

To Have and to Hold (Wedding Belles Book 1)

By Lauren Layne

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Discovering her fiancé is an international con man just moments before they exchange vows devastates celebrity wedding planner Brooke Baldwin’s business—and breaks her heart. Now a pariah in Los Angeles, she seeks a fresh start in New York City and thinks she’s found it with her first bridal client, a sweet—if slightly spoiled—hotel heiress. Then she meets the uptight businessman who’s holding the purse strings.

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To Have and to Hold (Wedding Belles Book 1) By Lauren Layne Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review
"Completely endearing characters...most definitely looking forward to the others in the Wedding Belles series. A great community of women I want to follow." (Harlequin Junkie, Top Pick)

"A fabulous story, with a wonderful couple, great secondary characters and a romance that had us rooting hard for... I enjoyed it so much, I read it in one day." (The Reading Cafe)

"A sweet, charming sexy romance that perfectly weaved passion, friendship, family, second chances, banter and love into one intoxicating and entertaining read... Highly recommend." (Four Chicks Flipping Pages)

"I was wrapped up tight in this story from beginning to end and I enjoyed the entire ride... everything that I love about reading a Lauren Layne book." (BookBinge)

"*To Have and to Hold* has humor, sexiness, and a great back and forth between stubborn, bold characters." (Book Reader Chronicles)

"A character driven and sizzling romance!" (Fresh Fiction)

"I love romance and this one had all the right ingredients!" (Mrs. Leif's Two Fangs About It)

"I had a major love fest with the story, the writing, and the characters. The ladies were well represented by all the darling, witty, and kick butt Belles...a great beginning to what promises to be a MUST READ series for adult Contemporary Romance fans."
(Satisfaction for Insatiable Readers)

"Super entertaining, sweet and sexy and it leaves you smiling big time at the end." (About That Story)

“Layne packs as much into this sexually charged and emotionally intense novella (an introduction to her upcoming Wedding Belles series) as most authors do in a full novel…The heat between [Leah & Jason] enough to melt steel, and the emotional connection and psychological struggles will keep readers engaged.” (Publishers Weekly on From This Day Forward, Starred Review)

About the Author
Lauren Layne is the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of the Stiletto series of contemporary romances and the all-new Pocket Books series, The Wedding Belles. She lives in New York with her husband and spoiled Pomeranian.

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To Have and to Hold

Chapter One



HOLD ON. BACK UP. Back all the way up. What do you mean you're getting married?"

It was eleven p.m. on a Wednesday, and Seth Tyler was exactly where he always was these days: behind his expansive mahogany desk at the Tyler Hotel Group, suit jacket slung over the back of his ergonomic chair, tie begging to be undone, impeccably pressed white shirt cuffed at the wrists.

He raked a hand through his thick light brown hair in frustration and fixed his younger sister with his best no-nonsense glare, an approximation—like everything else he seemed to do lately—of his deceased father.

When Seth's father dropped dead of a heart attack eight months ago, Seth had thought the hardest part about his father's passing—other than the mourning, of course—would be taking over the family company.

Sure, Seth had been groomed for the role. He'd wanted the president and CEO title. He'd always wanted it.

Eventually.

But not yet, for God's sake.

Seth had no problem admitting that he was a perfectionist, and he'd been bound and determined to take over the family company his way. The right way.

And the right way, as Seth had determined it, was spending at least a year shadowing each of the senior-level Tyler Hotel Group executives. Seth had wanted to learn every possible detail, every in and out of the business, before even thinking about taking over the reins of the Fortune 500 company.

But his father's heart had had other plans. Mainly, up and quitting during a routine round of golf. And so, quietly, per his father's wishes, Seth had become CEO two years ahead of schedule.

Not a day passed that Seth didn't wish his father were still with him, but in truth, taking his place at the head of the boardroom table had been easier than Seth had anticipated. The investors hadn't freaked out. The executive team hadn't left in mass exodus. Even Hank's longtime assistant, Etta, had stuck around, seemingly content to call Seth boss even as she busted his balls about not eating enough vegetables, getting enough sleep, or getting his hair cut.

But if taking over the family company was easier than Seth had expected, there was one ramification of Hank Tyler's death that Seth hadn't been in the least prepared for:

A wedding.

Maya Tyler inhaled a long, patient breath, as though preparing to deal with a difficult child. "Well see, marriage, Seth, is when two people fall in love and decide to spend the rest of their lives—"

"Yes, I'm aware of how marriage works," Seth interrupted. Although, not as aware as he'd like, as it turned out. He wouldn't be getting any firsthand knowledge of how marriage worked anytime soon.

Maya bit her lip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to remind you of Nadia."

Seth glanced down at his desk to avoid his sister's too-perceptive gaze. She wasn't wrong. He'd gotten to the point where he could go most days without thinking of his ex, but he hadn't yet figured out how to think

about marriage without hearing the incredulous laugh she'd let out when he'd gone on one knee and showed Nadia the ring he'd spent months picking out.

"Can we not?" he said curtly.

"Don't get pissed. It's a wedding. You're supposed to be happy."

"I'm not pissed; I'm just surprised."

That was an understatement. Seth had not seen this coming, and for a man who exercised precision in all things, he couldn't say he was enjoying the shock value of Maya's announcement. Especially not on the heels of his father's death. A death that everyone but Seth had seen coming, because Seth had been the lone outsider on the knowledge that was his father's longtime heart condition.

Apparently, Hank had considered his only son a control freak—had known that Seth would have stopped at nothing to try to halt death in its tracks.

His father had been, well, right. It was hard to admit, but if Seth had known about his father's condition, he'd have devoted every waking hour to researching experimental treatments and the best doctors.

Hank Tyler hadn't wanted that for his final months. Not for himself or for Seth.

Still, Seth resented not having the choice. Resented his father nearly as much as he missed him.

But he'd put that behind him. Mostly.

Hank was gone, and Maya was still here. Maya was all he had.

He had known she was dating a new guy—Neil something or other. But Seth hadn't thought a thing about it. Maya had whipped through a constant string of casual boyfriends since high school, and other than a two-year relationship in college, they had never been serious.

And it certainly hadn't gotten close to marriage.

What's worse, Seth hadn't even met this man that was apparently to be his brother-in-law.

But none of this would have mattered, not really, if Seth's instincts hadn't been buzzing that something was amiss with the way this was all going down. Something was off. He knew it down to his gut.

"How long have you been seeing this guy?" he asked.

Maya slumped back in the plush chair facing Seth's desk with a groan. "Don't do this. I knew you were going to do this."

He frowned. "Do what?"

"The big brother thing," she said.

"Hard not to, what with me being six years older and all," Seth said.

He didn't add that he was doubly obligated to be protective given Hank's death just months earlier. Maya had definitely been Daddy's Little Princess. She still got tears in her eyes every time their father's name was mentioned.

Maya leaned forward, her pale blue eyes much like his own, although her blond hair was lighter than his, thanks to her frequent trips to the salon.

"I love him, Seth. I know you're jaded these days, but Neil is exactly the type of guy we women spend our entire lives dreaming about."

Seth bit his tongue to stop from saying that he bet Maya was exactly the type of girl that guys like Neil dreamed about, too. Young, pretty . . . and filthy rich.

Or so Neil likely thought.

The truth was, most of Maya's money was tied up in a monthly allowance. It had been that way when Hank Tyler had been alive, and Seth's father had stipulated that it remain that way after his death.

Technically, Maya supported herself on the salary from the fancy art gallery where she worked part-time. But judging from the half dozen shopping bags strewn about his office right now, it was safe to say not a penny of that monthly check from their father's estate was going into savings.

Maya wasn't frivolous—she had a good head on her shoulders, gave plenty of time and money to charity—but she also liked pretty things and fancy dinners.

As a result, she tended to attract men who also liked pretty things and fancy dinners. Seth was willing to bet the new guy was no different.

It was on the tip of his tongue to beg her to reconsider—to date the guy for at least a year before taking the plunge. But then, time wasn't always the answer, was it? He'd dated Nadia for nearly three years, and look how that had turned out.

Seth sighed at the earnest, pleading look on his sister's face. No wonder she'd had their father wrapped around her manicured finger. The girl was good. No, not a girl, he reminded himself. Much as he thought of Maya as his baby sister, she was twenty-six now.

Old enough for him to start respecting her decisions.

"Tell me about Neil," he said begrudgingly.

Maya grinned and clapped her hands together, launching into something about a meet-cute at the art gallery. Damn it, he knew he should have pushed for her to land some desk job here at the hotel group, where he could keep an eye on her.

Seth pushed back from his desk, standing as she chattered away happily, and went to the large floor-to-ceiling windows that had an unobstructed view of the iconic lights of the Empire State Building.

He did some of his best thinking when away from his desk—which meant these days he was barely thinking at all. But when he separated from the office, that was when he was really able to focus: away from email

and the phone and the endless to-do lists and memos from his assistant and . . .

"—he's such a good guy, Seth. He brings me flowers every day, just because, you know? And sweet little gifts. And anytime I mention a new restaurant I want to try, Neil manages to get reservations, like, same day . . ."

And who pays for the dinner?

Seth kept his voice easy as he turned around to face Maya. "What does he do?"

Maya's smile froze for just a moment before it brightened again. "He wants to start his own company—one that makes art more accessible to regular people. You know, like matching up-and-coming artists with new collectors. Eventually he wants to build a mobile app and everything. He's in investment mode right now, but—"

Ah, shit.

Seth had no problem with start-ups. Or art. But a few of Maya's word choices caused the alarm bells in Seth's head to ratchet up another notch:

Neil wants to start his own company. He eventually wants to build a mobile app.

And the nail in Maya's fiancé's coffin—he was in investment mode.

In Seth's experience, a man truly in investment mode of starting his own company didn't have the extra resources to be sending a woman flowers every day. Or buying her little gifts. And certainly not taking her out to dinner on a regular basis at all the hottest new eateries.

Seth ran a finger along the inside of his shirt collar. It did nothing to ease the tension. He tugged at the knot of his tie, loosening it just enough to flick open the top button. Laid-back wasn't something he did often. As a thirty-two-year-old CEO of one of the largest companies in North America, he had an image to uphold.

But it was nearly midnight, and the only person to see him was his sister.

A sister who was getting married.

Fuck.

"Seth, you have to know I hate coming to you with this kind of stuff," Maya was saying now, her voice genuinely contrite. "I know this is all more than you wanted this soon. The responsibility of the company, plus all the logistics of Daddy's estate. The responsibility of me . . ."

Seth rubbed at the back of his neck as he sat back down in his chair and faced his sister. "You're an adult, Maya. It's not like I'm having to attend parent-teacher conferences."

"I know, and I'm taking care of myself, I am, it's just—"

"It's just that you want your big white wedding," he said.

Maya grinned in relief. “I have been planning it forever.”

Seth smiled back. “You forget that I was there for some of those early planning stages. I’m still not sure I forgive you for making Tinkerbell the groom while I was relegated to usher.”

“Head usher. And it wasn’t your fault you didn’t look as cute in a bow tie as an overweight pug. Besides, I’m happy to give you a promotion to maid of honor for the real deal,” she teased.

“We both know that Tori would kill me if I took the top spot away from her,” Seth said, referring to Maya’s longtime best friend. “Plus, teal’s not my color.” Seth knew his sister loved anything that emphasized her blue eyes and could already see the aqua-themed cornucopia that would be her wedding. He got a headache just thinking about it.

“Oh, please. You can pull off just about any color you want,” Maya said. “I hate that you got Mom’s olive complexion while I got Dad’s pasty shade of pale.”

“Buttering me up before you drop the cost of this blessed event?”

Maya pulled her bottom lip between her teeth nervously before scooting toward the edge of her chair. “It’s just, well, I have some money of my own, of course, but then Neil pointed out that if Daddy were alive—”

Seth stiffened. Neil pointed out, did he? Seth was liking his sister’s husband-to-be less and less.

Still, Maya brought up an undeniable point. Though Hank Tyler had left Maya plenty of money, the monthly allotment wouldn’t be enough to plan a decent cocktail party in their social set, much less a wedding.

But that wasn’t the real reason Seth felt himself caving.

He knew that if their father were alive, Hank would have spared no expense for his only daughter’s wedding.

And though Seth knew that no fancy flower arrangement or imported champagne could make up for the fact that their parents wouldn’t be there to walk Maya down the aisle, Seth was determined to give his sister the wedding she’d always wanted.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said gruffly. “You know I will.”

Maya made a happy squealing noise, but Seth held up a hand. “But just so we’re clear. How much are we talking?”

“Oh gosh, I don’t know yet,” Maya said. “There are so many variables. The venue, the photographer, the caterer, and the dress, of course—”

Of course.

“—but I’m sure I’ll have a better idea after this Friday.”

“What happens Friday?” Seth asked, somehow fairly certain he wasn’t going to like the answer.

Maya did another one of those happy hand claps. “Oh, I didn’t tell you! The Wedding Belles have an

opening."

Seth stared at his sister blankly.

Maya rolled her eyes. "Come on. The Wedding Belles?"

He shook his head. "Is that, like, a fancy dress shop, or something?"

"Um, try the premiere wedding-planning company in the city. Maybe the country. They have access to all the best venues, the top designers, and they never do the same wedding twice. Everything is custom, original, perfectly tailored to the bride's needs. One of a kind."

That, Seth could translate: expensive.

Still, if their father were alive . . .

"They're super exclusive," Maya said. "You have to book them, like, years in advance, but I called, and they had something open up!"

"That's great," Seth said, rubbing a hand down his face. He knew full well that the convenient opening had likely been a result of Maya's very recognizable last name.

"So anyway, Friday is just a consultation. They want to hear what I'm looking for and my timeline—"

"What is your timeline?" Seth interrupted.

In other words, how long do I have to figure out whether Neil's the gold digger I think he is?

"Well, I've always liked the idea of being a June bride," Maya said, "but that's less than six months away, so we all know that's not going to happen . . ."

Seth blinked. It wasn't? Six months seemed like a hell of a long time to him, but then he wasn't the one who'd been marrying off the family dog when he was six. What did he know?

"So I'm thinking maybe a Christmas wedding," she said. "It's so festive, with the red and green, or I could go metallic, or even blue—you know what that does with my eyes . . ."

Seth tuned his sister out as she ran through possible color schemes.

Christmas. That gave Seth eleven whole months. Plenty of time to get to know his future brother-in-law, and then find a way to get rid of the bastard if he didn't pass muster.

But if Seth was going to make this work—if he was going to have a shot at getting to know the real Neil—it meant he'd have to spend some time with the money-grabbing bastard. He had to be there when the man inevitably slipped up.

"What time?" Seth interrupted.

Maya paused mid-description of the pros and cons of flocked Christmas trees. "What time for what?"

“Your meeting on Friday with the Wedding Chimes. What time is it?”

Maya laughed. “The Wedding Belles. And it’s at two, at their headquarters on the Upper West Side. Why?”

“I want to be there.”

His sister blinked in surprise. “You do?”

Seth lifted a shoulder. “I want to be involved in all of this. I don’t need to come along to dress fittings and whatever the hell else you’ve got going on, but the big-decision stuff . . . I want to be a part of it.”

Maya laughed. “You are so like Dad. He always liked to know how every penny of his money was being spent.”

Sure, let’s go with that. Easier for her to think he was pinching pennies than checking out her fiancé.

Seth smiled. “Guilty. You want live doves, we’ll get live doves, but I want to make sure these wedding planners don’t think they have a blank check just because our last name is Tyler.”

Maya shrugged and bent down to retrieve her various shopping bags. “Suit yourself.”

Seth walked his sister to the office door, dipping his head slightly when she went up on her toes to kiss his cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Seth nodded. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I am,” she said, beaming up at him. “I’m so happy. And I’m really sorry you haven’t had a chance to meet Neil, but it all happened so fast.”

Tell me about it.

“He’ll be there on Friday, right?” Seth asked. “How about the three of us go out for a late lunch after the meeting with the wedding planner?”

Maya nodded. “Perfect. You’re going to love him. And he can’t wait to meet you.”

Me and my wallet, I’d bet.

“Friday, two o’clock,” Maya said, kissing his cheek one more time. “Don’t be late, ’kay?”

Seth blinked. “Have I ever been late?”

His sister laughed. “Good point. Would you be less grumpy about the whole thing if I told you we’ll do an open bar at the wedding, stocked with all your favorites?”

Seth only had one favorite: Four Roses Bourbon. And if the ever-increasing tension in his chest was any indication, he was going to be drinking a lot of it in the coming months. Starting with tonight.

He told his sister good-bye, and then went straight to his bar cart in the corner and poured himself a generous tumbler of his beloved bourbon—hell, he deserved it. Then he went immediately to his computer to search for every possible detail he could find on one Neil Garrett.

Users Review

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