

CHAPTER ONE



CRAZY BRIDE CALLED AT FIVE TWENTY-EIGHT A.M.

“I had a dream,” she announced while Parker lay in the dark with her BlackBerry.

“A dream?”

“An amazing dream. So real, so *urgent*, so full of color and life! I’m sure it means something. I’m going to call my psychic but I wanted to talk it over with you, first.”

“Okay.” With the grace of experience, Parker reached over, turned her bedside lamp on low. “What was the dream about, Sabina?” she asked as she picked up the pad and pen beside the lamp.

“Alice in Wonderland.”

“You dreamed about Alice in Wonderland?”

“Specifically the Mad Hatter’s tea party.”

“Disney or Tim Burton?”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Parker shook back her hair, noted key words. “Go on.”

“Well, there was music and a banquet of food. I was Alice, but I wore my wedding dress, and Chase looked absolutely amazing in a morning coat. The flowers, oh, they were spectacular. And all of them singing and dancing. Everyone was so happy, toasting us, clapping. Angelica was dressed as the Red Queen and playing a flute.”

Parker noted down MOH for Angelica, the maid of honor, then continued to record other members of the wedding party. The best man as the White Rabbit, the mother of the groom as the Cheshire Cat, father of the bride, the March Hare.

She wondered what Sabina had eaten, drunk, or smoked before going to bed.

“Isn’t it fascinating, Parker?”

“Absolutely.” As had been the pattern of tea leaves that had determined Sabina’s bridal colors, the tarot reading that had forecast her honeymoon destination, the numerology that had pointed to the only possible date for her wedding.

“I think maybe my subconscious and the fates are telling me I need to do an Alice theme for the wedding. With costumes.”

Parker closed her eyes. While she’d have said—and would say now—that the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party suited Sabina to the ground, the event was less than two weeks away. The decor, the flowers, the cake and desserts, the menu—the works—already chosen.

“Hmm,” Parker said to give herself a moment to think. “That’s an interesting idea.”

“The dream—”

“Says to me,” Parker interjected, “the celebrational, magical, fairy-tale atmosphere you’ve already chosen. It tells me you were absolutely right.”

“Really?”

“Completely. It tells me you’re excited and happy, and can’t wait for your day. Remember, the Mad Hatter held his tea party every day. It’s telling you that your life with Chase will be a daily celebration.”

“Oh! Of course!”

“And, Sabina, when you stand in front of the looking glass in the Bride’s Suite on your wedding day, you’ll be looking at yourself with Alice’s young, adventurous, happy heart.”

Damn, I’m good, Parker thought as the crazy bride sighed.

“You’re right, you’re right. You’re absolutely right. I’m so glad I called you. I knew you’d *know*.”

“That’s what we’re here for. It’s going to be a beautiful wedding, Sabina. Your perfect day.”

After she hung up, Parker lay back a moment, but when she closed her eyes, the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party—Disney version—ran manically in her head.

Resigned, she rose, crossed over to the French doors to the terrace of the room that had once been her parents’. She opened them to the morning air, took a deep breath of dawn as the sun took its first peek over the horizon.

The last stars winked out in a world perfectly, wonderfully still—like a breath held.

The upside of crazy brides and those of that ilk was wakefulness just before dawn when it seemed nothing and no one but she stirred, nothing and no one but she had this moment when night passed its torch to day, and the silvery light sheened to pearl that would shimmer—when that breath released—to pale, lustrous gold.

She left the doors open when she walked back into the bedroom. Taking a band from the hammered silver box on her dresser, she pulled her hair back into a tail. She shed her nightshirt for cropped yoga pants and a support tank, chose a pair of running

shoes off the shelf in the casual section of her ruthlessly organized closet.

She hooked her BlackBerry to her waistband, plugged in her headphones, then headed out of her room toward her home gym.

She hit the lights, flipped on the news on the flat screen, listening with half an ear as she took a few moments to stretch.

She set the elliptical for her usual three-mile program.

Halfway through the first mile, she smiled.

God, she loved her work. Loved the crazy brides, the sentimental brides, the persnickety brides, even the monster brides.

She loved the details and demands, the hopes and dreams, the constant affirmation of love and commitment she helped to personalize for every couple.

Nobody, she determined, did it better than Vows.

What she, Mac, Emma, and Laurel had taken head-on one late summer evening was now everything and more than they'd imagined.

And now, she thought as her smile widened, they were planning weddings for Mac in December, Emma in April, Laurel in June.

Her friends were the brides now, and she couldn't wait to dig deeper into those fine details.

Mac and Carter—traditional with artistic twists. Emma and Jack—romance, romance, romance. Laurel and Del (God, her brother was marrying her best friend!)—elegant yet streamlined.

Oh, she had ideas.

She'd hit mile two when Laurel came in.

"Fairy lights. Acres and miles and rivers of tiny white fairy lights, all through the gardens, in the willows, on the arbors, the pergola."

Laurel blinked, yawned. "Huh?"

"Your wedding. Romantic, elegant, abundance without fuss."

“Huh.” Laurel, her swing of blond hair clipped up, stepped on the machine next to Parker’s. “I’m just getting used to being engaged.”

“I know what you like. I’ve worked up a basic overview.”

“Of course you have.” But Laurel smiled. “Where are you?” She craned her head, scanned the readout on Parker’s machine. “Shit! Who called and when?”

“Crazy Bride. Just shy of five thirty. She had a dream.”

“If you tell me she dreamed a new design for the cake, I’m going to—”

“Not to worry. I fixed it.”

“How could I have doubted you?” She eased through her warm-up, then kicked in. “Del’s going to put his house on the market.”

“What? When?”

“Well, after he talks to you about it, but I’m here, you’re here, so I’m talking to you first. We talked about it last night. He’ll be back from Chicago tonight, by the way. So . . . he’d move back in here, if that’s okay with you.”

“First, it’s his house as much as mine. Second, you’re staying.” Her eyes stung, shined. “You’re staying,” Parker repeated. “I didn’t want to push, and I know Del’s got a great house, but— Oh God, Laurel, I didn’t want you to move out. Now you won’t.”

“I love him so much I may be the next Crazy Bride, but I didn’t want to move out either. My wing’s more than big enough, it practically *is* a house. And he loves this place as much as you, as much as all of us.”

“Del’s coming home,” Parker murmured.

Her family, she thought, everyone she loved and cherished, would soon be together. And that, she knew, was what made a home.

By eight fifty-nine, Parker was dressed in a sharply tailored suit

the color of ripe eggplants with a hint of frill on her crisp white shirt. She spent precisely fifty-five minutes answering e-mails, texts, and phone calls, refreshing notes in various client files, checking and confirming deliveries with subcontractors on upcoming events.

At the stroke of ten she walked down from her third-floor office for her first on-site appointment of the day.

She'd already researched the potential client. Bride, Deeanne Hagar, local artist whose dreamy fantasy work had been reproduced in posters and greeting cards. Groom, Wyatt Culpepper, landscape designer. Both came from old money—banking and real estate, respectively—and both were the youngest child of twice-divorced parents.

Minimal digging had netted her the data that the newly engaged couple had met at a greenfest, shared a fondness for bluegrass music, and loved to travel.

She had mined other nuggets from websites, Facebook, magazine and newspaper interviews, and friends of friends of friends, and had already decided on the overall approach of the initial tour, which would include the mothers of both.

She scanned areas as she did a quick pass-through on the main level, pleased with Emma's romantic flower displays.

She popped into the family kitchen where, as expected, Mrs. Grady was putting the finishing touches on the coffee tray, the iced sun tea Parker had requested, and a platter of fresh fruit high-lighted with Laurel's tissue-thin butter cookies.

"Looks perfect, Mrs. G."

"It's ready when you are."

"Let's go ahead and set it up in the main parlor. If they want the tour straight off, maybe we'll move it outside. It's beautiful out."

Parker moved in to help, but Mrs. Grady waved her off. "I've

got it. I just put it together that I know the bride's first step-mother."

"Really?"

"Didn't last long, did she?" Movements brisk, Mrs. Grady transferred the trays to a tea cart. "Never made the second wedding anniversary, if I remember right. Pretty woman, and sweet enough. Dim as a five-watt bulb, but good-hearted." Mrs. Grady flicked her fingertips over the skirt of her bib apron. "She married again—some Spaniard—and moved to Barcelona."

"I don't know why I spend any time on the Internet, when I can just plug in to you."

"If you had, I'd've told you Mac's mother had a flirt with the bride's daddy between wives two and three."

"Linda? Not a surprise."

"Well, we can all be grateful it didn't take. I like the girl's pictures," she added as they rolled the cart toward the parlor.

"You've seen them?"

Mrs. Grady winked. "You're not the only one who knows how to use the Internet. There's the bell. Go on. Snag us another client."

"That's the plan."

Parker's first thought was the bride looked like the Hollywood version of a fantasy artist with her waist-length tumble of gilded red hair and almond-shaped green eyes. Her second was what a beautiful bride Deanne would make, and on the heels of it, just how much she wanted a part of that.

"Good morning. Welcome to Vows. I'm Parker."

"Brown, right?" Wyatt shot out a hand. "I just want to say I don't know who designed your landscape, but they're a genius. And I wish it had been me."

"Thank you so much. Please come in."

"My mother, Patricia Ferrell. Deanne's mom, Karen Bliss."

“It’s lovely to meet all of you.” Parker took stock quickly. Wyatt took charge, but genially—and all three women let him. “Why don’t we have a seat in the parlor for a few minutes and get acquainted.”

But Deeanne was already wandering the spacious foyer, scanning the elegant staircase. “I thought it would be stuffy. I thought it would *feel* stuffy.” She turned back, her pretty summer skirt swaying. “I studied your website. Everything looked perfect, looked beautiful. But I thought, no, *too* perfect. I’m still not convinced it’s not too perfect, but it’s not stuffy. Not in the least.”

“What my daughter might’ve said in many fewer words, Ms. Brown, is you have a lovely home.”

“Parker,” she said, “and thank you, Mrs. Bliss. Coffee?” she invited. “Or iced sun tea?”

“Could we just look around first?” Deeanne asked her. “Especially outside, as Wyatt and I want an outdoor wedding.”

“Why don’t we start outside, then circle back through. You’re looking at next September,” Parker continued as she moved to the door leading to the side terrace.

“A year from now. That’s why we’re looking at this time, so we can see how the landscape, the gardens, the light all work.”

“We have several areas that can be utilized for outdoor weddings. The most popular, especially for larger events is the west terrace and pergola. But . . .”

“But?” Wyatt echoed as they strolled around the house.

“When I see the two of you, I picture something a little different. Something we do now and then. The pond,” she said as they rounded to the back. “The willows, the roll of the lawns. I see a flower-strewn arbor and white runners flowing like a river between the rows of chairs—white again, strung with flowers. All of that reflected in the water of the pond. Banquets of flowers

everywhere—but not formal, more natural arrangements. Cottage garden flowers, but in mad abundance. My partner and our floral designer Emmaline is an artist.”

Deeanne’s eyes took on a gleam. “I loved what I saw of her work on the website.”

“You can speak with her directly if you decide to have your wedding with us, or even if you’re just considering it. I also see fairy lights glittering, candles flickering. Everything natural, organic—but sumptuous, sparkling. Titania’s bower. You’ll wear something flowing,” she said to Deeanne. “Something fairylike, with your hair down. No veil, but flowers in your hair.”

“Yes. You’re very good, aren’t you?”

“It’s what we do here. Tailor the day to reflect what you want most, what you are, individually and to each other. You don’t want formal, but soft and dreamy. Neither contemporary nor old-fashioned. You want *you*, and a bluegrass trio playing you down the aisle.”

“Never Ending Love,” Wyatt supplied with a grin. “We’ve already picked it. Will your artist of a florist work with us, not only on the wedding landscape, but the bouquets and all that?”

“Every step of the way. It’s entirely about you, and creating the perfect—even too-perfect—day for you,” she said with a smile for Deeanne.

“I love the pond,” Deeanne murmured as they stood on the terrace looking out. “I love the image you’ve just painted in my head.”

“Because the image is you, baby.” Karen Bliss took her daughter’s hand. “It’s absolutely you.”

“Dancing on the lawn?” Wyatt’s mother glanced over. “I checked out the website, too, and I know you have a gorgeous ballroom. But maybe they could have dancing out here.”

“Absolutely. Either, both, however you want it done. If you’re interested we can set up a full consult, with my partners, discuss those areas, and more details.”

“What do you say we take a look at the rest.” Wyatt leaned down to kiss Deeanne’s temple.

AT FOUR THIRTY, PARKER WAS BACK AT HER DESK REFINING SPREADSHEETS, charts, schedules. In concession to the end of the day’s appointments, her suit jacket hung on the back of her chair, and her shoes sat under the desk.

She calculated another hour’s paperwork, and considered the day a blissfully light one. The rest of the week promised to be insanely jammed, but with any luck, by six she’d be able to change into casual clothes and treat herself to a glass of wine and actually sit down to a meal.

She went *hmm?* at the rap on her doorjamb.

“Got a minute?” Mac asked.

“I happen to have several on me. You can have one.” Parker swiveled in her chair as Mac hauled in two shopping bags. “I missed you in the gym this morning, but I see you’ve continued your weight lifting.”

Grinning, Mac flexed. “Pretty good, huh?”

“You’re ripped, Elliot. You’ll have showstopping arms on Wedding Day.”

Mac dropped into a chair. “I have to do justice to the dress you found me. Listen, I’ve sworn not to become Mad Bride or Weepy Bride or other various aspects of Annoying Bride, but it’s getting close and I just need assurances from the goddess of all wedding planners.”

“It’s going to be perfect, and exactly right.”

“I changed my mind on the first dance again.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can change it up until the countdown.”

“But it’s symptomatic, Parks. I can’t seem to stick to a basic item like a damn song.”

“It’s an important song.”

“Is Carter taking dance lessons?”

Parker widened her eyes. “Why would you ask me?”

“I *knew* it! God, that’s so sweet. You got Carter to take dance lessons so he won’t step on my feet during our first dance.”

“Carter asked me to arrange it—as a surprise. So don’t spoil it.”

“It makes me gooey.” Her shoulders lifted and fell with her happy sigh. “Maybe I can’t stick because I keep going gooey. Anyway, I had that off-site engagement shoot this afternoon.”

“How’d it go?”

“Aces. They’re so damn cute I wanted to marry both of them. Then I did something stupid on the way home. I stopped by the shoe department at Nordstrom.”

“Which I have already cleverly deduced by the shopping bags.”

“I bought ten pair. I’m taking most of them back, but—”

“Why?”

Mac narrowed her green eyes. “Don’t encourage the lunatic. I couldn’t stick, again. I already bought my wedding shoes, right? Didn’t we all agree they’re perfect?”

“Stunning and perfect.”

“Exactly, so why did I buy four alternate pair?”

“I thought you said ten.”

“The other six are for the honeymoon—well, four of them, then I really needed a new pair of work shoes and they were so cute I got one pair in copper and another in this wild green. But that’s not important.”

“Let me see them.”

“The wedding shoes first, and don’t say anything until I line them all up.” Mac held up both hands. “Total poker face. No expression, no sound.”

“I’ll turn around, work on this spreadsheet.”

“Better you than me,” Mac muttered, then got to work.

Parker ignored the rustling, the sighs, until Mac gave her the go-ahead.

Turning, Parker scanned the shoes lined up on a work counter. Rose, crossed over, scanned again. She kept her face blank, said nothing as she picked up a shoe, examined it, set it back, moved to the next.

“You’re killing me,” Mac told her.

“Quiet.” She walked away to take out a folder, slipping out the photo taken of Mac in her wedding dress. She took it back to the selection of shoes, nodded.

“Yes. Definitely.” She picked up a pair. “You’d be a lunatic not to wear these.”

“Really!” Mac slapped her hands together. “*Really?* Because those were the ones. The. Ones. But I kept waffling back and forth and sideways. Oooh, look at them. The heels, they’re all sparkly, and the ankle strap’s so sexy—but not too sexy. Right?”

“The perfect blend of sparkly, sexy, and sophisticated. I’ll take the others back.”

“But—”

“I’ll return them because you’ve found the ultimate wedding shoe and need to stick. You have to remove the others from your sight and stay out of the shoe department until after the wedding.”

“You’re so wise.”

Parker inclined her head. “I am indeed wise. And as such, I do believe this pair may very well be Emma’s wedding shoe. I’ll exchange it for her size, and we’ll see.”

“Oh, oh, again, wise points.” Mac picked up the pair Parker

indicated. “More romantic, more princessy. This is great. I’m exhausted.”

“Leave the wedding shoes—all of them—with me. Take the others. Oh, and check your calendar when you get home. I added in consults.”

“How many?”

“Out of the five tours I did today, we have three full consults, one need to talk it over with Daddy—who’s footing the bill—and one who’s still shopping around.”

“Three out of five?” Mac did a double fist pump. “Woo-hoo.”

“I’m betting four out of five, because Daddy’s girl wants us, and wants us bad. The fifth? The bride just isn’t ready to decide. Her mother wants us, which my instincts tell me is a strike against us in this case. We’ll see.”

“Well, I’m psyched. Three fulls and I’ve bagged the perfect wedding shoes. I’m going home to give my guy a big wet kiss, and he won’t know it’s because he’s taking dance lessons. Thanks, Parks. See you later.”

Parker sat, studied the shoes on the counter. She thought of Mac rushing home to Carter. Thought of Laurel greeting Del when he came home after a two-day business conference in Chicago. And Emma maybe sitting out on her little patio having wine with Jack and dreaming of her own wedding flowers.

She swiveled around to stare at the spreadsheet on the screen. She had her work, she reminded herself. Work she loved. And that’s what mattered right now.

Her BlackBerry signaled, and a glance at the readout told her another bride needed to talk.

“I’ve always got you,” she murmured, then answered. “Hi, Brenna. What can I do for you?”