

CHAPTER ONE



*S*INCE DETAILS CROWDED HER MIND, MANY OF THEM BLURRY, Emma checked her appointment book over her first cup of coffee. The back-to-back consults gave her nearly as much of a boost as the strong, sweet coffee. Basking in it, she leaned back in the chair in her cozy office to read over the side notes she'd added to each client.

In her experience, the personality of the couple—or often, more accurately, the bride—helped her determine the tone of the consult, the direction they'd pursue. To Emma's way of thinking, flowers were the heart of a wedding. Whether they were elegant or fun, elaborate or simple, the flowers were the romance.

It was her job to give the client all the heart and romance they desired.

She sighed, stretched, then smiled at the vase of petite roses on her desk. Spring, she thought, was the best. The wedding season kicked into high gear—which meant busy days and long

nights designing, arranging, creating not only for *this* spring's weddings, but also next.

She loved the continuity as much as the work itself.

That's what Vows had given her and her three best friends. Continuity, rewarding work, and that sense of personal accomplishment. And she got to play with flowers, live with flowers, practically swim in flowers every day.

Thoughtfully, she examined her hands, and the little nicks and tiny cuts. Some days she thought of them as battle scars and others as medals of honor. This morning she just wished she'd remembered to fit in a manicure.

She glanced at the time, calculated. Boosted again, she sprang up. Detouring into her bedroom, she grabbed a scarlet hoodie to zip over her pjs. There was time to walk to the main house before she dressed and prepared for the day. At the main house Mrs. Grady would have breakfast, so Emma wouldn't have to forage or cook for herself.

Her life, she thought as she jogged downstairs, brimmed with lovely perks.

She passed through the living room she used as a reception and consult area, and took a quick scan around as she headed for the door. She'd freshen up the flowers on display before the first meeting, but oh, hadn't those stargazer lilies opened beautifully?

She stepped out of what had been a guest house on the Brown Estate and was now her home, and the base for Centerpiece—her part of Vows.

She took a deep breath of spring air. And shivered.

Damn it, why couldn't it be warmer? It was April, for God's sake. It was daffodil time. Look how cheerful the pansies she'd potted up looked. She refused to let a chilly morning—and okay, it was starting to drizzle on top of it—spoil her mood.

She hunched inside the hoodie, stuck the hand not holding

her coffee mug in her pocket, and began to walk to the main house.

Things were coming back to life all around her, she reminded herself. If you looked closely enough you could see the promise of green on the trees, the hint of what would be delicate blooms of dogwood and cherry blossoms. Those daffodils wanted to pop, and the crocus already had. Maybe there'd be another spring snow, but the worst was over.

Soon it would be time to dig in the dirt, to bring some of her beauties out of the greenhouse and put them on display. She added the bouquets, the swags and garlands, but nothing beat Mother Nature for providing the most poignant landscape for a wedding.

And nothing, in her opinion, beat the Brown Estate for showing it off.

The gardens, showpieces even now, would soon explode with color, bloom, scent, inviting people to stroll along the curving paths, or sit on a bench, relax in sun or shade. Parker put her in charge—as much as Parker could put anyone else in charge—of overseeing them, so every year she got to play, planting something new, or supervising the landscape team.

The terraces and patios created lovely outdoor living spaces, perfect for weddings and events. Poolside receptions, terrace receptions, ceremonies under the rose arbor or the pergola, or perhaps down by the pond under a willow.

We've got it all, she thought.

The house itself? Could anything be more graceful, more beautiful? The wonderful soft blue, those warm touches of yellow and cream. All the varied rooflines, the arching windows, the lacy balconies added up to elegant charm. And really, the entrance portico was made for crowding with lush greenery or elaborate colors and textures.

As a child she'd thought of it as a fairyland, complete with castle.

Now it was home.

She veered toward the pool house, where her partner Mac lived and kept her photography studio. Even as she aimed for it, the door opened. Emma beamed a smile, shot out a wave to the lanky man with shaggy hair and a tweed jacket who came out.

“’Morning, Carter!”

“Hi, Emma.”

Carter’s family and hers had been friends almost as long as she could remember. Now, Carter Maguire, former Yale prof and current professor of English lit at their high school alma mater, was engaged to one of her best friends in the world.

Life wasn’t just good, Emma thought. It was a freaking bed of roses.

Riding on that, she all but danced to Carter, tugged him down by his lapel as she angled up on her toes and kissed him noisily.

“Wow,” he said, and blushed a little.

“Hey.” Mackensie, her eyes sleepy, her cap of red hair bright in the gloom, leaned on the doorjamb. “Are you trying to make time with my guy?”

“If only. I’d steal him away but you’ve dazzled and vamped him.”

“Damn right.”

“Well.” Carter offered them both a flustered smile. “This is a really nice start to my day. The staff meeting I’m headed to won’t be half as enjoyable.”

“Call in sick.” Mac all but purred it. “I’ll give you something enjoyable.”

“Hah. Well. Anyway. Bye.”

Emma grinned at his back as he hurried off to his car. “God, he is so *cute*.”

“He really is.”

“And look at you, Happy Girl.”

“Happy Engaged Girl. Want to see my ring again?”

“Oooh,” Emma said obligingly when Mac wiggled her fingers. “Ahhh.”

“Are you going for breakfast?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Wait.” Mac leaned in, grabbed a jacket, then pulled the door closed behind her. “I didn’t have anything but coffee yet, so . . .” As they fell into step together, Mac frowned. “That’s my mug.”

“Do you want it back now?”

“I know why I’m cheerful this crappy morning, and it’s the same reason I haven’t had time for breakfast. It’s called Let’s Share the Shower.”

“Happy Girl is also Bragging Bitch.”

“And proud of it. Why are you so cheerful? Got a man in your house?”

“Sadly no. But I have five consults booked today. Which is a great start to the week, and comes on the tail of the lovely end to last week with yesterday’s tea party wedding. It was really sweet, wasn’t it?”

“Our sexagenarian couple exchanging vows and celebrating surrounded by his kids, her kids, grandchildren. Not just sweet, but also reassuring. Second time around for both of them, and there they are, ready to do it again, willing to share and blend. I got some really great shots. Anyway, I think those crazy kids are going to make it.”

“Speaking of crazy kids, we really have to talk about your flowers. December may be far away—she says shivering—but it comes fast, as you well know.”

“I haven’t even decided on the look for the engagement shots yet. Or looked at dresses, or thought about colors.”

“I look good in jewel tones,” Emma said and fluttered her lashes.

“You look good in burlap. Talk about bragging bitches.”

Mac opened the door to the mudroom, and since Mrs. Grady was back from her winter vacation, remembered to wipe her feet. “As soon as I find the dress, we’ll brainstorm the rest.”

“You’re the first one of us to get married. To have your wedding here.”

“Yeah. It’s going to be interesting to see how we manage to run the wedding and be *in* the wedding.”

“You know you can count on Parker to figure out the logistics. If anyone can make it run smooth, it’s Parker.”

They walked into the kitchen, and chaos.

While the equitable Maureen Grady worked at the stove, movements efficient, face placid, Parker and Laurel faced off across the room.

“It has to be done,” Parker insisted.

“Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.”

“Laurel, this is business. In business you serve the client.”

“Let me tell you what I’d like to serve the client.”

“Just stop.” Parker, her rich brown hair sleeked back in a tail, was already dressed in a meet-the-client suit of midnight blue. Eyes of nearly the same color flashed hot with impatience. “Look, I’ve already put together a list of her choices, the number of guests, her colors, her floral selections. You don’t even have to speak to her. I’ll liaise.”

“Now let me tell you what you can do with your list.”

“The bride—”

“The bride is an asshole. The bride is an idiot, a whiny baby bitch who made it very clear nearly one year ago that she neither needed nor wanted my particular services. The bride can bite me because she’s not biting any of my cake now that she’s realized her own stupidity.”

In the cotton pajama pants and tank she’d slept in, her hair still in sleep tufts, Laurel dropped onto a chair in the breakfast nook.

“You need to calm down.” Parker bent down to pick up a file. Probably tossed on the floor by Laurel, Emma mused. “Everything you need is in here.” Parker laid the file on the table. “I’ve already assured the bride we’ll accommodate her, so—”

“So you design and bake a four-layer wedding cake between now and Saturday, and a groom’s cake, and a selection of desserts. To serve two hundred people. You do that with no previous preparation, and when you’ve got three other events over the weekend, and an evening event in three days.”

Her face set in mutinous lines, Laurel picked up the file and deliberately dropped it on the floor.

“Now you’re acting like a child.”

“Fine. I’m a child.”

“Girls, your little friends have come to play.” Mrs. Grady sang it out, her tone overly sweet, her eyes laughing.

“Ah, I hear my mom calling me,” Emma said and started to ease out of the room.

“No, you don’t!” Laurel jumped up. “Just listen to this! The Folk-Harrigan wedding. Saturday, evening event. You’ll remember, I’m sure, how the bride sniffed at the very idea of Icings at Vows providing the cake or any of the desserts. How she *sneered* at me and my suggestions and insisted her cousin, a pastry chef in New York, who studied in Paris and designed cakes for *important* affairs would be handling all the desserts.

“Do you remember what she said to me?”

“Ah.” Emma shifted because Laurel’s finger pointed at her heart. “Not in the exact words.”

“Well, I do. She said she was sure—and said it with that sneer—she was sure I could handle *most* affairs well enough, but she wanted the *best* for her wedding. She said that to my face.”

“Which was rude, no question,” Parker began.

“I’m not finished,” Laurel said between her teeth. “Now, at the eleventh hour, it seems her brilliant cousin has run off with

one of her—the cousin’s—clients. Scandal, scandal, as said client met brilliant cousin when he commissioned her to design a cake for *his* engagement party. Now they’re MIA and the bride wants me to step in and save her day.”

“Which is what we do here. Laurel—”

“I’m not asking you.” She flicked her fingers at Parker, zeroed in on Mac and Emma. “I’m asking them.”

“What? Did you say something?” Mac offered a toothy smile. “Sorry, I must’ve gotten water in my ears from the shower. Can’t hear a thing.”

“Coward. Em?”

“Ah . . .”

“Breakfast!” Mrs. Grady circled a finger in the air. “Everybody sit down. Egg-white omelettes on toasted brown bread. Sit, sit. Eat.”

“I’m not eating until—”

“Let’s just sit.” Interrupting Laurel’s next tirade, Emma tried a soothing tone. “Give me a minute to think. Let’s just all sit down and . . . Oh, Mrs. G, that looks fabulous.” She grabbed two plates, thinking of them as shields as she crossed to the breakfast nook and scooted in. “Let’s remember we’re a team,” she began.

“You’re not the one being insulted and overworked.”

“Actually, I am. Or have been. Whitney Folk puts the *zilla* in Bridezilla. I could relay my personal nightmares with her, but that’s a story for another day.”

“I’ve got some of my own,” Mac put in.

“So your hearing’s back,” Laurel muttered.

“She’s rude, demanding, spoiled, difficult, and unpleasant,” Emma continued. “Usually when we plan the event, even with the problems that can come up and the general weirdness of some couples, I like to think we’re helping them showcase a day

that begins their happy ever after. With this one? I'd be surprised if they make it two years. She was rude to you, and I don't think it was a sneer, I think it was a smirk. I don't like her."

Obviously pleased with the support, Laurel sent her own smirk toward Parker, then began to eat.

"That being said, we're a team. And clients, even smirky bitch clients have to be served. Those are good reasons to do this," Emma said while Laurel scowled at her. "But there's a better one. You'll show her rude, smirky, flat, bony ass what a really brilliant pastry chef can do, and under pressure."

"Parker already tried that one on me."

"Oh." Emma sampled a skinny sliver of her omelette. "Well, it's true."

"I could bake her man-stealing cousin into the ground."

"No question. Personally, I think she should grovel, at least a little."

"I like groveling." Laurel considered it. "And begging."

"I might be able to arrange for some of each." Parker lifted her coffee. "I also informed her that in order to accommodate her on such short notice we would require an additional fee. I added twenty-five percent. She grabbed it like a lifeline, and actually wept in gratitude."

A new light beamed in Laurel's bluebell eyes. "She cried?"

Parker inclined her head, and cocked an eyebrow at Laurel. "So?"

"While the crying part warms me inside, she'll still have to take what I give her, and like it."

"Absolutely."

"You just let me know what you decide on when you decide on it," Emma told her. "I'll work in the flowers and decor for the table." She sent a sympathetic smile at Parker. "What time did she call you with all this?"

“Three twenty A.M.”

Laurel reached over, gave Parker’s hand a pat. “Sorry.”

“That’s my part of the deal. We’ll get through it. We always do.”

*T*HEY ALWAYS DID, EMMA THOUGHT AS SHE REFRESHED HER LIVING room arrangements. She trusted they always would. She glanced at the photograph she kept in a simple white frame, one of three young girls playing Wedding Day in a summer garden. She’d been bride that day, and had held the bouquet of weeds and wildflowers, wore the lace veil. And had been just as charmed and delighted as her friends when the blue butterfly landed on the dandelion in her bouquet.

Mac had been there, too, of course. Behind the camera, capturing the moment. She considered it a not-so-small miracle that they’d turned what had been a favored childhood game of make believe into a thriving business.

No dandelions these days, she thought as she fluffed pillows. But how many times had she seen that same delighted, dazzled look on a bride’s face when she’d offered her a bouquet she’d made for her? Just for her.

She hoped the meeting about to begin would end in a wedding next spring, with just that dazzled look on the bride’s face.

She arranged her files, her albums, her books, then moved to the mirror to check her hair, her makeup, the line of the jacket and pants she’d changed into.

Presentation, she thought, was a priority of Vows.

She turned from the mirror to answer her phone with a cheerful, “Centerpiece of Vows. Yes, hello, Roseanne. Of course I remember you. October wedding, right? No, it’s not too early to make those decisions.”

As she spoke, Emma took a notebook out of her desk, flipped

it open. “We can set up a consultation next week if that works for you. Can you bring a photo of your dress? Great. And if you’ve selected the attendants’ dresses, or their colors . . . ? Mmm-hmm. I’ll help you with all of that. How about next Monday at two?”

She logged in the appointment, then glanced over her shoulder as she heard a car pull up.

A client on the phone, another coming to the door.

God, she *loved* spring!

EMMA SHOWED HER LAST CLIENT OF THE DAY THROUGH THE DISPLAY area where she kept silk arrangements and bouquets as well as various samples on tables and shelves.

“I made this up when you e-mailed me the photo of your dress, and gave me the basic idea of your colors and your favorite flowers. I know you’d talked about preferring a large cascade bouquet, but . . .”

Emma took the bouquet of lilies and roses, tied with white, pearl-studded ribbon off the shelf. “I just wanted you to see this before you made a firm decision.”

“It’s beautiful, plus my favorite flowers. But it doesn’t seem, I don’t know, big enough.”

“With the lines of your dress, the column of the skirt, and the beautiful beadwork on the bodice, the more contemporary bouquet could be stunning. I want you to have exactly what you want, Miranda. This sample is closer to what you have in mind.”

Emma took a cascade from the shelf.

“Oh, it’s like a garden!”

“Yes, it is. Let me show you a couple of photos.” She opened the folder on the counter, took out two.

“It’s my dress! With the bouquets.”

“My partner Mac is a whiz with Photoshop. These give you