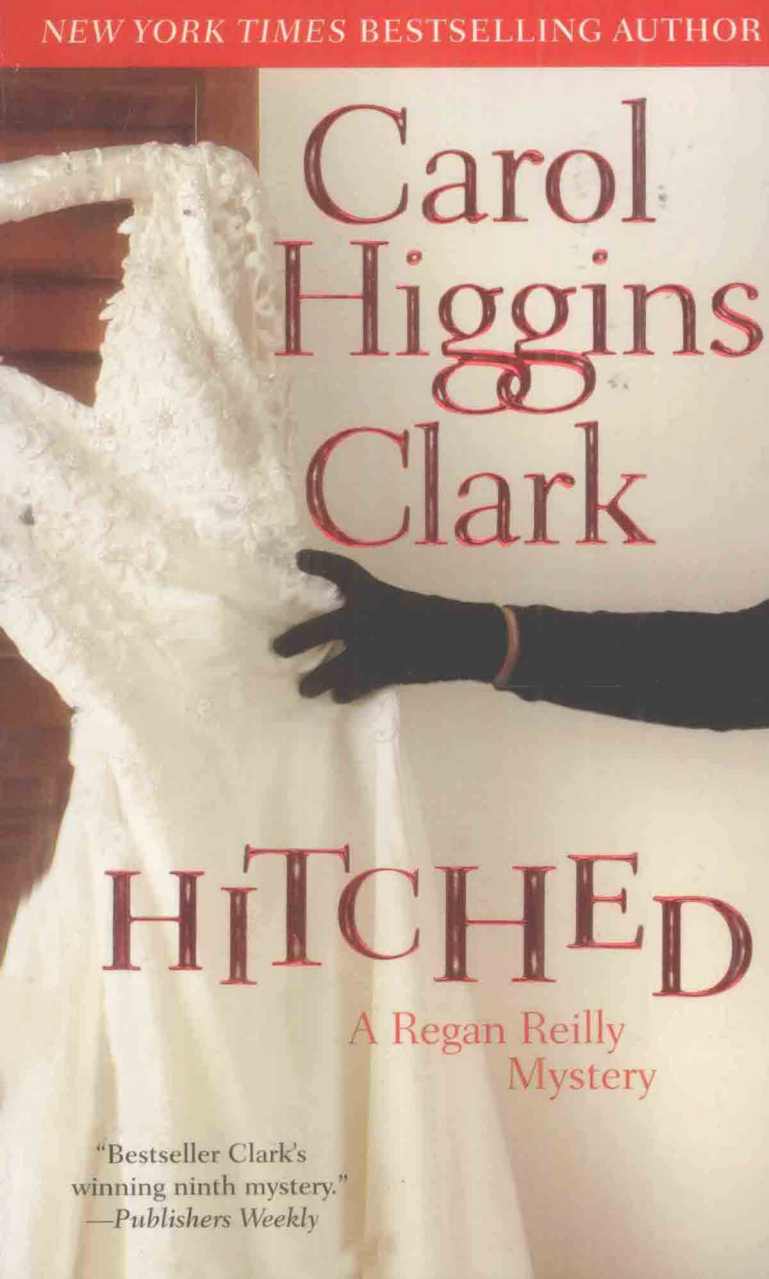


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A Regan Reilly
Mystery

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Thank you, one and all!



Saturday, April 2nd

Regan Reilly descended the staircase from the second floor of her parents' home in Summit, New Jersey, as she had on countless Saturday mornings in the thirty-one years of her life. As usual, she was headed for the kitchen where her mother would be putting out breakfast. But this Saturday was different.

It was her last Saturday as a single.

Regan's hand lightly brushed the banister as she reached the bottom step and turned toward the living room. The presents from her bridal shower, held the night before, were neatly stacked in the corner—everything from the latest and greatest cappuccino machine that Regan was sure she'd never be able to figure out, to a clock radio that blared "Today is the first day of the rest of your life" when the alarm went off. The set of gleaming kitchen knives had intrigued Regan the most. A private investigator, she had examined them closely. The only other present that could have been considered

a deadly weapon was the cookbook, her father, Luke, had remarked.

Luke and Regan's fiancé, Jack "No Relation" Reilly, had escaped to a restaurant in town, and then returned to join the women for an after-dinner drink. All the obligatory oohing and aahing over the household goods and lingerie were mercifully over. Jack's mother, sisters, and aunts were at the shower as well as many of Regan's old family friends. It had been a lively party.

Regan had flown in two days before from Los Angeles where she had her own PI agency. There was now one week left to finalize all the arrangements before she went from Ms. Reilly to Mrs. Reilly. Today she was heading into New York City with her mother, Nora, and her best friend, Kit, to pick up her wedding gown.

Getting married is a lot of work, Regan had thought more than once since she'd gotten engaged six months ago. It was easy to see why women turned into Bridezillas. But all the hassle was worth it. Jack was what she had waited for all her life and they both wanted to celebrate with their friends and family by having a large, festive wedding.

After years of enduring dates with losers, weirdos, and, worst of all, cheapskates, Regan often felt that she would never meet her soul mate. It took her father getting kidnapped for her to find Jack. He was the head of the Major Case Squad in New York City and had worked

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day and night to get Luke back. In the process, he and Regan had fallen in love.

At the large butcher block table in the kitchen, Nora and Kit were sipping coffee and munching on blueberry muffins.

"Good morning," Regan said cheerily. "Kit, I can't believe you're up. We don't have to head into the city for another fifteen minutes."

"I was sleepless thinking about seeing you in your wedding gown today," Kit said in her usual droll tone. "I never thought the day would arrive. I never thought *my* day would arrive. Yours did. Mine, I'm sure, never will."

Regan laughed as Nora cooed sympathetically. "Of course it will."

"Mom, don't worry about Kit," Regan said as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "Kit, we'll get through everything that this next week entails, get me married off, and then I'm sure we'll be planning your wedding before . . . before uh . . ."

"Before what?" Kit asked as she spread butter on her muffin. "Before the cows come home?"

"Way before that," Regan answered with a wave of her hand. "Life can change in an instant. I still have a week before I walk down the aisle. Who knows what could happen before then?"

Nora jumped up, an alarmed expression on her face. "Don't even think like that, Regan. Everything is going

to be wonderful. Now let's finish our coffee, get in the car, and drive into the city to pick up the gorgeous dress you will wear one week from today. I must say I'm glad it'll be the last time we have to deal with those crazy designers and that drafty loft they have the nerve to call a bridal salon."

Regan and Kit looked at each other and laughed.

"Mom, Charisse and Alfred are a very talented couple and they are starting to make their mark in the fashion world. They're booked a year in advance. I'm glad they were willing to squeeze me in. Pretty soon they're going to be household names."

None of them could have predicted that Charisse and Alfred's quest for fame would be sped up by their appearance on the front page of the following day's *New York Post*.

With Regan at the wheel, Nora's Mercedes-Benz glided into the Holland Tunnel.

"It's a lovely day," Nora sighed as the sunlight disappeared behind them. "I hope it's like this next Saturday."

"I do, too. But it's April. You never know..." Regan's voice trailed off.

"A girl in my office scheduled her wedding for late October on Martha's Vineyard. Wouldn't you know a

nor'easter hit that very day? When they got to the reception, the restaurant was without power. And the backup generator had gone kaput," Kit remarked from the backseat.

"Thanks, Kit." Regan smiled. "I'll be sure to pray for good weather."

Fifteen minutes later they parked the car in a lot not too far from the heart of Little Italy. Alfred and Charisse's Coutures was located in a loft on the entire third floor of a building that, in Nora's opinion, was in need of a makeover.

"I don't know what the allure is of places like these," Nora muttered as they walked down a side street that looked like the Broadway set for *Cats*.

"People love it down here," Regan commented. "And if you're in fashion, it makes you seem hip to have an address like this. It's where old New York meets the new. The pushcarts of yesteryear have been replaced by trendy boutiques."

"What's wrong with Madison Avenue?" Nora asked as she stepped over a piece of broken glass on the cracked sidewalk. They stopped in front of an old building and caught the door as a young couple was coming out. Regan held the door open as she pushed the buzzer for Alfred and Charisse's loft. There was no answer. She pushed it again, and they waited.

Kit looked at her watch. "It's eleven o'clock."

"I can't imagine where they'd be. They live here and they're expecting us," Regan said.

"We've already made it through security . . ." Nora remarked wryly, glancing around at the empty lobby.

"That we have," Regan agreed. "Let's head upstairs."

The three of them got on a large, battered, groaning elevator, which took its time about everything. The car slowly ascended to the third floor where it stopped with a jerk. A loud click and a mournful moan followed. After an agonizing six seconds, the door opened.

Right away Regan could tell something was wrong. The door to the loft was ajar. Whenever she'd been at the salon, Alfred always made a point to keep the door closed. He was paranoid that his genius might float out the door and people would somehow steal the ideas for his designs. Regan hurried across the hall and pushed the door fully open. There was no one in sight. The dress racks were empty. But one lone gown was in shreds on the floor.

"Charisse?" Regan called. "Alfred?"

There was no answer.

Nora grabbed Regan's arm. "Regan, be careful."

"Charisse?" Regan called again, her voice rising. "Alfred?" She slowly moved farther into the loft and saw that the shredded dress had drops of blood on it. Regan inhaled sharply and hurried to the back of the loft and

around the corner to where she knew their bedroom was. Gingerly, Regan opened the door.

"Oh, my God!" Regan cried.

Charisse and Alfred were stretched out on their bed, bound and gagged. Regan hurried over and removed Alfred's gag.

"Regan!" he cried, struggling for breath. "A couple of thieves broke in here in the middle of the night. They tied us up. I thought they were going to kill us. They smashed our safe here in the bedroom and grabbed our cash and jewelry!"

"They did more than that," Regan said quickly as she ran around the bed and untied the cloth around Charisse's mouth. "It looks like all your dresses are gone. Except one that could use a lot of help."

Two screams pierced the air: One belonged to Alfred. The other emanated from the owner of that sorry bridal gown who had just arrived in the next room.

Regan couldn't decide whose scream was worse.

Jack had gone to his parents' house in Bedford, New York, after Regan's shower. He'd wanted to spend a little time with his family on Saturday. The next week would be hectic, and he was burdened with a series of bank robberies that had been taking place around the city since January. The robber always struck when it was raining hard or snowing and everyone was wearing gloves and hats and bulky clothing. The perp would walk into a bank wearing a dark hooded raincoat, dark glasses, and a fake beard or mustache. Most criminals who knew they'd be caught on surveillance cameras did their best to disguise their look—this bank robber was no exception.

The banks were always on alert, but this case had them all stymied. They'd studied the surveillance pictures from all eight robberies, but so far had no suspect. Whoever it was always managed to escape into the driving rain or snow and disappear.

It was driving Jack crazy. He hoped there'd be a break in the case before he got married and went on his honeymoon. He and Regan would be spending two and a half weeks in Europe. Then, the best part was that after this trip she was coming home with him, not heading back to Los Angeles. The last few weeks she'd sent numerous boxes filled with clothes, pictures, and books to his apartment. It didn't bother her at all to move into his place. She didn't give him any of the I-won't-feel-as-if-it's-our-home. Instead, she'd said, "I love your apartment. Let's see how we feel in a year or two, then we can make a move if we want."

Jack's mother had cooked a late breakfast for the assorted family members who'd come into town for the shower. Most weren't leaving until after the wedding.

"One more week, Jack," his mother had said when she handed him a plate of eggs.

"This time next week Sheila Mullen will be drowning her sorrows," Jack's older sister, Trish, teased.

"I haven't seen her since high school," Jack protested.

"She was always sweet on you," his mother remembered. "But Regan is 'The One.' "

"You've got that right, Mom," Jack said as he salted his eggs. He was about to dig in when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID: 201. That's Nora's cell phone, he realized. Flipping it open, he answered quickly. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

As he listened, his body relaxed. “Nora, I’ll leave now.” He closed the phone and looked around at all the inquiring faces of his family members. “Regan’s dress was stolen. The designers’ studio was broken into last night. That’s all I know.”

“That’s enough!” his mother exclaimed as Jack took off out the back door.

“Moooooooooooooooooooo! Look at my dress!”

Regan finished untying the rope that bound Charisse’s delicate wrists and ran back into the front room while Alfred yelled, “I’ll call 911!” The scene that greeted Regan was like something out of a Greek tragedy. A red-haired young woman was crumpled on the floor, clutching the shredded bloodied garment that as of eight hours ago was supposed to make her feel like a princess on the biggest day of her life. Now the sight of its ruination had transformed her into a raving lunatic. “Whyyyyyyyy? Why me?”

An older woman, presumably Mommy, was standing over the bride-to-be, weakly attempting to offer comfort with a half-hearted shoulder massage. “I told you you should have worn my wedding dress. You’re a little heavier than I was when I married your father, but it could have been let out. I packed that gown up so carefully in the hopes that one day a daughter of mine