to meet all of you, and thank you for attending our ceremony,” Anna said. As her husband led her away, she found herself curious about his friends. Would she and Edward be entertaining a lot? Oh, how she wished she’d paid more attention to Catharine’s cooking lessons!



Edward drove the carriage through a stylish neighborhood of Victorian houses not far from Ella’s as neighbors and passersby waved to the newlyweds. They could’ve walked the two short blocks, Anna thought. Edward stopped the horse in front of a wrought-iron fence separating the yard from the street. Little had been said between them on the drive, and Anna took that to mean he was as nervous as she. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he set the brake, hopped down, and hurried to her side of the carriage.

“Here we are! I’ll put the carriage away after I show you where we’ll live,” he said, smiling up at her. “My jewelry shop is attached to the front side of the house, which makes it very convenient for my work, as well as visible from the street. The house was left to me by my parents after they died, and I added my shop after that.”

Anna glanced at the large white painted house and admired the delicate gingerbread fretwork adorning its broad porch. Green plants and potted mums were scattered about, complementing the rockers and a porch swing. The only thing missing from the picturesque setting was a plump dog. *Hmm . . . wait until he finds out about Baby later.*

Smoothing her gown, she rose from her seat in the carriage and stared down at his broad shoulders and capable, strong hands. He reached up for her hand, taking care to keep her gown from getting tangled in the carriage step, and then

guided her down to the sidewalk. She was no more than a couple of inches from him, and she could smell his aftershave. She allowed her eyes to travel from his broad shoulders to his chest and then to his narrow waist. He was lean and very masculine—surprising, she thought, for one who worked mostly indoors.

Thoughts of their wedding night sent a rush of heat to her face, and she hoped he hadn't noticed. Edward's steel-gray eyes locked onto hers briefly, but he quickly grabbed her about the waist, scooped her up in his arms, and then kicked back the gate, banging it hard against the fence. Was he going to be gentle with her? Or was this pent-up passion that he'd held back for years? A shiver coursed its way down her spine. Could she meet his need? She knew very little about what a wife was supposed to do.