

Winter in July

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WINTER IN JULY

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Written by Jean Shelby.

Dear Readers,

Winter in July is an introduction to the little town in Oregon, Garden Valley. Most of the characters in this book will have their own standalone story. I have *many* Garden Valley books planned, with several coming out in 2024 and 2025. I hope you enjoy this novella enough to come along with me on this journey!

-Jean



Chapter 1

The Elridge Account

The end of Cotton Street is where my passion lies, where every day is as fun as a Saturday afternoon. This little shop across from the weeping willow tree that's as old as Garden Valley itself is where I can flex my creativity. I flit around Clippers Salon, taking calls, outfitting clients with a customized skincare routine, and turning customers into friends. This is my home away from home and where I've found my solace.

But not today.

Today, I've broken the news to my business partner, Bailey. It's news that I squealed in excitement for, news that has the force to put my small wedding planning business fully on the map.

"There is no way I'll agree with this, Monica!" Bailey yells, keeping her ground. I'm used to her boisterous personality, but she's never all-out yelled at me. Don't get me wrong; I'm far from crumbling. It's usually me with the noisy vocal cords and hot temper. I have to stay true to my red tresses, after all.

"You can and you will," I command. "The commission from the Elridge account is more than what we'll make with all the other weddings this summer combined." With us being novice wedding planners, this is a major win for Emerald Weddings!

"This is way out of our league. Even for you, Monica." Bailey grabs her round hip and straightens her shoulders with an audible huff. She usually has a big enough mitt to catch my sass, but she normally doesn't throw it back at me like this. "I've told you how Naomi made my life

miserable in cosmetology school. She was more nitpicky than my little Sammy is with his food. Can you imagine her bringing that into the mix when planning a wedding? It would be a nightmare!”

“She was nice enough on the phone.” Bailey’s left eyebrow raises in disbelief. “Janine also said she’d love to help.” I turn and bite my lip, wishing I hadn’t mentioned the bride’s sister, Janine. I’ve made my voice high and light to show that this isn’t a big deal. In reality, I’m hoping Bailey won’t see my toes curl in new strappy sandals that are on my feet much too early in the season.

“I hardly think you’ll want to plan this with Janine,” Bailey puffs. “Those sisters are like twins. I don’t know which one of them is worse. They’ll be expecting the world, Monica.”

She speaks the truth. Working for Janine was the worst year of my life. She put so many knots in my life that I’m still detangling them. On the flip side, showing off my wedding skills to my nemesis is one thing luring me to take this account.

“I’m well aware of the status of the Elridge family,” I say, keeping my confidence. I’m due to make a name for myself in this business. I’ve planned a dozen weddings for the local families of Garden Valley and am ready to step up. Catering to one of the wealthiest families around will surely propel us forward.

“Then it’s settled...”

“Yes, it is,” I bulldoze, understanding our varied opinions.

“We’re not doing it,” Bailey says, tilting her chin up defiantly. Her lips purse into an undetectable line, and I’m sure if I turned her around, her bubble butt would be so clenched it could bend a paperclip. I’ve never seen her so angry, but it does little to sway my answer.

“Your dimples are so cute when you argue,” I say, bending to her level to dot her nose. I tower over her, emphasizing my standing. She may be the salon owner, but I’m the founder and CEO of the wedding-planning business. “This is why I make the decisions. It’ll be great for Emerald Weddings,” I say, turning for my office. We’re doing this wed-

ding, even if I have to tailor it to each Elridge family member. I don't care about Bailey's and my sour histories with the bride-to-be and her sister.

Bailey's sigh mixes with the rain splattering against the large floor-to-ceiling windows. They allow a ton of natural light to filter in on sunny days. It's always sunny in my life where I have the perfect schedule and a wonderful family. I'm challenged at work during the day and then get to spend the afternoons with my girls and evenings with my husband.

"This isn't going to be as easy as our other weddings," Bailey continues from her station, unwilling to throw in the towel. "The Elridge family will expect more than a backyard potluck wedding. They think of us as ultra hicks here in Garden Valley."

"I know," I respond with the tone of a teenager from the comfort of my office. "Amy's small wedding has been the easiest. Bailey, this is our chance to really show how we shine at these events. You've helped me build this company to become a household name in Garden Valley."

My sister, Amy, got married almost two years ago. Planning her wedding jump-started my passion. I couldn't stop myself. I was bitten by the bug, hit with the arrow, and scratched by the thorn. Whichever way you say it, I'm nowhere near throwing a bucket of water on this flame.

I've envied David Tutera, the wedding planning master himself, since my early twenties. I'm not comparing my skills to his, but let's say I share his flare—proof enough that this is my forte. The weddings I've planned have been relatively small, but I've splashed my dash of glamor and style. Everyone in town has gushed with happiness and praise. I expect an unlimited budget with the deep Elridge pockets, allowing me to pull out all the stops.

There's nothing more satisfying than bringing a bride's dream wedding to life. It's my job to develop a theme that ties colors, décor, hair, makeup, and the style of the dress into a nicely packaged bow. I in-

corporate the love story of the couple as well, as it is the most essential piece of the puzzle. It's a lot to orchestrate, but each wedding has strengthened my conducting skills.

"Ugh, Monica, please don't make me do this," Bailey whines, slouching my way. I keep my posture straight as I organize my office. "Maybe you and Leslie can take the lead," Bailey says as if this is a stellar idea. She sits in my overstuffed sunflower chair and plays with the squishy cake fidget on my desk, a gift from my youngest, Mia.

My corner office is organized for what I call a 'tour of the perfect wedding.' It's where I meet with brides to have them pick out all their favorites. Large binders hold pictures of hundreds of selections of flowers, color palettes, food, and music. I drop the wedding binder labeled 'Naomi Elridge Wedding' in front of Bailey, a clue that this will happen.

I take my time before speaking, instead focusing on our summer wedding schedule sketched on a mounted whiteboard. So far, we have ten weddings booked from May through August. It's far from the jam-packed, completely booked status I'm after. We've had a good but slow start, another reason this wedding is necessary. Word of mouth will do wonders for us, especially with the high-class Elridge community.

The picture on my desk of Callie and Mia, my two girls, reminds me of my goal to balance my work and home life. Janine coerced me away from them when I worked for her, and my home life nearly fell apart. I tried to play the part of superwoman and do it all but failed miserably. This is my chance to prove that I can do a stellar job while prioritizing my family.

"No matter your personal quarrels with Naomi, we need this wedding. And I can't do it without your help. Naomi picked a date when we're free. It's perfect!" It's more than me wanting to win the debate. Bailey is a big part of the team I've assembled.

"I'm not going to style her hair!" Bailey growls, tossing the fidget onto my desk before storming out of my office. Luckily, we're in a lull

of clientele at the moment so no one can witness her childish behavior. “I don’t see why you’re chasing this. The salon is doing great. Emerald Weddings is stretching its reach. We don’t need the money this bad.”

“You know I’m not money-hungry. I plan to reinvest this paycheck back into the business. We’d be real professionals if we had our own supply of tables, chairs, and flatware.”

“Monica,” she whines, “Naomi hated me. She nitpicked everything I did. One time, she told me I was brushing my hair wrong!”

I laugh at the silliness of her trivial comment. “It sounds like someone may be jealous of Naomi getting married,” I sing. Something bounces off my back and rolls away. “Did you just throw a roller at me?”

“Don’t let your red hair bring out your temper, Monica,” Bailey smirks. For such a sweet-looking person, Bailey is putting on her boxing gloves to fight back. Being around her is like having a hot cup of tea. It’s soothing and sweet but will burn you if you aren’t careful.

“Oh, yeah?” I say, stomping over and grabbing the squirt bottle from her station. “I’ll show you a temper.” I go after Bailey, laughter and curly blonde hair trailing behind her. Although I’m not her favorite person right now, it’s a good sign that she’s still capable of having fun with me.

The door jingles, and in comes Leslie, our salon’s nail technician and partial owner, ready to take on the afternoon and evening shifts.

“What’s going on?” Leslie asks in a low, monotone voice. She keeps her gaze on us, heading to her area. She tucks away her trendy beige bag with bronze zippers and snaps. Every day, a different bag matches a fashionable outfit. Bailey’s and Leslie’s style strains my closet, stretching my self-proclaimed fashionista status. Today, Leslie’s Italian-tinted skin glows with a flowy pink pleated skirt, beige blouse, and matching spring jacket cinched at her small waist.

“Monica thinks we’re going to plan a wedding for Miss. Elridge,” Bailey says, using Leslie as a shield against my spray bottle.

“What? No!” Leslie gasps. Great, now they’re both against me. I can’t do this without them. Leslie is excellent at helping me plan with fabric and texture, offering her classy style coupled with her youthful slant.

“Mmm hmm,” Bailey says, her round face now set in a smug expression.

“It’s not going to change my answer,” I say forcefully, squirting a mist from the bottle on my two younger coworkers to emphasize my point. I connect with Leslie’s light brown eyes after she blinks her mile-long lashes, figuring she’ll be the more logical of the two. “We could make multiple five figures with this account.”

“Holy cow!” Leslie yells. She grasps Bailey’s shoulders and spins her, putting them nearly face-to-face. “You know we have to do this, Bailey.”

“But...”

“I went through the same classes as you did with Miss. Elridge. I remember the time she made Melissa cut four inches off her own hair because she messed up on the mannequin. We don’t discriminate about who we do weddings for, right?” It’s a long shot of an argument, but at the same time, she’s right. We’ve never turned anyone down.

Bailey slouches in compliance, a sign that we’ve won her over. “Fine, but you’re doing her hair!”

“Okay, by me,” Leslie says, spinning on her heel to set up her nail station that’s complete with a chandelier. “I’ll plan a wedding for anyone as long as we use the table and chairs, guy,” she mutters.

Bailey looks at me with an eye roll. “Just ask Paul out.”

“No way,” Leslie gasps dramatically.

She’s had her eye on Paul ever since we started planning weddings, but as far as I know, the two have yet to speak to each other. With her beautiful olive skin and fit figure, I wouldn’t think she would have a hard time getting a date.

“Seems like everyone has marriage on the brain,” I say, raising one eyebrow. “Seriously, you two need to get on it. My girls and I have already created your customized binders.”

“Of course you have. Kenichi is almost done with medical school, and then I expect a ring,” she says in a far-off, dreamy voice.

“It’s about time,” I say, straightening our light blue lobby area, my last task of the day. The whole salon screams fancy meets chic with a gray base and splashes of color. We offer champagne and sparkling water to all our clients, which aids in our ninety-six percent client return rate. I grab my purse and keys and take a few steps to the door. “I’m off to pick up the girls from school, ladies. They only have four more weeks until the summer break!”

“This year has flown by!” Bailey’s face morphs into a serious expression. “Naomi’s family will expect a five-star experience. Do you really think that’s something we can provide?” The shake of her head shows she doesn’t believe in us.

I straighten my back and raise my chin despite the flurries of worry. “I know we are.” If we work together, I don’t see how we can fail.



Chapter 2

The J and J Team

I swish around the salon this morning in a yellow and white sundress with a wide belt cinched around my waist. I had Bailey add extra curls to my red locks for even more self-assurance. None of this matters when my insides aren't aligning with my outward confidence. At the moment, I'm surprised my hair isn't a ball of frizz to match what's happening in my stomach.

I've been bouncing around the salon for hours, getting the place just right for our guests. I brought in two more flower arrangements to add to the one we usually have in the lobby. I got in early this morning to clean from top to bottom, even vacuuming the couch and chairs in our lobby. I want to ensure no loose strands of hair will be floating around when our bride gets here.

"I can't wait to sit down with Naomi today!"

"That makes one of us," Bailey grumbles. "I don't want her in my salon."

"You aren't a student anymore; you're a professional. Naomi isn't going to say anything negative," I assure her. It's a relief to have Bailey here today for our first meet-and-greet, even though she's pushing back.

Bailey's look is full of disbelief before she leans toward her client. "Monica signed us up to organize a wedding for the Elridge family," she whispers to the client she refused to reschedule.

"You don't say," her client, Gloria, says as if this is the latest scuttlebutt. "I heard their twin daughter just moved back. You know, the one

who hasn't talked to them in years? She's working at the gym between here and Eugene."

My mouth hangs open, and I wonder if Gloria also knows what brand of toothpaste the Elridge family uses. Bailey gives me a look that says, 'I told you so.' I ignore her and continue to primp the salon, ensuring everything is one hundred percent ready for Janine, er, for Naomi. Proving myself with this wedding will hopefully allow me to shed my angst against Naomi's sister. No matter what has happened in the past, one shouldn't lug a backpack full of resentment around forever. It frees the soul to forgive, and right now, mine is still wrapped in ropes.

"Naomi isn't anything like the happy brides we've had. She's monotone through and through with a side of snide for every comment."

"I'll keep her focused on flowers and signature colors... and not how you're brushing your hair," I tease. The initial sit-down should have been weeks ago, but getting a hold of the bride has been difficult. I'll be back on schedule after today. These meetings begin with a favorite color, theme, or flavor and ends with two-foot-tall centerpieces, sparkly gowns, and three-tiered cakes. It's all delicious in my book, satisfying my taste buds that crave everything about wedding planning.

I glance at the clock for the hundredth time. Knowing what's at stake, my stomach rolls tighter than Bailey's kinky hair. The feeling clashes with my self-proclaimed type A personality, and one I hope will fly away as quickly as it swooped in.

My other gigs this summer are important, but my energy is focused on the Elridge wedding. I've pulled out all the stops in preparation. Examples of flower arrangements are on display with silk flowers. Fabric swatches await the brushings of fingertips, and themed wedding ideas fill dozens of four-inch binders in my office. I take my work seriously, aiming to create the best wedding possible, and it shows.

I peek out the front door for the dozenth time, hoping to spot a Rolls Royce or equally ritzy car turning down our street. The narrow streets are inlaid with cobblestones, throwing me into a different time

period. Boxy conjoined storefronts with colorful awnings and flower boxes have been my scenery my whole life.

“Good morning, Monica. Are you expecting someone?”

“Oh, hi, Pricilla. Yeah, I have a client coming by,” I answer.

“Must be someone high-end since you’re dressed so nice.” I swear the tips of her ears perk up at the prospect of gossip.

“No, they’re just a few minutes late,” I lie, wishing her a good day and popping back inside. I definitely don’t need the town gossip club in my business. All they’ll do is add more pressure to perform my best for this wedding.

I look forward to hearing Naomi’s thoughts. Looking through the lens of our brides makes me appreciate all we have here in our quaint little town in Oregon. Visitors love our clean, classy town with rolling green hills as a backdrop to their wedding pictures.

I haven’t always used these words to describe our small town of less than five thousand residents. A few years ago, in my early forties, I painfully endured a phase when I wanted to replace our pastures and smelly animals with the excitement of skyscrapers and a coffee shop on every corner.

“She’s not here yet? Pity,” Bailey says as she brushes liquid color into Gloria’s hair. “This is more your deal than mine, Mo. I’m just here for moral support,” she says, leaning toward Gloria and speaking in a loud whisper, “which she’ll need a lot of.” Her negative attitude is exhausting and brings my energy down. I snatch a paper clip from the front desk and bounce it off her shoulder. “Ouch, Monica,” Bailey jokes.

I shake my head, a weak smile spanning my perfectly lined lips. It’s one reason why Bailey and I work so well together. While we might not see eye-to-eye, even in the literal sense since I’m half a foot taller than her, we have a perfect mixture of logic and sense of humor to get us through anything.

A half hour later the door jingles with the announcement of my bride. I bounce out of my seat from the back corner, expecting to meet Naomi, only to find a tall, thin man... and Janine.

I catch my breath upon seeing her. I should be praising myself for not letting out the shrill scream currently stuck in my throat. I haven't seen her in two years since our falling out. Memories of Janine swindling clients and not knowing a thing about the makeup industry come flooding back. I fully expect her to participate in the wedding party, but her presence is about as welcome as keeping your eyes open in a sandstorm.

"Janine, hello," I say, rushing to greet them with a wide smile so I don't show my inner turmoil. "I wasn't expecting you. Is Naomi on her way?"

"She sent us," she replies in a flat tone that has haunted my dreams. She leans on her left foot as if posing for a picture, her Dolce and Gabbana purse dangling from her slim arm. She gives off an air of superiority with her dark brown hair styled perfectly. Dainty gold jewelry accentuates her bony clavicle and wrists. Everything she owns is tailor-fitted to her fat-free frame. Her outfit is impeccable: a gray skirt, a green silk blouse, and three-inch red bottom heels.

Standing next to her is a well-dressed man, whom I'm assuming is the groom. He's so polished that I would have mistaken him for a host on one of those makeover shows, all glammed up and ready to be on film. It's my first time meeting Jonathan, the fiancé. He embodies the look of the Elridge fortune from head to toe. My expertise in all things makeup spots the blush swiped on his spray tan.

Judging by their matching grimace of judgment, I'd think they were comparing our salon to a barn. First impressions are essential, and the initial seconds of this one aren't going well. We need to impress Naomi and her family.

Especially Janine.

My mind spirals into a tornado of doubt at her mere presence. What if she hates my ideas? It's a given based on our track record. What if the other weddings I've built my brand on were small beans compared to those she's been to? What if I'm too bland for their privileged tastes?

She hasn't even said anything in these thirty seconds, and the carefully constructed centerpieces I've painted in my mind are crashing to the ground.

"Welcome to our salon! I've been looking forward to getting this wedding started," I say with a hard swallow.

"Yeah, well, I've been dying to see where you've been, um, working these days," Janine says in her throaty voice. The sentence has all the pauses necessary to label my oasis of a salon as a dump. "The fake cherry blossoms are a bit much, don't you think?"

It appears I'm not the only one holding a grudge.

I'm thrown back to how unhappy I was while working for her. She was sharper than her jutting clavicles. I desperately wanted to work for Janine and put everything on hold, including my family. It was nearly too late when I realized the mistakes I made. Being around her was like starving yourself: sure, you get the desired outcome, but with the cost of feeling empty inside.

"I'm Monica. It's nice to meet you." I hold my long, slender hand out for Jonathan, finally bringing my confidence into this meeting. I'll be damned if they take me from my home-court advantage. You know how you want to grip someone's hand and give it a good shake? Yeah, this is the opposite.

Jonathan's three-piece dark gray and blue suit has him looking sharp enough for a court date. My eyes flicker to Bailey, who studies his slicked-back, black hair, probably wishing she could rummage through it and mess it up. Shiny black shoes and a pocket watch round out his posh look.

Janine shifts her attention from the champagne I've set out to my face. I recognize her judging eyes on me. Her area of so-called 'expertise' is makeup. Mine is flawless, a look I know she can't accomplish with her limited skills. I use this as my boost to shake off the nerves that have paralyzed me for a moment. No matter what, this is my turf, and this is my jam.

"Naomi sent me today. Obviously," Jonathan says, holding his hands out as if to say 'here I am.' "I'm playing the part of the scout. I'll take pictures and report to the queen to decide if we'll hire you."

If they'll hire us? From how Naomi talked on the phone, this was a done deal, enough for me to lock in their date.

Butterflies shoot from my stomach to my throat. It wouldn't be the end of the world if we didn't land this account, but I'd be devastated if I crashed and burned in front of Janine.

"No problem. I'll show you what we've got and go from there. If you don't mind coming back to my office?" I offer a wide smile. Jonathan saunters around the salon, taking pictures with his phone and oozing shrewd judgment.

"It's a bit small, isn't it? You only have two chairs," Jonathan says haughtily, glancing at Janine.

I chuckle in response, hoping it will illuminate his opinionated analysis that's as high as his cheekbones. "This is our day job, Jonathan. Did you know that Bailey was in Naomi's class?"

"Oh yes, the rogue student. Naomi has told me stories," Jonathan says, sneering at Bailey.

"Let's begin! Come back to my office. I have a lot for us to go through today." I gesture for the two yellow and white seats and glance at Bailey. She rolls her eyes and continues to work on Gloria, her client. I take my chair and open a binder to show a picture of our venue. Janine brushes off the seat before sitting down, pinching her legs together as if she's afraid of germs seeping through her stick legs. "First off, we have a tent for the big day where we do the hair and makeup."

“You want my Naomi to get ready in a tent?” Jonathan shoots me a look of disbelief at my first picture.

“It’s a huge white wedding tent, probably like you’ve seen on TV. It’s huge and beautiful. I’ll show you more pictures.” My shaky fingers flip to a page in my preparations binder I know will change his doubt. “This is typically how it looks,” I say, brushing my hand over the pictures. My daughter, Callie, loves laminating the wedding binder pages, and I’m thankful for her help at this very moment.

Jonathan’s eyes roam over the page. I bite my lip, hoping to impress with the ambiance of the scene. Soft gold, off white, and pale pink are surrounded by fresh flowers against the white tent, green grass, with lights everywhere. To my relief, his expression changes to one showing interest. I’ve chosen one of our high-end wedding binders specifically for the Elridge account. Our photographer, Ellie, perfectly captured the Greek-themed event. Tall columns hold flowers at every entrance. At this wedding, my husband, Brandon, and I strung thousands of lights, giving it a fairyland-type glow. Guests dined at tables with oversized centerpieces, gold China, and white and gold tablecloths and napkins.

“The ladies have a tent of their own to get ready in. They sip mimosas, nibble on their favorite foods, and have their hair, nails, and makeup done. At this particular event, they treated themselves to a masseuse.” His nod and slight smile signal his liking. I’m winning him over, which pushes me to impress him further. Janine’s hooded eyes, however, show no hint of coming to my side. “We have our very own nail technician, Leslie, who does the mani-pedis.”

“Maybe I can get in on that action,” Jonathan says, taking a picture of the page before inspecting his fingernails. His top-notch grooming allows him to fit in well with Janine’s group. I’m not used to seeing this behavior from the groom, but I have to admit it’s fun.

“You wouldn’t be the first groom to seize the opportunity!” I lie, taking advantage of his interest. “If the wedding party is large enough, we’ll hire additional hair and makeup stylists.”

“It sounds like that could work,” Jonathan replies, switching back to his monotone voice.

“Here are more examples of the work we’ve done.” I rely on the binders as my safety net. I usually start with the colors and work through table settings, flower arrangements, and meal choices. I have pictures of weddings we’ve done during other times of the day, so the time can also be decided. I peek at Janine’s stoic face to try and glean something from her reaction.

“Look how cute all this is,” she says in a high, belittling tone. I fear my pencil might break from clenching it so tight. She always has been able to find cracks in my usual rock-solid foundation.

“I like to start with a favorite color. What does your bride prefer?” I ask Jonathan. With this first question, Jonathan’s own color drains from his face. “I don’t have to design the whole wedding around this concept, but it’s a start, especially with her not being here today.”

“Oh, well, she likes green,” he answers, eyeing the yellow decorations in my office.

“Green,” I say with an uppity voice. It’s not the most common color for a wedding, but who am I to challenge him? “I had a bride who wanted her wedding to resemble Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. Let’s see, I have those pictures right here.” I pull one of the binders toward us and flip through to the right page. “They had an evening ball gown theme, and the bride invited everyone to dress as such. She wanted her guests to join in on the fanciness.”

“I don’t like that idea at all,” Janine blurts, putting words to Jonathan’s scrunched-up face.

“Me neither,” Jonathan agrees. “Naomi needs to be the one at center stage.”

“Okay, no problem. The sky’s the limit as far as themes to choose from,” I say with my voice high to cover Bailey’s and Gloria’s whispers. “We have all kinds of ideas in here: garden, seasonal, hobbies, or destinations. It’s your choice.”

I glance at Jonathan again as I flip through my theme book. Judging by his ‘scared shitless’ expression, he has no idea how to answer my questions.

“Green will not work,” Janine says plainly, glancing at the groom. “We’re looking for elegance, not a nine-year-old’s birthday party. Leave the colors and themes to us, Jonathan.”

“Here’s one idea with simple white and violet colors with...”

“No. Nope, that one won’t do. It’s too frilly, and Naomi isn’t into that,” Janine says. The comment takes me by surprise. When I talked to her, Naomi said she wants pastel colors and dainty flowers. I distinctly remember this because these were the only tips she gave me.

“It’s not going to hurt my feelings,” I laugh. “One bride didn’t want a drop of pink or purple and was afraid I wouldn’t cater to her wishes. I had to remind her that this isn’t *my* wedding. Another bride had her fiancé involved every step of the way. They chose bold black and a beautiful royal blue. It’s all up to the two of you.”

“Black and blue? What is this, a high school pep rally?” Janine asks. Gloria snickers and Janine snaps her face in their direction.

“Need some water?” Bailey asks her client as a cover-up.

“Naomi mentioned wanting a simple backdrop, I mean tabletop, I mean... place settings,” I say, turning to my table section.

“Nope, my parents will not approve,” Janine sighs. Her poised hands on her knees indicate she thinks she’s in charge. The way I’m fumbling over my words and striking out with every suggestion, she is.

“Naomi doesn’t want anything too big, Janine,” Jonathan chimes, giving me more direction with even this tidbit of information.

“As if it’s up to her. If she wants what’s coming to her, she’ll adhere to the Elridge wedding expectations,” Janine says without apology. My curiosity peaks, wondering what Janine has in her back pocket. “Seriously, Jonathan, if you’re going to take the Elridge name, you need to learn how we do things.”

“Is there a list of expectations written somewhere?” I ask, hating that I haven’t thought through this question. Janine and Jonathan give each other a look before laughing in my face.

“As in a ‘how to be classy’ list?” Jonathan says in between his exaggerated guffaw.

A glance at Bailey shows her taking it all in with wide, brown eyes. We haven’t had a challenging bridal party like this. Everyone has been excited to plan their big day with us, not belittle our operation.

“You’re welcome to check out my website, too,” I interrupt to change the subject. I have a lot of designs out there and have a questionnaire that will help pair you with a theme.”

“Aren’t we paying you to do that for us?” Jonathan says snidely, putting me in my place. He isn’t the bride, yet he’s putting my creative skills to the test by bringing his own flavor of a ‘groomzilla.’

Is it too late for me to sprint over to Bailey’s side?

“We have hairstyles and accessories to go through. I know it’s Naomi’s forte, being the teacher at the cosmetology school.” Once again, silence from Jonathan.

“Yes, her hairstyle will be near and dear to her heart,” Janine says. “I’m sure Bailey can help her in that department.”

The three of us turn to look at Bailey. She displays the fakest, most unsure smile I’ve ever seen. Gloria holds a shocked expression that would be comical in a different setting.

“Anyway,” I say quickly, pulling their attention away from my unwilling partner. “There’s a lot more in these ‘wedding bibles.’ We have cake choices from the bakery right next door. We have lighting options and, of course, flower arrangements. What is Naomi’s favorite type of flower?”

“Lilies,” Janine says plainly. It’s her bored voice ringing out, and I know I’ve lost her.

“I’m sure you can figure it all out. My time is up, ladies.” Jonathan pops out of his seat and speed-walks across the salon.

“I agree,” Janine says, following after him. “We have a lot to do today.” I rush after them in haste, blubbering something about scheduling another meeting. She stops so abruptly I almost run into her. “Just remember this, Monica, when you’re planning, ask yourself: WWJD? ‘What Would Janine Do,’” she says with a wicked laugh.

“But you’re not the bride,” I say with tense lips. I force myself to smile instead of snarling.

Apparently, time doesn’t heal all wounds.

“It’s cute,” she says mockingly, “you think you’re doing this for Naomi.”

Jonathan turns at the door, snootily looking at the salon we have worked so hard to build. “This place is small, but I like your style. I think my Naomi will be happy with your services.”

Janine rolls her eyes. “Don’t bother Naomi with every little detail. If you have a question, call me. Got it?”

Oh, goody. I get to plan this wedding with Janine being in the lead.

The meeting was a complete bust. We have less than three months, and I’ve only gathered a thimble of information. Even the not-so-picky bridal party takes at least four months to coordinate fully.

I wait until Jonathan gets to his Mercedes before I allow my smile to fall. He goes quite well with the poised nature Bailey used to describe our bride, whom I have yet to meet in person. As of now, she’s a cardboard cutout, a placeholder to move through the motions of this wedding, just as I did with little figurines as a kid.

“What the hell was that?” I yell. It’s always like this when I’m around Janine. I’m normally as tough as hard candy, but Janine is the blow torch, melting my exterior and exposing my interior.

“Naomi’s favorite color is not green,” Bailey scoffs. “She wore every shade of blue known to man at school.”

“I think Jonathan is just out of his realm thinking he can help plan,” I comment.

“Her outfits were mostly straight skirts with buttoned-up blouses. It was a bit boring, but she was always nicely put together in a librarian sort of way.”

“At least it’s something. I don’t even know what this woman looks like!” I exclaim, throwing my hands up and letting them fall. “What kind of food does she want? How does she want me to decorate? Does she want a natural look with her makeup or something with full coverage? Does she have short hair, long wavy hair? What?”

“I’ll take care of the hair department,” Bailey says confidently. “She almost always has it in a bun, and boy, do I have plans for her,” Bailey says, digging in her drawer and pulling out a few barrettes with gems.

“You do, huh?” I say with a sneer.

“After that disastrous meeting with the ‘J and J team,’ I see how badly you’ll need my help. I’ve thought this over a little. I dread working on Naomi, but this could be good for us. She might not be my favorite person, but I’m standing true to our mission of bringing about every bride’s dream wedding.”

“Thanks, Bay,” I say. My need to succeed hits me like a hurricane wind. It’s a feeling I’ve had my whole life: the need to prove I can take on challenges like Janine’s. It started with my Aunt Edna, the woman who raised my sister, Amy, and me. Much like Janine, my aunt could never be pleased, even if I handed her the world. And, much like I behave in Janine’s presence, I’ll swing my lasso to give it to her.

I have nothing but dead-ends from the groom and sister, but I’m far from giving up. I’ve just started clicking this puzzle together.

“What a show,” Gloria says, joining me and Bailey by the window.

Bailey reaches up and rests her bent arm on my shoulder as we watch our demanding guests drive away. “Looks like we’re stuck in this boat together. Let’s hope there are life jackets on board.”



Chapter 3

Taking Action

I've yet to experience a disconnected bride. I'm being ghosted. I have zero leads. Nothing has been ordered or scheduled. The Elridge wedding binder only holds two pages of 'what ifs' after Janine and Jonathan's meeting last week. As such, Callie, Mia, and I pieced together a few sample themes. However, these are only built around the color blue and a few upscale wedding ideas. I think Janine would approve.

I've been pouring over the empty Elridge binder more than the May showers in Garden Valley. After allowing yet another week to go by without any progress being made, I finally bite the bullet and decide to catch Naomi at the cosmetology school she works at, grateful Janine won't be here.

I sigh as I pull into the school parking lot, hating that I keep thinking of this as Janine's wedding. This is Naomi's wedding. Could have fooled me! I've tried dozens of times to connect with the bride herself. There must be some reason why she's disinterested in one of the most important days of her life. Her disconnection gives the aura of a disaster looming towards me like a noxious cloud.

I grab my bag of binders and head inside, thanking my earlier self for dressing in my rose pants and white blouse. Strappy beige heels and a spring jacket with all the buttons and zippers round out my look. My walk shows my usual confidence, nothing of which I feel on the inside. Hopefully, this will impress Janine's sister.

What am I saying? This is Naomi's wedding! It's not like I'm here to serve her garnishment papers.

The lobby is decorated in dark blue and silver, which I assume are the school colors. At least someone here can pick out a color! My nose fills with pungent hair permanent solution products that makes my nose want to run off my face. Bailey spends extra money on the less smelly stuff, and I'm now grateful for it.

Two women are in the reception area, and one is getting the tongue-lashing of her life. "You ordered the cheap stuff, and now it smells like a nineteen-sixties salon. Make it right, Patricia!" the more petite woman says.

I nearly drop my binders, wishing I had remembered the oversized bag that perfectly fits six of these monsters. I make it to the reception area just in time to drop one off on the counter.

"There we go," I say, juggling the rest and offloading two more. "Thank goodness I didn't drop any in the rain! Whew!" I say, straightening my jacket. "I'm Monica. I was wondering if Jan, er, Naomi Elridge is available."

The smaller woman only moves her neck to look at me, the rest of her staying still. "I'm Miss. Elridge," she says in a throaty voice.

"Oh, you!" I blurt before wishing I hadn't. "Well, good, great, I mean. I'm your wedding planner," I say, wondering if she recognizes my name. "Do you have a few minutes to talk about your wedding? Your binder is almost empty," I say, mustering up my best smile. This might sound silly to an outsider, but the binder is what I use as a basis for putting the whole wedding together. Without the binder, I can't delegate to my team.

I'm the founder of Emerald Weddings, but I've assembled a team of competent women who help round out my business. Bailey and Leslie do the hair and nails, Zooey designs the invitations, Joanie builds the arch, and my sister, Amy, helps with all the loose ends, quite literally, since she's the best seamstress around. I haven't delegated the tasks to my team as usual, mainly because I have nothing to give them.

“I don’t have time right now. I have a class in a couple of minutes.” Her voice is as dead as Janine’s. I stifle a shudder at the comparison. I think I could have her favorite type of wedding cake, and she’d say, ‘I love cake,’ in a monotone voice.

“Please? It will just take a few minutes,” I beg.

“I suppose,” she says with as much interest as going to the dump.

I look her over as she glides out of the front office and over to me, trying to glean some of her style.

Bailey was right about her penchant for blue. A crisp light blue blouse skims over slim shoulders. Slender hips fit into a blueish-gray skirt. Naomi’s straight, small figure will scream femininity in the right dress. Dark brown hair is swept away from her face in what I assume to be one of her signature buns.

As she gets closer, her high cheekbones and exotic catlike eyes are accentuated. Her petite facial features scream for color, something I hope to brush on when the big day comes. Her Bambi-like brown eyes are unwavering and beautifully framed by the longest eyelashes I’ve ever seen.

“You have five minutes,” she says.

I’m waiting for an affirmation to be here. Something like, ‘I’ve been looking forward to getting together,’ or even ‘It’s nice to meet you.’ This isn’t in the cards right now, as evidenced by her no-nonsense expression.

“Thank you. Your big day is getting closer, and I’d love to get a direction to start planning.” I keep my voice light as if tending to a lost kitten, hoping not to scare her away.

“Janine has taken over all that. But it reminds me of something,” she says in a throaty voice. I wonder if their tone is another family trait that puts us regular folk below them. “I’d like to move the date from August to July.”

“July?” It takes an award-winning performance to not show the shock of this request. My flustered fingers scramble to pull up the cal-

endar on my phone after her serious stare bores a hole in my head. I'm booked solid in July with a family trip planned in the middle of the month. "I'm sorry, I'm all booked." I slouch in fake sympathy, hoping she won't push. She doesn't take this as my final answer. Her unblinking brown eyes meet my pair of greens, raising the intimidation factor.

I know this tactic: she's using the silence to hypnotize me into changing my mind.

"You're saying no to the Elridge wedding?"

Is this going to put the wedding at stake? Either I change the date and squeeze my time to plan for this event even more, or have the account ripped from my grasp? I'm already holding on by a fingernail; one little tug would be enough to tear it away, creating a hangnail I could never heal from.

"I'll see what I can do," I say, buckling under her stare, pulling a can-do attitude from my hat. "Which weekend are you thinking of?"

Please don't be during our trip! I could ask another wedding party to reschedule, but our tickets to Disneyland are non-refundable, not to mention it would break the girls' hearts.

"Jonathan's birthday is the twelfth, so that date would be fine," she says casually as if scheduling a tea date with friends.

I keep my smile on, even though I'm looking right at the trip to Disneyland I booked months ago. I know the trip is smack dab in the middle of the wedding season, but it sounded like a good time for family time when I booked it.

"A birthday and a wedding! That's a fun combination."

But not for Naomi.

With her lackluster expression, I may as well be planning a funeral. I change lanes, nudging my professionalism to match her calm demeanor. "We'll make the twelfth work."

"Good." She turns away from me and starts down the hall, heading for her class!

“Naomi,” I say, reaching my hand out to touch her shoulder, “can we look through some wedding pictures for a few minutes?” I ask sweetly. My passive voice sounds nothing like my own. It’s not in my nature to add this much sweetness to my speech. It proves I’ll do what’s necessary to keep this wedding from slipping through my fingers. So far, it feels like I’ve been holding sand at the beach.

Naomi glances at her watch and then back at me with an odd expression. It’s not dread or irritation; it’s a tense nervousness.

“Just for a few minutes. I’ve put together this binder with the ideas I’ve gotten from Janine, but I want to run them by you.” It’s not what I want to say. I’ve kept myself from screaming, ‘Please just give me something to go on!’

Naomi’s eyebrow raises in interest. In her pause, I quickly set a few binders on the small table in the lobby. I’m not expecting a huge array from her. At this point, I’ll settle for a couple of grunts to set me on the right path. She sits arrow straight with elegance and the same reservation Janine had in the salon.

“We’ll go fast! This is the one I’ve put together for you. Is summer your favorite season?” I keep my voice light as I speed through my words, hoping she’ll jump at something I’ve said.

Come on, girl! You can do it!

“God, no. I hate the heat.” I stare at her in confusion as she flips through the book. Maybe she wants a summer wedding because of Jonathan’s birthday.

“Okay,” I say slowly, eyeing her for more.

Her sigh quivers her perfectly straight posture. “My parents want me to get married soon, so this is what we’re doing,” she shrugs.

“Oh,” I say, matching her solemn expression.

“This is all wrong,” Naomi says, patting Janine’s page. “I told Janine no reds or golds. It’s her ‘go-to,’ and I’m tired of it. I don’t want the huge, pompous Elridge wedding with all those stuffy people. I want something different altogether, and if it upsets my mother...” she trails

off as she looks away. Something holds her back. It's as if Janine is here with us, cracking the whip to get her way.

"How would your dream wedding go?" I ask tentatively, leaning forward hungrily, hoping for a wordy answer full of hints and clues.

She looks me straight in the eye with sudden longing and whispers, "I've tried this before, the getting married thing. The church scene doesn't work for me. Everyone in my family goes absolutely crazy, making it bigger and better than the last sister or cousin who got married. I hate it all," she reveals. "What's wrong with something small and sweet?"

Her eyes droop in the corners, making me want to wrap my arms around her request and grant her wish. I know this won't solve her family problems; that's not what I'm after. I want to make this one day memorable for her the way she wants it.

"Okay," I nod slowly, scribbling notes on my pad. "How do you picture it?" I ask quietly, closing 'Janine's' wedding binder.

Naomi's gaze focuses somewhere beyond my left shoulder. "I'd pick a date for when it's colder. Winter is my favorite time of year. The weather is always changing. It could be sunny one day and windy the next. I snuggle on the couch with a blanket every chance I can to watch it snow." Her voice softens, and I sink into this tiny peek of her world. Her hands lay still in her lap as her gaze moves downward. The whole meeting takes on a slowness. She has shifted from a woman in charge to one who is almost fairly-like.

"Maybe your dress can have extra tulle to remind you of being snuggled into a blanket." It's a long shot of a correlation, but hey, I'm trying my best here. "What does your dress look like?" I ask with a sweet smile, hoping we'll fall into the connection I've been desperate for.

"I don't know. Janine is in charge of that, just like everything else," Naomi says with irritation.

I can't hide my shock with this one. Despite leaving countless voice-mails on Janine's phone, she won't call me back. "You don't have a dress yet?"

She shrugs her shoulders helplessly. "Janine has my measurements," she says without panic, "and apparently is ignoring every one of my requests. I've dumbed this wedding down to two goals, so I can get through it: as long as I'm not naked when walking down the aisle and I'm married by the end of the night, it'll be fine. Getting married to Jonathan is all that matters."

"Well," I say, standing and looking down at my bride with renewed confidence, "that doesn't go along with my motto. This should be your dream day come true."

Naomi gives me the slightest twinge of a smile that silently connects us. Something stinks about this wedding, and it's not the permanent solution. It's finally time for me to put my own slant on things. If that means I'm going against the Elridge family, so be it.



Chapter 4

The Dress

The shop in Eugene has my favorite selection of dresses and a crew of people who know this trade inside and out. Naomi and I agreed to meet secretly, keeping Janine in the dark. She's waiting for me in the light pink lobby when I get there, uncharacteristically leaning over and bobbing her legs, which are weaved together like a corkscrew.

"Monica, you're here," Naomi breathes, popping out of her seat the second she sees me. She grasps my hands and gives me a nervous smile. The incorrect first impression of labeling her as a mirror of Janine is long gone, revealing a woman stuck in the shadows of her family's legacy.

"I wouldn't miss it! I can't wait to pick out your perfect dress. There are hundreds to choose from here." I squeeze her clammy hands, hoping my smile will reassure her we're doing the right thing, even though I also have reservations about this meeting.

"Monica, it's good to see you," Heidi, our dress associate, says with a small hug before turning her attention to Naomi. "I heard you were the planner for the latest Elridge wedding and couldn't be more excited for you." She's as peppy as can be, giving Reese Witherspoon vibes, yet I detect a slight tremble in her lips when she says this. "I'm Heidi, and I'll be helping you pick out your dress today. Thank you for sending your measurements beforehand, although I already had them. Your sister said to wear the same dress style as the other Elridge weddings, but I'm excited you're here to try something different! I have some dresses picked out for you. I'll show you to your fitting room if you follow me."

We follow Heidi's long blonde curls and pass rack after rack of dresses through the white and pink store. Some are lacy, some with long trains. Others are shades of off-white, and some are short and less formal. More than once, I've had to fight the urge to try on a dress with a twenty-foot-long train and parade around downtown. Some people would love to be locked in a candy store or bakery overnight by accident. For me, I'd love to be locked in a store just like this so I could play princess and try on all the frilly, poofy dresses.

Heidi opens the door to a large room with chandeliers and sconces decorating white walls with gold trim. A gentle smell of roses hangs in the air. Several white dresses of every style hang on racks. Three adjacent mirrors hang on the wall at the top of steps leading to a platform. It's all designed to give the bride a sense of royalty, and judging by the look on Naomi's face, it's working.

"I've picked out several dresses to help guide us towards what you like," Heidi informs. Naomi looks at her clenched hands with worry. It matches nothing of the Naomi that Bailey described. Maybe the classroom gives her confidence that falls away once she's out of her element. "It's okay, dear; most of our brides come in with one idea and leave with a completely different dress. Go ahead and look through the racks of what I've personally selected for you to see if you like any. If you don't, we have hundreds more to choose from and more from our on-line store."

Heidi and I step back to offer Naomi space as soft piano music plays in the background. I don't know if she got to the stage of picking out a dress with the other two weddings she's told me about. Judging by how she gently touches each dress, feeling the fabrics between her fingers, I'd say this is her first time in a store like this.

She stops on a dress and pulls it toward her. "Do you like this one?" Heidi asks, reaching to take it from her.

Naomi pulls it back slightly before moving to the end of the rack. "Not really, but this is the type of dress my mother always wants my sis-

ters to wear. I like this one instead, and this,” Naomi says, clinging to two other dresses.

“You can try both of them on, dear,” Heidi chirps. Her long blonde curls swish elegantly as she moves. She has a fuller figure, and if you ask me, she’s as sexy as you can get. “You can try on as many as you like. We’ve had women try on dozens. One woman chose a dress based on how it looked when she sat down and posed for pictures. It’s all fine here.”

The two women go behind the curtain, and Heidi talks Naomi through the delicate process of putting on the dress. I take the time to inspect the other dress Naomi selected, snapping a picture for the binder. It’s a simple design with a modest neckline and thick shoulder straps. The silk bodice is plain before having the slightest poof at the silhouette. I haven’t seen a wedding dress I don’t like, but this one is plain-er than most.

“We’re ready,” Heidi sings before opening the curtain. And there stands Naomi, with the first confident smile I’ve seen her wear. Standing before me is a petite porcelain doll dressed in white.

“Naomi, you look so beautiful,” I say with a hand on my chest. It’s not meant for flattery; she shines through the tough exterior I first witnessed.

“I’m not sure about this one,” she says, stepping on the platform to inspect herself in the mirrors. “I thought I wanted something plain, but this one is too plain.”

“In which way?” Heidi asks, her hand moving to her chin in thought. She drills down into the areas of the dress that Naomi would like to be different. They land on a completely different style, as Heidi said could happen. I snap a full picture of the dress as Heidi carries it to our bride. Naomi excitedly pulls the curtain to change into the next dress.

Minutes later she opens the curtain with a beaming smile. I would never have guessed Naomi would pick out a sparkly dress with hun-

dreds of glistening white beads. The straps are made of a delicate lace crisscrossing her back, exposing creamy skin. The sexier design surprises me.

“I like this one,” she says, swishing the dress while inspecting herself in the mirror. “I never want to take this off!” I chuckle inwardly, remembering how she resembled a stray cat when I met her, ready to lash out and hiss at whoever lent a helping hand. This person is as sweet as the cherry on top.

The dress’s silhouette cascades down in layers of tulle, giving it more dimension than a crepe or silk fabric. Several lacy flowers are fastened to the bodice and up the straps around her shoulders.

“Naomi, this looks stunning on you!” I say, feeling the softness of the tulle between my fingers.

“You think so?” she asks with a bright smile. “It doesn’t have any light blues we’ve discussed.”

“It’s an easy fix when you have a sister like mine who is a master seamstress.”

Heidi agrees it looks exquisite before being called out to talk to another customer.

Naomi’s face falls slightly from a beaming smile to a reserved grin. “Not Homely Naomi anymore, huh?”

“What?”

We’re interrupted by none other than Janine, who saunters in like she owns the place, crashing our small party. Heidi comes in with a huge smile as if she has done the best thing in the world by bringing Janine and an older woman in.

“I must have missed the invitation, girls,” Janine croaks with a sneaky smile. Signs of Naomi and I going behind her back don’t show on her face. Instead, a look that says ‘game on’ resides.

“Mother,” Naomi breathes, keeping her eyes on the woman in the perfectly tailored white and mauve skirt with a matching blazer.

“What do we have here?” the shorter, polished woman asks. She brushes by me without a sideways glance, with expensive perfume lingering in her wake. Her presence alone makes me want to slink away in the corner. I was spot on when comparing Janine to my Aunt Edna. Their mother has the same mannerisms. The aura surrounding the older woman resembles my late aunt so much they could be sisters.

“This neckline is much too low. We need something with sleeves to cover the shoulders. She’s not getting married in a bar,” Mrs. Elridge snaps in an accusing voice. With the tip of her finger, she guides Naomi to turn as if spinning a mannequin on a turntable. “The back is showing too much skin.” She drops her arms in frustration. “This just won’t do. Nothing about it is right. We need one with Mikado silk, just as everyone else in the Elridge family gets married in. Remember, Naomi,” she says, lowering her voice, “you have to abide by my rules if you want what’s coming for you.”

I grit my teeth, hating how I can’t use my usual sass to control the bullying. My eyes stay on Naomi, waiting for her to defend the dress she loves. My bride robotically walks to the changing room upon command. Before long, Heidi joins her with a dress matching the description of Mrs. Elridge’s demands.

Janine peers at me beyond her perfectly pointed nose. “You can’t sneak behind my back, Monica,” she says in a deep tone. Her voice holds nothing of offense. She’s par for this game, complete with a set of boxing gloves and strategic punches.

“I wasn’t being sneaky,” I retort, “I’m spending a day with my client.”

“The Elridge family is your client, not Naomi. I didn’t think I would have to spell it out for you, but here we are.”

“Yup, here we are,” I say, looking her square in the eyes. Janine scrunches her lips in a tight smile as she shakes her head slightly.

“Be smart about which side you take, Monica.”

Naomi steps out from behind the curtain with an expression that matches her bland dress. She holds nothing of her smile with the dress covered in sparkly beads. It's a sad sight to witness how Janine and her mother have stripped her of the rays of sunshine she was allowing through the clouds.

"This is more like it. You know the deal, Naomi," her mom says, flitting around the dress while Naomi stares at herself in the mirror in defeat. She plays the part of the mannequin, lifeless without an opinion. "It's not entirely fitted. Miss?" she says, calling Heidi with the snap of her fingers. She rattles off a dozen orders for the dress to be altered to fit Naomi perfectly. Heidi scribbles furiously on a small pad of paper, jumping through the hoops being thrown at her.

Naomi looks at me with the stoic nature that matches Janine's. She's a turtle sucking its head back inside, only to leave the shell of herself out for others to do with as they please.

"It looks beautiful," I say with a nod.

I wish I hadn't.

"You can get dressed now, Naomi," Mrs. Elridge instructs before locking onto me. "So, you're the wedding planner," she says, slinking my way as a lion sizes up its prey. "Janine has spoken highly of you, but from what I see," she says, taking an obvious glance down my body, "I'm not impressed. That beady dress better not be a sneak peek into what you're planning for the wedding. We're looking for class, not a hoe-down."

"We were just having fun trying on dresses," I defend in a high-pitched tone.

"Naomi only hired you because you're not in our town. She was trying to keep us out of it until Janine got wind of what she was doing." The woman is so much shorter than me that I can fully see the top of her head. Still, she has no problem leading this lecture. "This wedding must abide by the Elridge standards. It's what we've always done, and it won't change just because Naomi would rather have blue instead

of red. I've wiped wedding businesses clean off the map before; one's much bigger than your dinky operation. Now," she says, throwing her shoulders back, "you're going to work with Janine to see this wedding through. Do you understand?"

I swear Aunt Edna is floating above her, controlling Mrs. Elridge with invisible puppet strings to make my life difficult from beyond the grave. It all brings back memories I'd rather not revisit. My sister, Amy, made her own prom dress since Aunt Edna only provided the bare necessities. Our lovely aunt hated the dress and said it showed too much cleavage. The dress was plenty modest, but with Amy's large bust, it would have been difficult to cover up those puppies. Still, Aunt Edna wanted to make sure Amy didn't go to the prom. She took a pair of scissors to the dress the night before the big dance. Amy didn't have time to fix it. I made my sister's night as fun as possible, taking her out to ice cream and enjoying a night at the lake, but it still didn't replace the debut of her beautiful skills.

The scene before me pours just as much distaste into my mouth. I don't care who these people are; I have an unspoken oath to my bride. You know, the one who is getting married?

I stay behind moments later as her family escorts Naomi out of the dress shop. She looks over her shoulder and gives me the saddest smile yet.

"I hate working with those people," Heidi says, crossing her arms as we watch them get in a Cadillac before their driver takes them away. "I was hoping Naomi would break the mold. I've outfitted six Elridge daughters on both sides of their family in identical dresses."

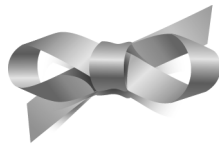
My rebellious thoughts push my inhibitions aside. I grab Heidi's wrist, staying true to my natural persona of pushing the limits. "Just for kicks, can you get the beaded dress Naomi tried on?"

Heidi's sweet face changes to a sneaky smile. "You've got it!"

I've been torn about which way to take this wedding, seesawing back and forth to the point of feeling nauseous. After spending this

time with Janine and Mrs. Elridge, I would love to go with Naomi's theme just to throw a bucket of water on their snobby ways. I shake my head, telling myself the beaded dress will simply be a backup. I still want to knock this out of the park. I'd like to grant Naomi's wishes, but I don't want to make life harder for her.

I thought this wedding had already been difficult. Now, the challenge really begins for me: finding a way to appease everyone.



Chapter 5

The Venue

Emerald Weddings would undoubtedly suffer if it weren't for my sister Amy's assistance and her connection as an office manager at the Hubert Mitchell apartment complex. With one hundred acres of land and the yard maintained to perfection, it makes for the perfect venue with a backdrop of our surrounding mountains for pictures. Our weddings are tucked in the back of the property, far from the apartment buildings, lending an exclusive vibe for our bride and groom's big day.

This property holds upscale low-income apartments. This description seems like an oxymoron, but the place is immaculate. Pruned rose bushes, diagonal lines on evenly green lawns, and crisp rock pathways pull in even the most sophisticated person. At least, I hope it'll be up to the caliber of the Elridge party.

Naomi has pulled away from me again, ghosting me after the dress incident. She has been referring all of my calls and texts to Janine. It's been a clunky preparation at best, with me trying to piece something together with a safety pen and Post-It.

Today, I'm showing Janine the venue. I hope to get her blessing on invites, place settings, food, drinks, and everything else for which I need her stamp of approval. I have sample pages printed in the binder, ready for approval. I've made it so easy that all she has to do is say yes or no to my chosen designs.

"Brandon, the lights already look good," I praise with a pat on my hubby's butt. He has strung thousands of lights so they effortlessly

blend in. He's already put hours into this venue for the other weddings but has said his work here is never-ending.

"They need to be perfect, Lover," he says with a wink. I can't help but admire my husband's large frame atop a ladder. He's weeks overdue for a haircut, as evidenced by the brown curls peeking out of his hat. It gives him a boyish charm that goes well with his fun personality.

"What do you think, the red or the blue?" I ask, holding up two floral designs. One holds red and off-white roses for Janine's preference. The other gives wispy spring vibes with baby's breath, blue carnations, hydrangeas, and irises.

Brandon leans against the ladder with a lazy look. "You know I'm biased to red." He reaches down and twirls a lock of my hair between his fingers. "It's one of the only colors I can see."

My eyes roll, but I can't help a girlish smile. "I know you're mostly colorblind, but what do you think about the look of each bouquet?"

"Well, if you like dull and gray, go with the one on the left," he says, pointing to the blue design. "If you want something with color, go with the other."

"These are blue, Brandon," I laugh, reaching up to tickle the spot beneath his butt cheeks. It's one of the reasons Brandon was attracted to me. While most colors are dull for him, he said my hair was the first vibrant color he had ever seen.

"I think y'all are making up those colors," he says before returning to his task.

"I think you fake the color thing so you don't have to help me with decorations," I laugh. "Ahh, do you need your ball tossed?" I ask our beagle, Mark. Brandon and the girls got this dog a couple of years ago. I wasn't set on having something else to care for and had no idea how to raise a dog since Aunt Edna never allowed us to have pets. Still, Mark grew on me, despite his silly name, and I couldn't imagine life without him. "Here you go," I say, tossing his ball.

Movement by the apartments catches my eye. I sigh and snag Brandon when he walks by.

“Is that Alice and Pricilla? Are they seriously spying on us?” I say, peeking around Brandon to get a good look at the two women. “Goodness, does nothing else happen in this town?”

“It’s a big deal, Lover,” Brandon says as if he hasn’t been wanting to say anything. “I’ve heard people at work talking about the wedding.”

“What? You work in construction! What do the men care about a wedding?”

“You know everyone knows everyone else’s business here. It’s a big deal when someone with as much money as the Elridge family is interested in a small town like ours.”

“Great, no pressure or anything,” I say, stepping wrong and nearly rolling my ankle. “Yikes, I’ve got to be careful with these shoes.”

“Monica, I need direction for the arch,” Joanie says with urgency, taking wide, sasquatch-like steps toward me. “You know it takes me a few weeks to get one done, and I don’t have a style yet.” She adjusts a green and white paisley bandana over her thick brown hair, her olive-colored cheeks rosy with the day’s warmth. Her look is filled with worry, one I’m trying not to adopt as my own.

“I know, Joanie, just get the basics done. I hope to have an answer for you today,” I say, touching her gloved hand. I don’t give a drop of a clue about how much the late start affects me, needing to keep the netting tight on this operation and my crew.

“I’m already done with the beginning stages. I can’t work a miracle on my carvings at the last minute.”

“I think Brandon said he could use some help,” I suggest, mainly so she’ll get off my back. She stomps away to fix a sagging part of the tent. She’s as good of a carpenter as Brandon.

“Man, she can be intense, huh?” I say to my beagle.

Joanie’s pleas for more of a design aren’t the only ones I’ve heard for this wedding. I typically delegate more tasks to my crew but don’t

have a direction to give them. I have mostly hoarded the details of this wedding, instead steering my team to oversee the other weddings we've booked this summer. With me straddling two ideas, I can't exactly give them two complete sets of tasks.

The sound of a car brings me to the front of our operation. "What? She's not supposed to be here for another hour! Girls, can you play with Mark?" I ask Callie and Mia, who are submersed in a game.

"What is this place?" Janine asks the second she exits Jonathan's Mercedes. Worry grips my stomach as I rush to the parking lot, ready to endure another round of displeasure from the Elridge group.

I take a few hurried steps toward the car, hoping Naomi sits beyond the ultra-tinted windows. Unfortunately, I must have broken the strap on my sandals when I took a misstep and it comes undone, flopping over with every step I take. I bend to try and fix it as I walk, undoubtedly looking like I've stepped on a ladder and am dragging it along with me. I look up at Janine's furrowed, penciled-in brows.

"Still shopping at the thrift stores, huh, Monica?" Janine says. I don't miss these little jabs. They were a constant when I worked for her. Once, she told me it looked like I had closed my eyes when putting my makeup on.

"Aunt... uh," I bang on my chest and emit a fake cough as a cover-up. Come on, Monica, get it together! "Janine, welcome." I don't know what has come over me, having merged these two foes in my mind. Janine is not Aunt Edna! I inwardly sigh a breath of relief when Naomi exits the car and takes Jonathan's hand.

I hold my hand in the air, showcasing the enormous white tent that stands from May through September. "And here it is." I muster up as much enthusiasm as I can, not typically having to work this hard to make others happy.

"Just think of the pictures with the rolling hills and the sunset," Amy says, stepping beside me with a pat on my back. As always, she has dressed the part and looks radiant in a light blue blouse and a white

skirt that hugs her full hips nicely. We have always been opposites, not looking a thing alike. Amy is much shorter than me, has thick brown hair, and has the creamiest skin I've ever seen.

I'm thankful for my sister's sweet, calming nature, and I hope she can work her magical charm on our hoity-toity guests. Bailey generally plays this role, but she has been missing in action since I signed us up for this self-inflicted beating.

Janine's frown and pursed lips show she's less than impressed. I could hand her a diamond vase, and she would ask where the roses were. I've been living in a mixture of anxiety and regret for taking this account, traits I want to burn in a bucket the second this wedding commences.

"The rest of my staff should be here shortly. Paige and Willow are putting the final touches on the wedding cake." My bakers aren't here yet, which drives me crazy, but Janine is early.

Janine slinks slowly on the wood floor Joanie, Leslie, and Brandon painstakingly constructed. She shares the same sneer I remember. A stiff shrug from her is probably as good as I'll get today.

Mark wiggles over to her, the sight of him catching my breath in my throat. I hadn't thought it through, bringing him here.

"Ahh, look at you," Janine says softly, taking me off guard. She bends to pet my beagle, scratching lovingly behind his ears. "Naomi, doesn't he look just like Pogo?" Naomi nods with a small smile but doesn't say a thing.

"I'm sorry, I meant to keep him in the truck," I say, gathering Mark and pointing him toward Callie and Mia. He gets the point and trots off to be a part of their make-believe land under a table.

"It's fine as long as he's not at the wedding. Monica, have you learned nothing from me? Clench your cheeks together," she says, swatting my behind with her hand purse. "It helps tighten up those balloon hips."

My eyes flicker to Amy, Brandon, and Joanie, staring with open-mouthed expressions. I shake my head with pursed lips, indicating they should stay quiet. I brush off the rude remark, having heard them all from my year working for Janine.

“Well, shall we get started?” I say in a high tone.

“Mom and Dad aren’t going to like this outdoor wedding,” she sings, eyeing Naomi. Naomi rolls her eyes and looks into the hills. “What do you have for me, Monica.”

For you?

I jump into action, feeling as though the stopwatch has started. My binders rest on a table, awaiting opinions. I keep my eyes on Naomi, hoping to pull her into this setting. My wildest dream is they’ll agree on a theme so I can blissfully start planning.

This is about as likely as Mark cleaning up his own poo.

‘It’s Your Love,’ by Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, wafts from the speakers that Brandon wired in, setting the scene. Jonathan strolls the grounds with the same ‘I’m better than you’ expression he had at the salon. I’m sure he’ll also be weighing in.

“Here’s the color I was thinking: a simple light blue. It’ll look lovely against the white backdrop.” It’s a long shot. I know Janine doesn’t want these colors, but I must try for Naomi’s sake. I lift an uncomplicated centerpiece with silk flowers, the same color scheme I plan to use for this wedding. With my nerves getting the best of me, the flowers topple out of the vase and scatter as soon as they hit the table. I gather them as I quickly talk over my mishap. “As you can see, we string lights around every tent and have a photo booth set up here, a popular choice for our clients and guests.”

“You want to have a photo booth?” Janine interrupts with a tone of arrogance. “No, this won’t work, Monica. What about this don’t you understand? My parents have invited all their friends. The mayor is coming, Monica!” She takes long strides toward me until she’s within

inches of my face. “And I’ve distinctively said not to do these cheap-looking pastel colors.”

Not for the first time, I regret agreeing to take on this wedding. The bride won’t be happy unless I go with her wishes. Yet I’m on the border of making an enemy of the family if I don’t abide by their demands. And if no one likes what I’ve done, the potential for Emerald Weddings to be dragged through the mud is about as real as, well, Janine hating everything I do. My win-win scenario has been flipped upside-down, bringing forth its ugly stepsisters, the lose-lose twins.

Paige and her daughter, Willow, drive in, pulling all our attention. The mother-daughter team begins unloading cakes from their van, chatting happily amongst themselves, laughing, and slamming car doors. I’m usually enchanted by their fairy-like looks with dainty features and wispy blonde hair. Not this time. This time, Paige’s denim onesie and apron make me want to scream!

“Sorry, we’re late!” Paige yells. “We were putting the finishing touches on the cakes, and...” She stops when she sees the solemn nature of her audience. “I’ll, uh, just set up over here,” she says, thankfully changing her demeanor.

It’s not my most professional wedding presentation display. Still, I’ve never had to be so critical of every step we’ve taken.

Disappointment shines on the faces of the wedding party, further cinching my stomach in the vice named ‘Janine.’ Why did I think I could go up against this woman again? I see Alice and Pricilla pointing in the distance. Couldn’t they at least spy on us from their car?

“She’s my doll, Callie!” Mia shouts from underneath a table. I turn to find Callie yanking on one of Mia’s dolls, trying to pry it from her hands. Mark jumps around them, barking at the commotion.

“Girls, stop!” I yell, stomping over to them, lowering my voice to a whisper. “I’m working right now, which means you need to behave. Brandon...”

“I’m on it,” he says.

He's picked up so many of the pieces I've dropped lately and has been juggling six balls in the air instead of the typical three. I've been failing at what I usually boast as a balanced work and home life, something I blame on Janine. And Bailey, who claimed she 'forgot' to cancel her appointments.

My dreams of hitting a home run with this wedding are slipping away, with me running after it in four-inch heels with the strap missing. Janine, Naomi, and Jonathan stand awkwardly, miles away from a hint of a smile, looking as out of place as royalty in an unkept barn.

I present more ideas as Paige and Willow set up the cakes on a table to my left. I'm mortified when Janine swats at a fly, her face scrunched as if a steaming cow pie is next to her. Jonathan peels off to strain Brandon's ear with his critical mumblings.

My silent bride has yet to voice a single opinion.

"If you step over here, I'll tell you about the cake options," Willow says calmly. At twelve years old, she is already as tall as her petite mother. The two love working together, which wasn't how they started here in Garden Valley a few years ago.

"You have *children* working for you?" Janine asks, keeping her eyes on Willow.

"I own the bakery, and my daughter, Willow, helps me," Paige replies with a proud expression and an arm around her daughter. I look on with longing, wishing I could be as unaffected by this cluster as she is. "We get to work together during the summer."

"Interesting," Janine says in a demeaning tone.

"Let's get started," Paige, unmoved by the remark, steps before the cakes to give her presentation.

Instead of making whole cakes, Paige and Willow prepare delicious and beautiful mini cakes. They decorate them entirely as they would one of the cake tiers and then send them home with our guests to enjoy as a pre-wedding treat. I asked her to add light blue flowers to one of the cakes to match my wishful thinking. Four cakes and several flatware

sets are tastefully displayed on the table, awaiting the prim mouths of the Elridge party. If God shines his light on us today, maybe Janine and Naomi will agree on something.

“We have four cakes to choose from: red velvet with royal icing and edible flowers of your choice,” Paige begins, while Willow points out the cakes. “Here we have an organic carrot cake with locally sourced ingredients and decadent cream cheese frosting. We have a traditional white cake here. I chose a compote made from fresh Garden Valley strawberries, but you can choose any flavoring you’d like. We top the cake with generous buttercream frosting and edible gold flakes. And here is one of our best-sellers, the bell-ringer chocolate cake with dark chocolate ribbons and whipped cocoa frosting topped with a generous helping of melted fudge. Look them over, taste them, and let us know what you think,” Paige says softly. It’s a perfect presentation, but our audience isn’t impressed.

“Oh, this one’s pretty, don’t you think, Naomi?” Jonathan says of the red velvet cake topped with blue carnations. It’s the first positive thing any of them have said today. “I like the regular white one too. What are you thinking, hon?”

Naomi is as separated from this presentation as oil is from water. She looks from one mini cake to another with the same bland expression. I’ve never seen a bride without enthusiasm, her family having stolen her joy for her big day.

“We’ll just do all of them,” Naomi says.

Paige’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Yeah, right, a wedding with four cakes,” Paige says with a laugh of disbelief. I let my team know this would be a different type of showing, but I couldn’t prepare them for this.

“With three hundred guests, we’ll need a lot of cake,” Janine chimes in.

“Janine, I said I don’t want the whole guest list here!” Naomi whines.

“It’s not really up to you, is it?” Janine barks, moving only her mouth as the rest of her body stays cemented in place.

“So, you want to do all four flavors, full-sized and fully decorated?” Paige says with wide eyes, looking at her equally stunned daughter.

“Did you say three hundred guests?” I ask with my mouth open. The guest list I had to pull out of Jonathan over a phone call had less than a hundred, similar to our other weddings.

Unless we have them bring their own tables and chairs, we have a problem.

“We need enough cake. It’s why people come, isn’t it?” Janine says as if she’s made the funniest joke.

“It’s the reason I’m coming,” Naomi quips. It starts with a slow smile and her grasping Jonathan’s arm. Naomi soon bursts into laughter, practically howling at the sky. He looks at us in embarrassment and joins Naomi with a forced chuckle. It’s so out of place from her other mannerisms and stuns us to silence.

“Which cakes would you like to taste?” Paige asks, poised and ready to cut a chunk out of one of them.

Naomi mimics Janine’s voice in return. “I have no room for sugar in my diet right now.”

“No, you don’t,” Janine says, wagging her finger before turning to Paige. “My parents love cake, so make sure to impress them.”

“Well, duh,” I say with an eye roll. Janine’s eyes flare in my direction. “Of course, we all want the cake to taste good,” I say lightly.

Janine puffs in annoyance at my exaggerated smile before moving to Joanie next. Her eyes grow large at being on the spot, and her hands fumble over each other as she stutters a greeting. Joanie’s earlier fire alarm emergency about the arch has apparently been extinguished.

“Janine, this is Joanie,” I interject. “She’ll be making the archway under which the bride and groom will be married.” My voice always takes on serenity when talking about two people pledging themselves to each other. It’s love that brings them to me. I never tire of this back-

bone of my profession, making sure I show up to the weddings with my pockets stuffed with tissue.

Something tells me I won't need any for this wedding.

Joanie opens her notebook of pictures of the archways she has designed for previous weddings. She does a beautiful job, and most couples want to purchase the arch. Janine looks on with lackluster as Joanie explains the variety of options.

Naomi stands on the sidelines, looking bored. The woman I thought I had grabbed a hold of has vanished. The layers I had begun to peel back have returned, encasing her composure with a super glue-like hold.

"Jonathan, I'm ready to go," she whines with apparent misery.

"Look at these archways!" Jonathan exclaims, engrossing himself in Joanie's designs. "Did you really make these?"

"I did!" Joanie smiles with surprise, ready to show more pictures. She flips the pages of her book with the groom as a captive audience.

Poor Brandon endures Janine's wrath as she asks him questions about the tent that only I can answer. "How many people can fit under this thing? What if it rains? How many people cater and serve at the events?"

Brandon flashes his 'nice guy smile' at her, listening to her rants and not allowing him to answer. He flicks his eyes at me, and I shrug, knowing he'll jokingly scold me later.

As for me, I'm keeping my eyes on the bride, yet again trying to decode her as if I'm reading a foreign book. She steps away from the commotion to be on her own. I focus on her from a distance, hoping something will pop at me, screaming, 'Choose this theme.'

A slow song by Coldplay comes on, a lovely serenade for my tension-filled stomach. Naomi noticeably shifts in front of me. Her posture slouches slightly, and her feet step to the beat. Her narrow hips sashay to the beat, her fingertips delicately touching the lights as if in a dreamland.

Then, something odd happens: Naomi starts singing! She threads through the tables as if it's just her and the song. Gone is the hard exterior described by Bailey. It's beautiful and sad at the same time. She's getting to marry the man she wants, but not in the way she desires.

"We can get going, dear," Jonathan says, holding his arm out for her. "The next time I'll be here, I'll be crowned Mr. Elridge," he says proudly.

"Wait, we're not done yet," I say, snapping back into planning mode. This time, I fail to keep the panic from my voice as I hobble after them with my broken shoe. "We haven't picked out invitations or place settings. What kind of food do you want to serve? What do you want for decorations? Flowers?"

"Oh, Monica, you're so funny. Our parents sent the invitations," Janine calls over her shoulder, heading for the car.

Amy and I share an 'I can't believe this' expression. Janine abruptly turns and comes my way. "Monica, a word." She continues to walk to the side, with me following. "I've been mostly hands-off, which I can see has been a gross error of mine. I hired you to make this a big, classy wedding. Do not use these frilly light blue colors. It needs to be better than what you have here," she says with a tone showing she's not impressed. "Ditch the small-town crap and tap into your wealthy side if you have one. This is the bronze style you're showing me. I need gold, literally. Come on, Naomi, let's go."

I'm rarely the person who can be stunned into silence. I'm the one who ignites everything into action. I'm the creator of these events, and I didn't get here by treading lightly and creeping forward. I'm a 'take charge and haul ass toward my dreams, goals, and ambitions' type of person.

Yet, here I am, open-mouthed and having these dreams stomped on by the woman I want to impress.

Naomi turns to me and mouths an 'I'm sorry' before tucking into the car.

My eyes follow every movement as they drive away, leaving me and my team more perplexed than ever. For people who have a lot of opinions on where to go, they sure didn't tell me which road to choose. Still, I'm determined to wave my wand and create a magical event out of thin air.

"I've never seen someone take over a wedding like she did. Poor Naomi," says Paige.

"Poor me," I say with a piece of spittle flying from my lips. And there are Alica and Pricilla, shaking their heads, a visual disappointment of how I feel.

"How in the heck are we supposed to make four cakes?" Willow asks.

"I don't think they liked the venue at all," Amy says with offense.

"Welcome to the party, ladies. This needs to be my 'pièce de résistance,' and right now, it sure is a piece of something."

"Why didn't Naomi interject and tell Janine to lay off? She didn't give one opinion about anything," Joanie says.

"You've heard of a bridezilla. What we have is a bride-zero."



Chapter 6

Falling Apart

“I’m sorry I’m late!” I scream, plowing into the house and heading straight to the dining room. I scratch Mark’s back as he gives me the usual greeting wiggles. The calming nature of my country-style house fails to work its magic on my anxiousness. “I went through four decorating stores in Eugene. Hopefully, Janine will like these,” I say, dropping the bags before they drain the blood from my fingers. The girls and Brandon pause their forks mid-air as they all stare at me, sweaty and out of breath.

“Tough day at the office?” Brandon teases. He scratches under the sleeve of his right arm, exposing his bulging muscle underneath. I may be frantic, but I’m not blind. Brandon keeps his body in shape, working even harder during the warmer months when he’s outside every hour of the day.

“It was a productive day! I’m sorry I wasn’t home in time for dinner. I’ve been at the craft stores all afternoon. My cart got so full I had to get another one!” My voice shrinks when I see they’ve made my favorite cold chicken and celery salad to go with burgers and tater tots. “You made dinner. Thank you, I’m starved.”

The girls fill me in on their second to the last day of school. After tomorrow, I’m looking forward to a summer of fun with them. Of course, some of our summer will be putting these weddings together, but they enjoy helping as much as I love having them around.

“Thank you for picking the girls up. And this was a delicious dinner,” I say again after licking my plate clean. Thinking back, I don’t

think I've had anything since breakfast. I really do appreciate all Brandon does for our family. I make a mental note to look into a vacation he and I can take for our upcoming anniversary in the fall.

My phone dings, and I am sucked into the wedding world for the millionth time today. It's a message from Paul, saying he can bring more chairs, but we'll have to wait for another wedding to be over just hours before Naomi's wedding starts. Janine certainly would disapprove! I'm sure she would like fresh new seats for her affluent butt.

I'm writing a response about the chairs when Callie's voice sings in the background. "She's doing it again," she says smartly.

"I know," Brandon whispers back, patting his hands down as if to quiet her.

"I'm sorry. I needed to answer Paul about a chair fiasco. Dinner was great, hon, thank you."

"You're welcome, for the fourth time," he says, leaning toward me. "Girls, why don't you go outside and play. Mom and I will be out in a minute."

Dinner clean-up is on hold for now as we opt to sit on the porch Brandon built himself. Mia and Callie jump on the oversized trampoline before playing tag and running on our ten acres with Mark. They are mini versions of me, with long, red hair trailing behind them as their twig-like legs take them across the lawn. Before starting the wedding business, it was just the girls and me during their summer break. It was a special time, but I needed more of an outlet for my creative juices to flow. It's a delicate dance to balance everything. Right now, I think I look like I'm dancing with two left feet.

"I'm lucky I was approved for a business credit card. I've spent nearly five thousand dollars on the Elridge party so far!"

"Wow, that's a lot of gray decorations," Brandon teases.

The breeze mixes with warm air, finally offering me a moment of rest in my busy day. Our property overlooks much of the backside of Garden Valley. A river winds through some of our yard, and I make yet

another mental note to take time out this summer to play in it with the girls.

This break won't last long. When my family hits the hay, I'll unpack everything I bought, take labels off, and organize it into the two themes vying for first place. I sit quietly, knowing I'm tipping the scales in balancing my work and business. With one missed step, I could slide down the slippery slope.

"Listen..." Brandon starts, his head tilting to the right.

"Uh oh," I respond to his heart-to-heart tone.

"Mo, you know I'm your biggest fan. You can do some amazing things at these weddings. But seeing how much they are stressing you out worries me. You're here much more than when you worked for Janine, but you've been in a far-off place when you're home." It isn't his movie-star looks keeping us together all these years. To say Brandon has been the glue that holds our family together isn't an understatement.

"I know I've been busy, but I'll be over this hurdle in three weeks," I say with my hands up in surrender. "The Elridge wedding is the biggest client we've ever had, and I want to ensure it's perfect. It'll launch Emerald Weddings to the next level."

"Perfect? People don't need things to be perfect to have a good time."

"These people expect perfection. It needs to be memorable and big enough to make the family happy while being small enough to please Naomi."

"Even saying 'I do' is memorable. Remember how you used to say that?"

I look over our view of the river on our property, feeling the stab from his misunderstanding of what I'm going through. The pressure of this wedding is more than all my other weddings combined.

"You know you'll never be able to fully impress Janine. Even if she's halfway pleased, she won't let any of it show." Okay, so maybe he does understand. "I don't mind doing more around the house. I don't mind

picking the girls up and making dinner. I even enjoy working on the wedding setup,” he says, tilting my bowed chin to look into my eyes. It’s always this gesture that shows me he’s telling the truth. “I could forgo the takedown process.” This gives me a laugh. We all agree the hours of post-wedding clean-up are grueling. “I just hope you’ll return to normal after this wedding. ‘Normal,’” he says with air quotes.

I nod in understanding, blinking back tears, willing myself to keep the overflow of stress to myself. I don’t care if Brandon sees me cry; I don’t want to admit I can’t handle the pressure of this wedding. Allowing myself this bit of vulnerability could hinder me from moving forward.

I’ve always been this way, wanting to prove to others how I can withstand the weight of the world. It started with Aunt Edna and has yet to cease. Even a B plus in school would send her ranting for days, with her afraid of what people would think if she knew Amy and I were stupid.

“Mommy, look. I can almost beat Callie,” Mia shouts from the yard. I snap into ‘mom mode,’ knowing now is the time to be present.

“You can?” I yell back with a smile, standing at the railing. “Ready, set, go!” The girls take off through the yard, their bare feet pounding against the grass as their legs pump as hard as possible. Brandon joins me with an arm across my back. I rest my head on his shoulder, not feeling any relief from the heaviness in my life. I’m not a rocket scientist; I’m planning a wedding. But everything has a place in this world, and this is mine.

The girls beam smiles back at me as I cheer for them. It’s short-lived. My responsibilities won’t disappear until this wedding is over, no matter how many resting moments I take.



Chapter 7

A Desperate Need of Inspiration

My new norm has been burning the candle into the late-night hours. What would look like ‘frilly fun work’ on the outside are sessions where I bust my brain, wracking it to conjure masterpieces. This time of year, I turn my makeup-filled home office into what looks like an investigator’s study. Pictures of flowers, table settings, and color swatches cover the walls. I have a color-coded system of Post-Its indicating what is done versus what still needs my attention.

Unfortunately, most are dark pink, meaning I have a long way to go.

“Goodnight, Mom,” Callie says from my door. Mark scratches behind his ear, ready to snuggle in at the foot of her bed.

I jump and turn in her direction. “Goodnight, sweetie. Is Mia still in bed?” I take a couple of steps to engulf her in a much-needed hug.

“She’s already snoring like this.” Callie tilts her head and opens her mouth into a long growl of a snore. I laugh, but it does nothing to ease the decision fatigue I’ve endured tonight. “You have a lot of pink stickies,” she comments, walking over to my board in her slippers.

“Don’t I know it? Mark hasn’t been pulling his weight.” Callie laughs at my joke before turning serious.

“Maybe you don’t need to complete all the tasks,” she suggests. I raise my eyebrows, and she continues. “I’m not kidding. Are people going to know if you don’t have a design on the cake cutters? And what’s this one about getting cushy chairs? Does that matter?”

“It does!” My shocked response makes Callie giggle. “I have plans after this wedding. I want to set up a big shed on the north side of our property. Over there,” I say, pointing across the room. “I can have my own stock of tables and chairs, flatware and silverware.”

“That’d be nice. Then you wouldn’t have to make all those reservations for every wedding.”

“Exactly! This year, I had to call several places since my usual chair companies had already been hit up by the other wedding planners. Well, honey, it’s time for bed. You’re almost done with school. You’ll be in middle school next year.”

“I can’t wait!”

“I’m sorry we can’t go on our trip,” I say softly. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“It’s fine. Mia was totally freaked out about going on a plain.”

“And you?” I ask sneakily.

“I would have gone if Mia would,” she says with one eye closed to make me laugh.

“I hope you and Mia have fun helping me this summer.”

“We always do,” Callie says. She gives me a hug before leaving for bed. Her words might have said she doesn’t mind sacrificing her summer for my wedding business. Still, I know my daughter well enough to hear the disappointment in her tone.

It’s not the only thing plaguing my thoughts. Knowing I can do nothing about the vacation I botched, I trade this worry for the other one that is front and center. I have two themes running simultaneously for Naomi’s wedding, taking swings that are worse than Janine and I with our verbal jabs. Not only am I planning a huge wedding, despite what Naomi said about the guest list, but I’m also tripling up on everything for the decorations. I want to hear the ‘wow’ when Naomi’s clan enters the tents.

Amidst the dark stillness, I sit on the floor, trying to create an arrangement that Janine would be proud of. “Would Janine like this?”

I ask for the hundredth time, holding the flower arrangement up. I've tried mixing the dark red palette with the light blue one, and it looks terrible. Everything clashes as bad as sugar on scrambled eggs.

I rummage through my sticky notes, moving things around, trying to solve an endless puzzle. "I feel like I need to scratch all of my ideas!"

One of the red flowers breaks off at the stem. I watch in disbelief at the stem's betrayal as it falls to the ground. I allow my arms to fall to the ground and crumble down with them.

"This isn't working," I cry, tears spilling onto my bare legs. I scour through my plans, wondering if my talent was used up on the weddings I've done so far. I keep pushing, willing myself to come up with an answer. Not only does Naomi depend on me, but the whole town will be watching to see if I fail.

I've been trying to keep my head together to see this through. Still, the disappointment in everything from the decorations to canceling the trip takes over. Unfortunately, the flower was right; I've reached my breaking point.



AFTER THREE NIGHTS ending in a puddle of tears in the office, I decide it's time for a break. It's not a real break like the vacation we should be taking in two weeks, but I've found a way to make a working session fun by binge-watching the David Tutera show with the girls.

I've always been into makeup, like, way into it. I love the colors, the blending, and the pairing with outfits. One of my jobs at the salon is selling makeup and giving facials. Getting to know the person behind the makeup is part of the fun. Still, the job alone wasn't satisfying my girly-girl side.

And then, I planned Amy's wedding. There was color, gowns, sparkle, lights, fabrics, and hair and makeup. Emerald Weddings all started with Amy's wedding, with the challenge of bringing it all to-

gether. It sparked my love of wedding planning, and the growing business I now fear is nearly beyond my reach.

It all started when I was a little girl playing with my dolls. The toys our parents bought us before they died in an unfortunate car accident were all Amy and I had through the years. Aunt Edna brought us to Garden Valley but was hardly a stellar provider. She tried to stop us from going for our dreams, never offering one encouraging word. She couldn't stop me from watching TV when she wasn't home. Once David Tuterra stepped onto the screen, my passion was sparked.

"Are we ready, girls?" I throw the past aside, willing myself to keep an open mind. My daughters and I snuggle on the cushy white couch in our country-style living room. "I'm sorry again about canceling our trip. Maybe we can go during spring break next year."

"Maybe we can go to Hawaii," Callie suggests.

"You'd rather go to Hawaii than to Disneyland?" I ask in surprise. Both girls nod their heads. "Why?"

"The ocean is warm there!" Mia says with a surge of excitement.

"Our beaches are cold," Callie says.

"You two never cease to amaze me," I laugh. "Okay, on to the show! I can't believe I get to watch this for my job," I say, tossing Mark a piece of buttered popcorn. While I want this day to be fun, I'm ready with different colored crayons, binders, and notepads for all of us.

It'll be my biggest test to pull this wedding off for the ritzy crowd. They'll expect elegance, creativity, and pampering, and I'm determined to give it to them. A few of them, I know, will also expect me to fail. In fact, they'll be rooting for it. I'm using this as inspiration to beat Janine at this game she started with me years ago, the one rigged for her to win.

"We've got our notepads too, Mommy," Mia says with her bag of colored pencils beside her.

Their interest melts my heart. "You two are the best." I push play and divvy out the popcorn. "Let's get ready for a wedding!"

Callie and Mia are both into the girly thing, too. Callie is nearly a teenager now, with Mia three years behind her. On the weekends, they frequently work with me at the salon or home office, drawing up plans and developing themes. I've spent hours building these binders with my girls right there with me.

The show is full of creativity at its finest. It's hard not to envy someone like David, who is obviously at the top of the game. I can only hope to create a fraction of his beautiful creations. I do my best to watch on without envy but with a learning cap.

"Ugh, I can never do something so amazing!" I say with the final presentation of the reception.

"Look how many people there are to set it up, Mom," Callie says. She's always there for me with her voice of reason. "You basically do the same thing but with maybe five people."

"Hey, we help," Mia whines.

"You help for five minutes and then play with your stuffies under a table," Callie laughs.

"Eww, the kissy part!" Mia screeches, covering her eyes. "I'm not even going to kiss my husband when we get married!"

"You would think that, Mia," Callie teases.

"I don't think I've ever heard, 'You may now hug the bride,'" I laugh.

Mia sticks her tongue out, and Callie takes it as her cue to toss a piece of popcorn at her.

"You missed!" Mia screams, opening her mouth wide to give her sister another chance.

"Girls, the butter!" Mark thankfully scoops up every piece ricocheting off a tongue or mouth. It doesn't take me long to get into the popcorn game. I know my worries will be back in full swing as soon as I step into my office full of stickies, but I allow this to be fun for now.

Our time together curbs my guilt for canceling the trip. I've wanted to reschedule something but have barely had time to file my nails.

My idea meter is off the charts after we watch a few shows. We take turns presenting our doodles and notes. I jump up, ready to proclaim my final inspiration. For the moment, I relish the feeling that I've won and beaten Aunt Edna, er, Janine, at her game.

“Girls, with your help, we have a plan!”



Chapter 8

Gathering the Team

“I’m sorry I’m late!” This apology has been my mantra these last couple of weeks. “I forgot the girls had a dentist appointment. I don’t know what I was thinking when I scheduled it during the wedding season, but it’s bound to happen since they’re every six months.”

I’ve logged onto my twice-weekly Zoom call with my team, talking to my computer on the kitchen counter as I open the wedding binder that finally holds more pages. Mark follows me as I scurry through another haul of decorations the girls and I picked up before their appointment. A bag flops over, spilling red and light blue contents all over my rug. Obviously, I haven’t pulled the trigger on either design yet.

These Zoom calls are lifesavers, allowing each of my team members to stay in the comfort of their houses and all of us to meet at a convenient time. I stop fussing with the decorations and check on my connection when there is only silence. Four sets of eyes look back through the screen with worried expressions and frizzy hair. All our weddings take time and effort, but the Elridge account has a difficulty factor we’ve all been struggling with.

I beef up my inner turmoil, knowing I must stay strong for my frazzled-looking team. “So, how is everyone...”

“There’s no way I can get the arch done!” Joanie interrupts with her arms crossed. “We’ve waited until the last minute to choose a design, and I still have dozens of hours of work before it’s complete.”

It’s so unlike her to use this clipped tone of defiance. I snap into planning mode, staying calm even though I’ve had a few solo mini

freakout sessions. How can I not? Janine's judgmental side never rests, nagging at me even when she's not around, just as it did when I worked for her.

"Just do what you always do, Joanie. If you can add a subtle snowflake design to it, even better. We drape the arch with tulle and flowers anyway." It's one of the many fires I've put out. This is our last week to get everything together, and we're nowhere near ready. My joyous, confident team has become a big stress ball, bringing about frantic and near-panicked sessions.

"You try and find snow designs in July," Leslie complains when it's her turn to give an update. "You've barely given me anything to go on with decorations, Monica, and I feel like I'm not helping at all."

"You're helping so much with the other weddings. Try and order something with snowflakes," I instruct, pacing in my living room. With the girls playing upstairs, I can't lose my cool. I've promised Brandon things will calm down after this wedding. I've ruined our trip and have taken up most of our summer.

"We only have six days! We don't have enough time to order anything at this point. Maybe we should do the other theme, the one Janine wants," Leslie says, so close to the screen that I can see her nostrils flare. "We already have all of those decorations." I've never seen them like this, pushing back and nearly giving up.

"What does she mean, the other team?" Zooney asks. Zooney is our graphic artist who makes up the invites and place cards for seating arrangements. She probably has the least amount of time in the weddings, but her skills still help.

"Monica's decided. Haven't you, Mo?" Bailey asks in a worried tone.

"I haven't decided which theme to do yet," I say quietly, hating how I have yet to make this decision.

The screen erupts in a flurry of excitement. Comments such as 'What?' and 'You might want to get on it!' filter to me, only heighten-

ing my anxiety about making this decision. With everyone taking their own piece of the wedding, the colors and theme affect them all.

“Maybe I should flip a coin,” I say calmly, even though my chest has erupted into another round of tightness.

“Monica, you’re planning two weddings. I thought Mindy was joking when I heard it from her,” Amy says.

“How does Mindy know?” I ask. “She’s a veterinarian, for crying out loud.”

“This is Garden Valley, hon,” Joanie comments. “Everyone knows everything. Being the newbie in town, I should know. Mindy probably knows the type of toothpaste you use.”

“Isn’t it Colgate?” Zooney asks.

“No, she thinks it’s too spicy,” Bailey replies.

“For crying out loud!” I shout.

“Let us help you more,” Amy says. Her quiet nature hushes the rest of the group, her words settling in with them. Instead of getting angry, they switch to voices of reason.

“That sounds hard,” Zooney says with a tilt of her head.

“How are you even dealing with the pressure?” Leslie asks.

“You must be going nuts!” Joanie says.

“I’m doing okay.” I flop on a chair in front of the computer, my head falling into my hands. Either I do the design Janine and her mom are demanding or the one that will bring Naomi’s dream wedding to life,” I explain.

“Seems like a no-brainer to me,” Leslie says bluntly, pulling a sucker from her mouth and pointing it at the camera. “We’re in this for the bride,” she says, changing her tune from a minute ago to one of support.

“Yeah, but this is the type of family who won’t pay us if they don’t get what they want,” Amy says, hitting it on the head.

“Even worse, I don’t want to make Naomi’s family life even harder.” I haven’t wanted to bring them into my struggles, bearing this burden on my own. I have to admit, it’s nice to get their opinions.

My need to please Janine is like a disease eating at me inside. It's not only that. I'm still holding onto the hope that this wedding will bring us more business. "We have time if you order something today, Leslie. We really need the fake snow," I smile, returning to planning. "You all need to be strong and stay in your own lanes. Do what you do best with the cakes, Paige. I'm sorry. Trying to make four huge cakes and have them stay fresh will be difficult. Leslie, it would help me a lot if you could keep tabs on the flatware to ensure we get enough. Brandon is on the lights, and I'm doing the rest."

"Monica, I can help you with the decorations," Bailey offers.

"Nah, I'm doing okay," I lie, hoping they can't see the dark circles under my eyes from my late nights. I cringe when I see my reflection on the screen. My hair is an absolute mess, and I've never seen myself with mascara smeared across my cheekbone.

"Do we even have the dress yet?" Amy asks.

"I have it on my list to pick it up tomorrow. Alterations took a while."

"Bad news," Zooley says, going along with the doom and gloom theme when it's her turn. She has a small part in the weddings, but every little bit counts. "The Gibsons are out sick, so the name tags for the place settings won't get done unless we do them ourselves. We finally got a list of guests from Janine. I don't have a printer good enough to print thick cardstock, especially if we need to print three hundred tags."

It's time to think. It's time to improvise. This thing can potentially explode like an overstuffed pillow if I can't wrap my arms around it tightly enough. So far, we've all managed fine with the other weddings this season. We each have designated jobs that ultimately come together to form a beautifully complete wedding. It's true that I orchestrate the events and have most of the tasks, but with this wedding, we are out of tune, screeching our instruments to a clunky melody.

My breath catches in my throat, my pulse skyrocketing with the demands. This isn't a huge dilemma, but enough to tip the scales. I'm mortified when tears spill from my eyes, wanting to shove them back in. Brandon comes out of nowhere and rests his hands on my shoulders.

"Aw, Monica, it's okay," Bailey says, "we're here for you. Tell us what we should do."

"Ladies," Brandon says, "I think it's time for a work session."

"Yes!" Leslie says after a moment of silence.

"We can meet here at the complex," Amy offers. She works at the apartment complex that serves as our venue, and she and her family also have a house on the property. "My sewing supplies are here so I can work on the dress, and we have a good printer."

"It's a good suggestion," I agree, grabbing Brandon's hand. "We can spread out in your living room and see everything in one place."

"Slumber party at Aunt Amy's!" Mia yells in the background. It's another reason I've kept my cool; little ears always listen.

"Sounds like fun to me," Leslie chimes, ever the party girl. Cheers bounce off my ears, giving me the hope to keep going.

Among everything else, I'm on the centerpieces, which will push me to my creative limits. This is my moment to shine in front of the many wealthy and elite eyes watching. The bags under my eyes are only one of the many sacrifices I'm more than willing to make.

Amy stays on the call after everyone else has agreed to their assignments. "I don't need to ask how you're really doing. I haven't seen you this frazzled in a while."

"Nothing gets past you, sis."

"I practically invented the fake smile. Listen, Mo, they're asking for the impossible, and you can only do your best."

"What if it's not good enough?"

"Aunt Edna isn't here to judge anymore."

"Aunt Edna. Where did that come from?"

“I hear her disappointed voice sometimes, too,” Amy says quietly. “Remember how she sent me to my room without dinner when I got an A minus? I think she just didn’t want to see me. We’re adults now. We have each other and can put it all behind us.”

“I know,” I sigh. “You’re right. I need to do the best I can.”

“That’s not what I said. I said you’re already doing your best and need to give yourself credit.”

One thing is for sure. Amy doesn’t understand the pressure building up while being under Janine’s laser eyes.



AFTER OUTWARDLY SHOWING my inner turmoil, Brandon whisks me away for dinner at a nearby restaurant by the lake. Amy and her family were excited to watch Callie and Mia for us. Amy continued my therapy session, grasping my hands in worry and telling me to take my time tonight.

The moon sparks a romantic evening. It’s a late dinner but warm enough to eat outside.

“You’ll get over these hurdles. I remember seeing those long legs jump over them in high school track.” Brandon, my unwavering supporter.

The lights, ambiance, and other couples enjoying their time keep the wedding at the forefront of my mind. “This is why I do it, to give people a special moment. It’s not just for the bride and groom. People remember these big events, and I want everyone to have a good time.” I’m fooling myself with these responses. It’s all true, but I’d love to show Janine what I can do.

Alice herself stops at our table. I bite my tongue to stop myself from telling her to keep her nose out of my business. “Hi, Monica,” she says with a sneaky look. “How’s the wedding planning going?”

“It’s good, Alice, thanks,” I chirp.

“Be sure to treat that Elridge family well. We could all benefit from this if you play it right. We’ve been wanting to drum up more tourist business in town,” she sings, thankfully returning to her seat.

“Well, if Alice knows...”

“The whole town does,” Brandon finishes for me. “Her gossiping roots run deep! Do you really think Janine and her mom won’t approve because of a color?”

“Says the man who can basically only see shades of gray.”

“I sure liked it when you read the *Fifty Shades of Gray* book to me,” he says, running his hand up my thigh.

Yikes!

“Yes, they’ll absolutely disapprove of my decorations if I choose wrong!”

“I know. It’s a tough place to be in, Lover,” he says, taking a bite of his steak. I pick up my fork, willing myself to enjoy my chicken marsala. “Do you know what Mia said to me the other night at dinner?” he asks with a chuckle. “You weren’t home yet, so we got started on dinner early. She saw that I had my burger in my right hand and my fries in my left, and she said, ‘Your left hand must be a vegetarian.’”

I laugh along with him, loving how my kids’ minds work. “That’s hilarious!”

“It’s good to hear you laugh. I know you work hard at your business.”

“I wonder who I get that from?” I say, pressing my bottom lip with my finger and giving him a sneaky smile. Brandon owns a construction company and works harder than anyone I know. “I’m doing the best I can, and it’s hard because I don’t think Janine is capable of enjoying anything.”

“In that case, what does it matter which palette you choose?” he asks.

I pause and think through this thought. “There’s a brain behind those good looks,” I say, sitting back, wishing it could be as easy as he

thinks. I need to appease the elite Elridge's, give Naomi sort of a dream wedding without making life harder for her, and I need to make sure the town benefits from my decision and skills.

Brandon twirls my red hair while keeping his gaze on me. He always has been the more romantic one between us. "The girls are lucky to have your good looks. They only got my dimples."

"I have dimples, just not in places where I want them," I say, lightly tracing the divots in his cheek.

"Dance?" Brandon asks, nodding to the dark corner of the balcony. With the guilt from canceling the trip still bringing me down, and the wedding heavy on my mind, I want nothing more than for him to hold me and shield me from my worries.

And that's precisely what happens as we sway in the moonlight on the restaurant deck. His body is firm yet gentle as he guides me to the music. Our kisses bring me back to when I wasn't drained from sleep and poster boards full of sticky notes. I'm supposed to have fun with this business, not be stressed to the max. I silently vow to calm down, reminding myself I don't have to do it all; I just have to do what's right.



Chapter 9

The Untimely Storm

“I’m sorry I’m late!” I say, flying into Amy’s house with Mark and the girls in tow. “I swear, other weddings this summer have gobbled up all the lilies. I’ve called all the flower shops on the west coast. No one has anything. Maybe they aren’t in season,” I say, setting my things down and flipping the hair out of my face. Amy’s and Jason’s isn’t the largest house, but the log style cabin and everything in it offers a cozy feel for our gathering.

Amy’s two kids are already playing with Zoocy’s little boys. They gather Callie and Mia and scurry off to the back bedrooms, where make-believe and imagination will rule their lives. I long for those days to be a carefree kid. It wasn’t in the cards for me to have this upbringing past ten years old. The stress in my life started early when I was in charge of shielding Amy from Aunt Edna’s wrath. Still, it made me the person I am today, the type of person who can take on people like Janine and still have the upper hand.

At least, I think that’s what I’m doing.

“Naomi is allergic to lilies, Monica,” Bailey says from the kitchen. She’s using Leslie’s thick hair to practice the hairstyle she’ll be doing on Naomi. At the same time, Leslie works on putting together the chocolate boxes we’re passing out to all the guests the day after tomorrow.

“What?” I ask in confusion, remembering Janine insisting on lilies. My shoulders drop in exasperation at falling for her prank.

“One person in our class brought her a bouquet once, and she sneezed the whole class. Remember that day, Leslie? She had us do braids until our fingers were sore,” Bailey says.

I push Janine’s mini-sabotage aside, needing to be in the moment. It’s not unlike her to mix tricks and bribes with a full helping of insults to get what she wants.

One look around shows everyone hard at work. Amy is settled into her recliner with a container of blue beads resting on a TV tray. “Lilly did this whole section,” she boasts, lifting a portion of the white dress from her legs.

“She’s every bit as good of a seamstress as you are.”

“Are you hungry?” Bailey asks, giving me a warm hug. There’s no better way to motivate my team than snacks and David Tutera’s shows playing in the background. I recognize Bailey’s plastic containers and casserole dishes full of food. It’s her way of apologizing for giving me attitude earlier.

“I’m good,” I say with a squeeze of her hand, catering to my tense stomach’s need to be empty for now.

My team is working away, yet still showing the stress we’ve all been feeling. I’m walking a tightrope between two options and they know it. Janine wants it one way, Naomi another. One theme will more than likely bring me referrals. I’ll be the talk of the wealthy community. This option has a steep price: the bride’s happiness, which is my mission statement. This option will likely bring out Naomi’s smile again. Yet, this could cost me my business and possibly make life even more complicated for her.

“Blue beads, huh?” Amy says mischievously.

“We have two dresses,” I say with my hands up and shaking my head to indicate this isn’t the final plan.

Zoey and Leslie are working away at Amy’s dining room table with the chocolate boxes, cardstock, a laptop, and Amy’s printer. Joanie is practically pacing a dent in the hardwood floor. She’s peering through

Amy's oversized windows overlooking the expansive green grass of the complex, waiting for her arch to be delivered. Paige and Willow brought their supplies over with sketch pads ready for my instruction on what to design.

This gathering is intended to be uplifting. Yet, within minutes of being here, I can feel their nerves pulsating around the room. Everyone is talking with such nervousness that I'm surprised the lights aren't flickering.

"Ladies, I have something to say," I say, standing in front of the room at Amy's house, clutching the wedding binder to my middle. I should feel confident in my white capris paired with a strappy red tank top, but lately, I've been second-guessing even when I have to go to the bathroom. "I know there's a lot of pressure for this wedding to be grandiose. I'm so grateful for all of you being here today. I honestly couldn't have gotten all of this done myself."

It's the truth, too. This wedding has tipped me into the crazy category. Late nights of scouring my mind for creativity have caused me to oversleep, miss meetings, and forget practically everything Brandon has told me about the progress of the tent.

"It's been hard, and you've helped so much with the other weddings. Zooley, your graphic design skills for the invitations and table place cards are the best I've ever seen. Paige and Willow, when Janine said everyone looks forward to the wedding cake, she was right. Everything that comes out of your bakery is top-notch. Leslie and Bailey, your design savvy is as good as mine." I flip my messy hair to the giggles around the room. "And Amy, allowing us to use the facilities is priceless. Well, not really, since we pay a fee. But it's worth it. I know other people in town help too..."

"Like Leslie's chair Beau," Zooley says with a sneaky voice.

"Ooohhhh," the rest of us coo.

"Oh, stop it. Paul probably doesn't know I exist," Leslie says with a bit of an edge.

“Please, with your style and beautiful hair...” Bailey says.

“Um, there’s my nails, too,” Leslie says, holding her perfectly manicured hand up with a different kitty design on each nail. It gives us all a laugh. I’m grateful for the dedicated friends around me. At the beginning of this business, we created contractual percentages for all of us to make from these weddings. I hadn’t factored in the rest of the town counting on us, and am not allowing it to muddy the waters even more. If all goes well, we’ll benefit big from this one!

“We need to get more brides on board this wedding train,” Amy says, looking at the bachelorettes in the room as she throws out the short train on the dress.

“She’s talking about us,” Leslie says, nudging Zooley.

“What? Nope, I’m not interested,” Zooley says defiantly. “Been there, done that, and happy to have the round anvil off me.” Zooley traces her right fingertips around her left ring finger. I don’t know her whole story, but apparently, she had a messy divorce.

“You mean you’re not interested at all in getting remarried?” Bailey asks Zooley and Paige astoundingly as they shake their heads.

“It’s the boys and me, and I’m happy,” Zooley says. She lives here at the apartment complex and seems to enjoy a simple life with her two sons.

“Not me,” Leslie says. “I’d love someone to come home and give me some sugar every night.” It’s the laugh we’ve needed to calm the air.

Voices filter in from outside, interrupting our girl talk. We run over to the window, lean on the couch, and spy on four men carrying stacks of wood across the lawn.

“Speaking of sugar, look at the rump on him!” growls Leslie. The rest of us let out a hoot or howl. My eyes are glued to Brandon, remembering how he skillfully made me forget about my worries last night.

“It’s the wood for my arch!” Joanie yells before running outside. She’s started three arches for this wedding but hasn’t been happy. I told

her what she had would work, but she insisted on making something special.

“It’s Kenichi!” Bailey says, sprinting after Joanie.

“Is Paul here?” Leslie asks with a deep inhale. All five of us turn with wide grins to look at her. “I think he’s cute, so sue me!”

“You’re allowed,” I say, patting her back before using it to push off the couch. “Let’s get to work!”

We get in the swing of things, making progress every minute. Lilly takes a break from playing with the kids so she and Amy can sew together. They chat about an upcoming family trip that I can’t help but be envious of. Zoocy prints the table seating cards for the three hundred and twelve guests. Joanie builds the arch with the guys outside, Bailey practices on Zoocy’s short blonde and pink hair while watching tutorials on her phone, and Willow and Paige pipe frosting until their hands are sore.

I’ve made two complete sets of centerpieces. Ultimately, the theme with the squeakiest wheel will win, and Janine is the noisiest. In this case, bigger is better, and I’ve taken tips from the king of wedding planning himself, David Tutera. I’ve added more, more, more to this wedding to make it big and classy at the same time.

After everyone’s assembly stations are set up, I head outside with Mark to get Brandon’s status on the tents. Watching my dog romp through the grass does nothing to settle my racing mind this time.

I’ve been praying I can bring my unconventional ideas to life. If anyone can help, it’s Brandon. He’s as supportive as a corset. I’ve had some outlandish styling designs, which Brandon has almost always been able to manifest into reality.

With so many guests on the list, we’ve added a second tent, moved the dance floor, and added dozens more tables for all the guests. The extra space means double the decorating and triple the flourish.

"This better be worth it," I mutter from the guilt of canceling our summer vacation. "Do you think this will work?" I ask, biting my lip and flipping through the wedding binder.

Brandon stops his work on one of the outlets and turns slightly to give me a questioning glance. The look stirs my stomach, grounding me in our roots from high school. "You're talking about me here, babe."

"True." One thing that attracted me to Brandon was his MacGuyver-like brilliance. He hardly has to think through a problem and always comes up with a clever solution. He troubleshoots until the issue is resolved, keeping his composure even-keeled the entire time.

One thing he can't fix is the weather.

A distant flash alerts me to the dark, ominous clouds building over the horizon. It's our signature summer cumulus buildup, preceded by a signature gust of wind that pulls in the storm.

"The forecast didn't call for a thunderstorm," I mumble, checking my phone. "Darn it! A warning has just been issued." Thunder rumbles in the distance as a warm wind rushes through my hair. Persistent clouds move in closer with a promise of ruining all outdoor activities. "We need to button up the tent!"

Half a dozen of us scurry around to close tent flaps and move tables and chairs to the center of the floor. We shuttle what we can inside Amy's house. In less than an hour, the thunderstorm is on top of us. The lightning is so fierce that the ground beneath us shakes. Brandon insists our team huddle inside Amy's home until the storm passes. I watch helplessly as the wind rushes through the tents, dousing them with hail and rain.

"The whole place is taking a beating," I moan with my forehead against a door frame, watching as the curtains at the entrances flutter in the wind. "I bet the whole inside is getting soaked!"

"These tents are made to withstand the weather. It will be okay, Lover," he assures. Brandon's smile typically lights up my day, but now I want to smack the optimism off his clean-shaven face.

“Look at how horrible I am at tying knots! Everything came undone with the first gust. I’m surprised my shoelaces stay together,” I yell above the pounding rain on Amy’s roof.

“It’s only Thursday. We’ll have plenty of time to fix whatever damage is done before Saturday.” He wraps his arms around me from behind, offering much-needed comfort. Over the last two months, I’ve let him down, choosing to dedicate my time to weddings instead of my family. Yes, the girls are with me often and genuinely love everything to do with weddings. They might not have noticed a lack of me physically, but I know I’ve been mentally absent.

Twenty-five minutes later, the storm moves on to crash someone else’s plans. I rush outside to inspect the tent when the rain has slowed, not caring if the sprinkles splash off my makeup.

“Yup, this will cost me a lot of time,” I growl. The hanging decorations we couldn’t bring inside are droopy and soaked, several lights are haphazardly dangling from the ceiling, and the electrical part of the storm knocked the power out. An inch of water lay atop the floors Brandon and his team built. Only the very center of the tents has remained dry.

“It’s not too bad,” Brandon says, tinkering with the lights.

“Not too bad? It looks like a tornado hit this place.” I pick a leaf from my hair, knowing it has fallen as flat as this disappointment. “I can just hear my speech. Guess what? We made this an ultra-realistic water-themed wedding.” My voice takes on that of tour guide Barbie, complete with the most fake smile I can spread. Brandon laughs, discarding my frantic state. “I don’t see what’s so funny!”

“You’ve had challenges before and always got through them.”

I plop in one of the chairs in the middle of the tent, figuring it to be dry. “Nope,” I mumble, looking at my wet bum. This wedding has been a disaster, not just because some decorations are ruined. It feels like this one issue is staining the whole ordeal. It’s like when the kitchen is a mess and it feels like the entire house needs a detailed cleaning.

I fold over in defeat, ready to add tears to the wet table. How come being involved with Janine means giving so much of myself? I've told myself I won't return to the Monica I was when I worked for her. So far, I've failed miserably, but underneath the guilt is still the drive to impress and succeed.

Brandon kneels beside me with a hand on my leg. "You'll get through this. I know you will. It's supposed to be hot tomorrow, which is enough time to dry this out. I can bring my big fans in, too. Look at it this way: it's better this storm happened now instead of this weekend," Brandon says, rubbing my shoulders.

"Oh my gosh, is it supposed to rain this weekend?" I shout, frantically flipping to my weather app. "Good, it's not." Usually, I'm on top of the weather, but my mind has been so scattered lately, and I've let this slip. I look around, disappointment settling in so hard it has the potential to push me toward quitting. "I've gotta clean this up, or Janine will be on the moisture scent like a fly on poop."

"I thought your goal has always been to make the bride happy," Brandon says with a sneaky glance that always makes me second-guess my actions.

"There's a fat chance I'll pull it off with this wedding," I reply, knowing I've ditched my mission statement this one and only time. Catering to Janine and proving to her that I can do this is the reward I'm after, which will make this whole thing worthwhile.



Chapter 10

The Dress Rehearsal

My whole purpose of running Emerald Weddings has been thrown into a spiral. I'm banking on my confidence to spring back to life, looping me back to my initial passion once this is over.

The wave of judgment approaching is about as unwelcome as a tsunami. I want this wedding to be better than perfect if such a thing exists. I've been teetering between wanting to push full force and wanting to give up. I've kept this under wraps, careful not to scare my team into a frenzy. I need them to give it their all, not feed from my uncertainty. I admit it's a lonely place to be, locked in this chamber where my drive to succeed is the method of torture.

Today holds the frenzied last-minute preparations but lacks the excitement we usually have for the bride and groom. We've planned an entire wedding for a silent bride, her sister throwing her elbows into the mix to take the lead. It's something even my best-planned-out binders don't have a solution for. Not only that, but Alice and Pricilla are decided to be spectators at the last night of preparations at the venue. They're here with their group of gossips, adding pressure to the pot that's already at its max.

My phone jingles in the back pocket of my shorts. "Hello?" I answer on the fourth ring.

"Monica, where are you?" Naomi scolds.

"I'm getting ready for your wedding tomorrow. Where are you?" I ask playfully, looking around the venue. It's just twenty-four hours before the Elridge wedding, and my team and I are picking up the pieces

in the storm's aftermath. It's like Janine showed up the size of Godzilla, flinging the decorations around in a rage. We've frantically been putting chairs up, making the place look like a florist shop, stringing more lights, and setting tables.

"I'm getting ready for the rehearsal! You're supposed to be here to help me with my makeup!" she says in a panicked voice.

My team has always been invited to the rehearsal dinner, but not with this wedding. *Why do I have to rehearse walking down an aisle?* Naomi snipped during one of our clipped calls.

"Everyone has questions about the wedding, and I have no idea what to say!"

"I'm not exactly dressed for..."

"Dinner starts in less than an hour. *Please* try and get here!" she demands before hanging up. I allow my arm to fall, the rest of my body following suit.

"What's wrong, Lover?" Brandon asks from the ladder.

"Naomi wants me at the rehearsal dinner ASAP! I don't have time to..."

"Go ahead, we can do this," Bailey says from several tables over. She's been tying tulle to the columns, arranging flowers, and setting tables all afternoon. Despite her qualms with Naomi, I've got to hand it to her for digging in and helping.

"Are you sure? It doesn't help that you have an audience," I say, gesturing to Alice's group.

"I'll put them to work!" Bailey says.

I give myself a second to look at the work of art we have created. If it weren't for an aura of doubt surrounding me, I'd be able to enjoy it fully. This place looks impressive, with mile-high centerpieces and lights enveloping every square inch. It's in the undesirable red, but it can't all be perfect.

Everything we've done will be tested tomorrow. This is the day when the 'we' is stripped away, leaving only me, myself, and I to vulner-

ably stand naked in front of the firing squad. This is when I display my hard work towards the event. Normally I do this with pride and cheer, but I feel nothing of the sort this time.

I wring my fingers, praying I've chosen the correct theme. Despite going with the mother's wishes, I still wonder if we'll get paid or, worse, shunned. More important is the question of whether or not Janine will like what we've done. I'm convinced tomorrow's elite guests will sneer at our shortcomings.

I turn my hopeful eyes to Brandon, wishing he could take my worries, if just for the next twenty-four hours.

"Come on," he says, wrapping an arm around my hot, sticky shoulders. He has stood by me with this crazy wedding, even though it ruined our vacation plans and has taken the little extra time he has in the day after working. "Let's go home and get ready. We'll pretend it's a date."

Amy doesn't mind watching Callie and Mia, my two little angels. I give them a big hug before we leave. "Don't forget to watch after Mark!"

Once we get home, I rinse off in the shower, give my hair a quick blowout, and grab my makeup bag for the ride. We slide into our best clothes and are out the door in under fifteen minutes. The forty-five-minute drive means I can brush on a full face of makeup and tame my red tresses before we get to the five-star restaurant.

"Is that Naomi?" I ask, eyeing the woman pacing in the valet parking area.

"You go ahead. I'll catch up after the lecture," Brandon says, pulling in front to drop me off.

"Gee, thanks," I say, grabbing my purse and jumping out of the truck.

"There you are!" Naomi shouts, rushing to me. Her chocolatey eyes are full of desperation where I expected to see anger for my late arrival. She clutches my elbow as she speaks, looking ready to crumble. I feel her pain as I'm about ready to pour myself into a bucket as well. "I hate

this part of the whole thing,” she says, reminding me she’s gone through this twice before. She’s been in this spot but hasn’t taken the next step, the one leading her down the aisle of no return. Her comment makes me wonder if she might run again. “Everyone is asking about the wedding.”

“What have you said?”

“I said I needed to meet you out here almost an hour ago. What a surprise; no one has come to check on me.” Her sarcastic tone ups the curiosity I have for this evening. Being on Janine’s home turf should shed more light on what’s happening behind the scenes in Naomi’s life. I’ve had a sneaky suspicion about something hidden driving my bride to say ‘I do.’

“I’ll take care of the questions, but I can only be vague. I have surprises I can’t give away.” I ditch my doubt and say this with a mixture of happiness, hoping it’ll transfer to the woman who should be elated about her big day tomorrow.

Naomi sighs and turns to me. “I’m sorry. I know this has been hard for you, having to deal with Janine’s ‘help,’” she says, making air quotes.

“It hasn’t been easy,” I reply. “And I was hoping you could help me decide something.”

“Sorry, I took so long. I had to park across the street,” Brandon interrupts.

“I don’t think you’ve officially met my husband. Naomi, this is Brandon.”

“Okay, nice. Let’s go in,” Naomi says, cutting off the rest of my introduction. Naomi turns and stomps inside, holding herself differently than when I first saw her poised posture. She leans forward and walks with her arms swinging as if she’s in a speed-walking contest.

Brandon shrugs. I hold my hand up and whisper, “Don’t cry, hon. I know it’s not the usual greeting you get from women.” Brandon shines like a ball of light to the opposite gender. He’s six foot three and filled with broad muscle. A handsome face and wide, charming smile round

out his hunkiness. I used to go wild with jealousy upon every glance aimed his way. After years of building trust and finally believing Brandon's loving words, I take satisfaction in the attention of other women. After all, I'm the one who gets to go to bed with him every night.

We follow Naomi through a quintessential five-star lobby with high ceilings and a large chandelier. Aged leather furniture and an impressive water feature round out the high-end vibe. There's no time to gawk at the billowing bouquets or velvet Chesterfield couches in front of the sizable fireplace. I whisper to Brandon to remind me to take a few pictures before we leave for my wedding binders.

Naomi stands outside a set of double doors with her hands folding over themselves. "I doubt you'll be ready for this," she warns. "Prepare for the grilling of a lifetime."

Fear swirls in my stomach as I glance at Brandon with uncertainty. I pride myself on being able to hold my own, but time after time, I've realized I'm no match for Janine. Now, I must face a whole room of El-ridge's!

"Don't worry, I'm here," Brandon whispers. "You look beautiful in your so-called green dress and have your sass to rely on." He gives me a wink, but it does little to dampen the feeling of walking into a lion's den. Even the sassiest of people are allowed a twinge of anxiety here and there.

We enter a private room with at least fifty people dressed to the nines. The guests are serenaded by a live classical pianist, making me wonder if I should have hired live performers for the wedding. A dozen waiters deliver drinks and appetizers. Several people look our way, and some whisper behind glasses of red or white wine. I clutch Brandon's arm, hoping to glean support from him. I can usually do fine with a group as long as the focus isn't solely on me.

It doesn't go unnoticed how the decorations are dark red and beige, which Janine requested for the wedding. Tall columns and low lighting create a rich atmosphere. I'm wildly out of place as I take in the se-

quined evening gowns and bow ties at the table. Jonathan jumps up when he sees Naomi, ready to greet his bride. He attempts to put his arm around her waist, but she shrugs away. Her tense posture shows how much this wedding is weighing on her.

Naomi introduces me to a few of her family members with the lackluster energy of a sloth. I barely have any energy of my own, but I keep smiling, trying to transfer some cheer to her.

At her parent's request, we sit for dinner, with Brandon on my right and Naomi on my left. Servers scurry around, filling glasses with water and champagne while others take dinner orders. Naomi fusses with the napkin on her lap, shifting her eyes from one person to the next. No one around the large table pays any attention to her.

Isn't this the whole evening for her?

Her nervous energy transfers to me, making me feel sorry for her. I gently rest my hand on her forearm and lean toward her. "Are you okay?" I ask quietly. She looks at me with large eyes full of the desperation I saw outside. She nods but stays quiet.

Five rapid taps against a glass quiet the talkative crowd. My eyes don't take long to spot Janine standing, holding her wine glass high. Janine, with her fat-free body and chiseled face, with her usual 'I'm better than you' expression. Her features look exceptionally sharp in a dark blue dress that hugs her flat waist, her toned arms bronzed to the likeness of a hard metal statue. At this moment, I find it hard to believe I once envied this woman.

"We're here tonight to finally celebrate my sister Naomi's wedding," she starts with a haughty tone. "She's marrying Jonathan, who I've never been sure of, but at least he's stayed." Some people chuckle at the ultra-rude comment while I'm hit with confusion. "I never thought we'd get here, sis." Janine offers with a rise of her glass.

"What the hell kind of speech was that?" I whisper to Brandon. This should be a speech of celebration and praise.

But Janine isn't done. Her eyes are glued to mine as her face morphs into a conniving sneer I know well. "And her wedding planner joins us tonight. Monica, why don't you say a few words about what you have in store for us tomorrow?"

"If we even make it to the wedding venue," someone off to my right roars.

I look at Brandon and then Naomi, wondering if Janine is serious about this request. I'd be lying if I said this crowd wasn't getting to me.

I stand and lightly smooth my satin emerald green dress. It's my go-to color that makes my red hair and fair skin pop. It usually gives my confidence a boost. I remember this now, as all eyes are on me.

"Planning the wedding for Naomi and Jonathan..." Crap, what do I say? "has given me such joy. I've planned several weddings, but Naomi's has proven excitingly challenging." What am I even saying?

"Can you promise she'll go through with it this time?" a woman shouts. I look to my left, trying to find the person who said these words.

"You might want to make sure she doesn't bring tennis shoes," a man to my right yells.

Is Naomi's family heckling her? It reminds me of the taunts from the *Runaway Bride* movie. I suddenly feel defensive for my bride. I pause and give a thoughtful yet harsh look at the hecklers across the table. It's not my place to put them in theirs, though someone at this table needs to stand up for the bride.

"Naomi and Jonathan are very excited about their wedding. And you should be, too. It'll be like nothing you've ever seen." I take a seat without permission, hoping I can follow through with this promise. My mind runs through the venue, flipping through the variations of decorations, seating arrangements, food, and these 'surprises' I'm promising. I have no idea if it will be enough to satisfy this crowd. It's nearly too late to make changes; what we've done is all I have to offer.

More criticisms follow my short speech. Things such as 'She won't be Lonely Naomi anymore,' 'We'll see if she stays Gloomy Nao-omi,'

and other rhyming words. I don't know this woman very well, but it doesn't take a detective to see the sadness in her eyes.

A woman next to Jonathan reaches across him and squeezes Naomi's arm with a comforting smile. I suspect this is one of Naomi's other sisters. She shares the same warm brown eyes and long lashes as Naomi. I feel more at ease knowing Naomi has at least one family member on her side.

Janine's effort to put me on the spot fuels my fire to prove myself even more. This is my niche, and this account will prove I can do a high-end wedding.

Unless you fail.

Aunt Edna's voice plays like a record whenever I allow a shard of doubt into my life. I've worked hard over the years to bury her verbal abuse, but apparently, a crack in my shield has allowed it through.

"I said this to the person who took my order, but you need to know too." Mrs. Elridge's voice rings through the crowd's murmur, tightening my stomach with her requests. "You brought the relish trays out much too early. I want the appetizers to come out first. Do not serve the soup and salad until we finish our appetizers. Take the appetizers away when we are done, and give us five minutes before you serve the soup and salad. I don't know if you normally offer a bread basket, but I haven't seen one. I suggest you start kneading some dough. When we finish the soup and salad, I want six minutes before the entrees come out. Do not bring the entrees out with the salad, appetizers, or soup. Do you understand?" Her small eyes don't waver a millimeter from the poor young guy who is somehow withstanding the verbal beating. It's a small comfort to know she wasn't singling me out when she chewed me out at the dress boutique.

Naomi's dad isn't much better. He's been squirming in his seat since I've been here, grumbling about something or other with a sour look. "Do you think they purposely found the most uncomfortable chairs they could?"

Brandon scrunches his mouth and gives two nods, showing he, too, is taking it all in. Naomi's family, however, doesn't appear surprised at all. It's a typical day amongst the wealthy yet flawed Elridge clan.

I can't tear my eyes from Mrs. Elridge. The display before me is a preview of how she'll behave at tomorrow's wedding, which I've painstakingly planned. "I don't want this side of the table to get their food without the other side getting theirs. I don't care what you must do; gather all your staff to deliver it simultaneously."

I type out a message on my phone hidden under the table. *Ladies, be prepared for the judgment of a lifetime tomorrow!*



IN THE 'SIX-MINUTE break' before our entrees come out, Naomi excuses herself for the restroom. I give her a few beats before following, apologizing to Brandon for leaving him alone. As usual, he's made friends with the man next to him. The two have been talking business the entire evening as if they've known each other for years.

I find Naomi in the sitting room adjoined to the bathroom, standing in front of the full-length mirror. She stares motionless at herself. It's the day before her wedding, and she's frowning. It's always a frown that I now understand stems from her closest family members.

"I'm glad you are here tonight," she starts. "I invited you because I wanted you to be prepared. You saw how my mother ordered. You saw how she was at the dress shop. She's like this with everything. It's nearly impossible to please her... unless you're Janine." Her last words are a whisper, making me wonder if she's even talking to me anymore. "And my father complains about everything. No one in this world can do anything right in his eyes."

"The rest of your family seem good," I say. The rhyming comments about Naomi being a runaway bride were rude but jovial. The rest of the dinner conversation has been boisterous, with plenty of laughter.

“They barely know I’m here. It doesn’t matter what they think. My mom is the one in charge. This wedding isn’t for me, it’s for my parents. It’s yet another excuse for them to flaunt their wealth. They did it with my sisters and cousins when they got married. I’ve dreaded being this person for them, but it’s what they require. I’ve tried to get married twice before...” She looks down at her hands with quivering lips. Her vulnerability brings me closer to her, this rawness tearing a piece of her open, allowing me in. “Those other guys my mother set me up with weren’t my type. I thought I could go through it and just get it over with. To get my mother to finally leave me alone.”

“And is Jonathan your type?” I say this with delicacy. I don’t want her to run this time, but I also want to help her to be happy, not sign her into a life of misery.

She nods, the hint of her first smile of the evening on her lips. “He is. He’s a good friend, and we have fun together. He’s nothing like the men my parents have set me up with. He sticks up for me in smaller settings and makes me laugh, which isn’t always a cakewalk. I’m not the easiest person to love, but he’s found a way, even when I am being a ‘Gloomy Na-oomi.’” Her words seem to be as much of a motivation for herself to walk down the aisle as they are for me to be on point with everything else.

I run with it, allowing myself a slight chuckle that builds into a carefree laugh. She slouches into a genuine smile, finally being at ease in my presence. Gone is the stress that tomorrow holds, even if for a brief moment. It’s the bonding I’ve craved, and Naomi’s laugh also confirms this for her.

“My mother has set me up with dozens of men over the years. I didn’t connect with any of them,” she says, her hands framing her forehead. “I want to marry Jonathan. You’ve seen him when he’s putting up a front. He’s just trying to get my family to approve of him. He’s so goofy and fun in private. I wish it weren’t such a push from my parents, but I want it to happen. I’m sorry if this has been hard working with

Janine. I've been involved in my other weddings, and they became too overwhelming. Everything got so big and out of control. I didn't want to be scared off this time."

Finally, it's the explanation I've been needing! Naomi *has* purposefully ignored me, shoving me off on Janine for a good reason. We stand in awkward silence, my mind still spinning in all the possible mishaps that could occur tomorrow.

I turn toward the mirror and fake-primp myself, keeping my inner turmoil away from my already anxious bride. "How many sisters do you have?" I ask casually, wanting to talk about something other than the wedding for a change.

"Enough to know how being compared to them is a lifelong thing." It's not the answer I was expecting. I stop my trek down this road the second she turns rigid, returning to her old self. "It's one reason I'm doing this: to rise a few notches in my parent's book." She shakes her head as she talks. "Everyone thinks this is because of the money. Yeah, right," she says with a puff, throwing confusion into the mix. "I love working at the school. It's what I'm good at. It's my own thing. I'm so tired of having my parents dangle my inheritance in front of me to gain control of my life. *I need them off my back*, and I need them to approve of the wedding." She turns to me with a stern expression to command my attention. "Make it happen, Monica."

She swings the door open and stomps through as I stare after her with wide eyes. I stay still with this revelation, having no idea the layers of family drama at stake. But, with Naomi revealing her opinion about her family standing, I have my answer.

I grab my phone and text my crew yet again, finally having the confirmation I need to make my decision.

I've changed my mind. We're going with design two!

With pursed lips, I return to the party, ready to face whatever comes my way.



Chapter 11

The Prep

It's judgment day, and my top priority of getting the bride ready is a failure. We have less than two hours before the wedding starts, and Naomi is nowhere to be seen! I've sent her several texts, called her every five minutes, and haven't heard a word. I can't do anything about it if she bolts, but I'm the one who has to deal with the aftermath. Plus, I'll be out all the expenses that have toppled over the five-figure mark.

I'm about to enter the bridal suite tent when Jonathan saunters to me in a dark blue silk robe and a champagne flute. His droopy eyes and slow walk show he's thoroughly relaxed in his role of being pampered today.

"Jonathan," I greet with a smile, not wanting him to know about Naomi's absence. He takes my hand with his empty one and looks into my eyes.

"Monica, today has been fabulous," he says genuinely. "I'm thrilled you set up an extra tent for us. My mani-pedi was exquisite, and your gal, Leslie, is a kick."

"I'm so glad," I say with a squeeze of his hand. Brandon put up yet another tent at the last minute. I knew Jonathan would sing his kudos if he had his own space to be pampered.

"How is my Naomi doing? Is she enjoying a facial and massage as well?"

"Oh yes, she's having a great wedding day. You will be floored when you see how beautiful she looks. Now, off with you. We can't risk you seeing the bride," I say teasingly. Jonathan scoots off, taking my white

lie as the truth when the whole wedding could unravel as quickly as a thread caught on a hook.

To keep my sanity, I shift my focus to what I do have control over. I take one more trip down the aisle to ensure everything is perfect. Joanie created a beautiful archway to sit at the end of the walkway. Hundreds of flowers and enough tulle to make a dozen dresses are tied around the chairs to make the eyes dance around every detail. We've created a lit walkway lined with hidden white lights. It hints at the theme beyond the tent flaps without giving it away. It's kept a secret for the dual purpose of maintaining the surprise factor and ensuring the mother of the bride doesn't sink this operation.

I hope I haven't dug a grave for Emerald Weddings. I remind myself for the hundredth time that I've done my best. I've made dozens of trips to every craft store within a forty-mile radius of Garden Valley. I've been to Eugene at least five times to get more supplies. I've stayed up late for weeks, getting everything just so. I've even canceled our family trip. The day is finally here! It's almost time to reveal to Naomi the wedding of her dreams.

This is always the most stressful yet exhilarating time before exchanging the 'I do's.' Last-minute touches are always needed with every wedding. There's a point when I have to cut myself off from tweaking everything. If there wasn't a deadline, I could do this for eternity.

"Paige, did you bring the cake cutters, as in all four?" I ask as I pass the table, which will soon be full of cakes. A refrigerator on-site keeps the multiple cakes from melting in the July heat. We could barely fit two in there, but the caterers had room in their refrigerated truck.

"I sure did. I brought extra so several helpers can cut and serve since there are so many guests."

"Great. I should call this the 'mountain of cakes wedding,'" I say with fake cheerfulness.

The sound of someone pulling in ignites the butterflies in my stomach.

“Let’s hope that’s the bride,” Alice murmurs when she walks by. What on earth is she doing here? I give her a curt smile as she saunters towards the aisle.

“Please let it be the bride,” I mutter with my fingers crossed. The car stops, and to my relief, Naomi steps out! I fight the impulse to yank her out of the car and whisk her into the bridal tent for hair and makeup. I’ve never gotten a bride ready within less than two hours of the wedding. At this point, I might be doing her makeup as she’s walking down the aisle.

“Naomi, you’re here!” It’s a statement that would have taken on an entirely different meaning had I not witnessed the runaway bride jabs at the rehearsal dinner last night. “Not that I didn’t think you would be,” I quickly say, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “Come on! Today will be amazing, but first, we need to get you into hair, makeup, and dress.”

“Your friends and sister have been getting ready for hours in the bridal suite, sipping drinks and eating strawberries.” At Naomi’s request, she has only three bridesmaids. They have been a joy to work with, having their pre-wedding party in the designated tent.

“Sounds like them,” she says in a shaky voice. “What is going on here?” she asks, seeing the dozen people running around to complete their final tasks. I took Callie’s advice and hired a few more people to help with the last-minute preparations. It has saved us so much time that I think I’ll do this for future weddings. You’d be surprised what people will do with the promise of a piece of cake and a hundred-dollar gift card.

I grab Naomi’s shoulders and hurry her to the bridal suite. “That’s for you to see later.” While I’m anxious as hell to know what she thinks of the work my team and I have done, now is not the time.

“We need to get you ready. Bailey is ready to do your hair and...”

“Bailey is doing my hair? I highly doubt that,” she says with a puff.

“We have another hair stylist if you’d rather,” I say, speed-walking to the back tent and sneaking glances to ensure Jonathan is tucked away.

“No, it’s not that,” she says, stopping and shaking her head. “It’s just... she was one of my students when I was going through a tough time. I’m afraid to admit I wasn’t very nice.”

What? You?

I smile at my inside joke about our first couple of encounters. “Bailey’s fine, really. She has been practicing a few different hairstyles for you that I think you’ll love.”

“Okay then, here goes,” she says, stepping into the tent.

While it’s technically not too late for her to change her mind, this is the farthest into a wedding Naomi has gotten. The tent erupts in cheers and hugs for the bride once she enters. The woman who offered warmth to Naomi at dinner last night is here, putting a protective arm around her sister’s shoulders. She’s quite a few inches taller, with a broader frame that Naomi sinks into. My bride is cute, with a sheepish smile at all the commotion pointed toward her.

The tent is more than comfortable for the wedding party. Brandon has installed air conditioning, indoor plumbing, mirrors everywhere, and a carpeted floor for the summer gigs.

Yup, he’s a keeper!

“You’re going to be just fine, sis,” the woman says, rubbing Naomi’s back. She shows her to a station where Bailey awaits with a tight smile, poised with a hair pick and bobby pins.

“The chair awaits you, my lady,” Bailey says, dusting the seat in humor. Naomi pauses, and the two connect eyes.

“I don’t blame you if you don’t want to do my hair, Bailey,” Naomi says quietly. “I know I was hard on you. You need to understand how most of my students come to me as teenagers. If they can’t take my demands, imagine how they’ll be against a client like Janine.”

“It took me a while to appreciate your lessons,” Bailey says, releasing her breath. “A few clients have put me through the wringer over the last

couple of years. I'm grateful for what you taught me, Naomi." The two exchange a slight nod that only they can understand. Bailey lovingly touches Naomi's arm and guides her into the chair. "I have the perfect hairstyle for you."

"As long as you don't use purple shampoo, I'm good," Naomi says. Bailey laughs at what must be an inside joke before getting to work.

"You're the wedding planner," Naomi's sister says warmly. "I'm Amanda, the twin sister. I'm not a twin to Naomi but to our other sister, Marisa. The 'twin' name was how we were labeled growing up."

"It's nice to meet you. Have you enjoyed the pampering today?"

"I've been holding back, letting the other bridesmaids get their makeup done. Jonathan stole one of the ladies for a facial. It's fine; I'm still having fun," she says sweetly.

I usually have time to decorate more faces with makeup, but this wedding has pulled me in more directions than average. "I have time since Naomi is getting her hair done. Do you want me to put a splash of color on you?" I'm never sure how someone will take this. I don't want to change their look; I want to make them shine.

Amanda nearly chokes on her champagne before putting the glass down. "Please do! I'm not nearly as glammed up as everyone else."

Amanda is bubbling over with happiness to be here. She has the best personality of the Elridge family yet. "Your dress looks great on you." It's true. Her curves in the dark silver satin dress could make the hillside cry with envy.

"You did a great job picking these dresses out. I normally feel like a balloon at these events. I loved it the second I saw it. And look," she says, twisting and shoving her hands in the seamless pockets, "these are all the rage for dresses right now."

"Thank you. I did my best. What do you do for a living?" I ask, getting started by wiping her face clean with a warm washcloth before brushing on the foundation.

"I own a boutique in Eugene." I nod, now understanding her savvy comment about the pockets. "I have sizes ranging from two to thirty. Just because we have extra padding doesn't mean we can't dress nicely. You don't have any extra on you, but I've carried this around my whole life," she says, grabbing and squeezing her tummy. "My mother hates how I'm on the larger side, which is one reason I started my business," she divulges. It makes me wonder if she's always an open book or if the champagne has loosened her tongue. "I've thought about starting a shop here, but I'm not sure if it'll fly. Mine is more of a trendy place."

"I think it would do well!" I respond honestly. "You should get a feel for our downtown. Garden Valley is mostly rural, but we have a cute shopping center that's always busy. There's a club here where the ladies like to dress up for a night on the town."

"I'll check it out, thanks. I met your wedding helpers... sorry, I don't know their official titles." I laugh, and she continues. "I was surprised to see how trendy they are. Maybe having a boutique here is a good idea." I have a talker, my favorite type of client.

"So, has Naomi said if she's looking forward to the wedding?" I ask lightly, done with Amanda's foundation and now working on her eyes. Naomi's ears are far away at the hairdressing station across the tent. Otherwise, I wouldn't bring this up. I want to ask her some inside questions, but I don't want to overstep my bounds. After all, Naomi will be married in a couple of hours. My job will be done, and the baby bird will fly from the nest. My stomach gives a jolt of nervousness when I think of the critique I'll endure during that time.

"She is, and she isn't. She doesn't want to have a crowd gawking, but she wants to be married to Jonathan. Naomi deserves to get the wedding she wants after dealing with all the crap my mother has put her through over the years."

"Oh?"

"Our mother has walked all over us," Amanda says, sipping her champagne. "She has set Naomi up with dozens of men over the years."

She didn't care if Naomi was happy; she was just worried about what people in her community would think of her thirty-four-year-old daughter not being married. She almost made Naomi get married twice!"

"Why would she do that to her and not the rest of you?" I ask.

"The rest of us were ready to get married in our early twenties. Except my twin, Marisa. I'm not sure if she'll ever walk down the aisle. And," she says before flinching, "Naomi went through a not-so-pretty stage growing up. She was super skinny, had headgear, short hair, glasses, that sort of thing."

"She's beautiful now," I interject.

"Oh, of course!" she says, nearly choking on her champagne. "She grew up and got her own style. I think our parents were afraid no one would date her. I mean, how embarrassing would it be to have an unmarried daughter?" she says with sarcasm and an eye roll. "I think it's one reason she got into cosmetology. She got into the hair and makeup thing in her late teens and loved it."

"It must be hard to have an unsupportive family," I say.

"Don't I know it?"

I put the finishing touches on Amanda, barely able to sneak a word between her motor mouth. "Here we go!" I say when I'm done.

"Oh, my gosh! I've never looked like this. I love it! I will definitely send my clientele your way!" She gives me a firm hug before scurrying off to show her friends.

"Thank you!" I say with elation.

"Am I next?" Naomi asks from my side. The once standoffish woman has transformed into a sweet swan these last few weeks. "What do you think?" she asks with a pat on her head.

"Lovely!" I beam. Bailey tied a loose braid into Naomi's brown hair, weaving them around the outside of her head like a crown before adding crystals to give it a bridal touch.

“Come on up,” I say, patting the back of the chair. “Time for makeup.” I’m limited to thirty minutes before Naomi walks down the aisle. Some don’t mind starting a wedding late, but it’s a faux pax I never want to commit.

Naomi shrugs a shoulder and smiles. “I’ve never styled my hair this way. Hasn’t Bailey done a great job?”

“She must have had a great instructor. How would you like your makeup? Light, medium, or caked on?”

“Not caked on like Janine’s. I don’t want huge fake lashes, but focusing on my eyes would be fine. Maybe a little bit of glitter.”

“You’ve got it!” It surprises me that she wants anything other than her regular dab of color. I want to go for it but remember to accentuate only her exotic features.

I start on her eyes after using a color-matched foundation to even out her skin tone. Blue glitter matches her theme perfectly and goes with her overall look. As a final touch, I add a plumping gloss to her lips with a hint of rose color. When I’m done, I allow her to see her face, expecting the big surprise I usually get.

“That’s too much makeup,” a voice says over my shoulder. It’s Naomi’s mom, butting into the glory of my makeup reveal. “You don’t have Janine’s bone structure and can’t pull it off.” Based on her behavior and demands last night, she’s the queen bee of the family. I nearly freeze in the presence of her, this woman who could potentially derail the evening *and* Emerald Weddings in one swoop. Hey, maybe if she’s not happy, there will be a mass exit of the guests, and Naomi will get the small wedding she wants.

“It’s what she does best,” Janine says, sauntering in like she owns the place, “Monica is like a one-trick pony regarding her makeup skills.” My toes curl upon hearing Janine’s voice. I smile, knowing her dark red dress will clash against the shades I’ve used for decorations.

“We’re glamming it up in here, Janine. You should join us. I can do your makeup just like old times.” I hold up my eyeshadow brush as an

invitation. It wouldn't be the first time I've gotten her ready. When I worked for Janine, she loved how I styled her makeup... and then took credit when others showered her with praise.

Obviously, I hold grudges.

"I know how to do my own makeup, Monica." We lock eyes, sharing this lie between us. She clears her throat and steps back, probably fearing I'll expose her secret of not knowing a thing about the makeup she sells.

"So far, this looks quite different than the other Elridge weddings," Mrs. Elridge observes.

"Naomi wished to be outdoors instead of in a church," I say with a snark. It's too late to switch anything now. I've given this wedding my all and am ready to show these two a piece of my mind.

"It was awfully gutsy of you to take on this account," Janine says with a head shake. "From what I can see, you're crashing and burning, Monica."

I glance at the bride-to-be. We haven't been as close as I get to some of my brides, but she's trusted me. I've helped bring her here. The full force of my mission blows through me as the storm did the other day. My mantra has shamefully included the WWJD acronym. I now change this to 'What Would Monica Do' at the most opportune time.

"This isn't Janine's wedding; *it's Naomi's*. I had to do what's right for my bride," I repeat, emphasizing the name change to drive the point home. Janine stands straighter and rolls her right shoulder.

"So, helping her get cheated out of ten million dollars is a good thing?" she says pointedly. "Bravo."

I can't help my face from showing surprise with this statement. Naomi said something about an inheritance, but I had no idea it was this much! I shrug, having no idea how to respond.

The news is a slap in the face, shifting the reasoning to appease the Elridge queens in a way I hadn't considered. The nerves return full force, bringing all their friends and extended family for a party.

"I think it looks great, Monica," Naomi grins, unable to take her eyes off herself in the mirror. A defiance in her voice matches her expression, the brief sweetness gone. It makes me wonder which is her genuine persona, the hard exterior or the softness buried inside. She stands with confidence and turns to face her mother. "Here I am, ready to get married, just like you want."

Their short stature doesn't prevent either woman from standing firm. "We'll see. I haven't heard any 'I do's' yet," the woman answers, her arms crossed. I nearly flinch when she turns her gaze to me. "It's a little informal out there, don't you think?"

"I followed the wishes of my bride," I answer, standing my ground in the only way I know how. I'll be damned if I continue to ignore my own true persona, especially when Naomi's fate is on the line. Now is my chance to co-mingle professionalism with courage.

"That wasn't the assignment," the woman snaps. With heels, I'm at least eight inches taller than her, yet she's not afraid to bring her icy stare. This statement brings humor to my mind, thinking how her demeanor will match my chosen ice theme. "I'd like to see what's inside the tent so I can prepare a speech of apology to my guests," the woman says, keeping her jaw firm.

Mrs. Elridge's face is twisted in a way that Aunt Edna used to hold. I blink my terror away as I stand at my full height. "The tents are closed until Naomi and Jonathan say, 'I do.'"

The woman's face changes to smugness, something decades of practice has perfected. "Your rule might work for others, but it won't for me. Remember, I'm the one who signs the checks. It's time you reveal this nonsense, so I know how embarrassing this will be."

I look at Naomi, wondering what to do. It's her turn to comfort me. "You can show her if you want. I'm happy no matter what," she whispers. It's the confirmation I need to face the woman with an intimidation factor of one thousand.

“No,” I say firmly. I take my signature breath, the one that acts as a corset for my whole body, trapping my confidence and deflecting self-doubt. “What I say stands. You two will have to wait like everyone else. If you don’t want to pay me, so be it. Money isn’t what this is about. This is about Naomi getting the day she deserves.” Mrs. Elridge scoffs at how I’ve held my ground. I haven’t been myself during this entire venture. Instead of living in this regret, I use it as fuel to resist their commands. “You two have overstepped your bounds. I call the shots for this wedding and will ask you to leave if your behavior isn’t satisfactory. Please find your seats and wait for the wedding to get started.”

Mrs. Elridge does something I never would have expected, she softens. The woman makes a ticking noise with her mouth and shakes her head. “What this younger generation is doing these days is beyond my comprehension. Come on, Janine, let’s find our seats.”

Janine backs away from us with sideways glances full of opinions I don’t care to hear. “The guests are arriving,” Janine sings on her way out.

“I don’t know how you did that, but I’m definitely stealing it,” Naomi says with a big sigh. Bailey pats my back, and Amanda raises her glass.

“Here’s to Monica, the only woman who has stood up to my mother and lived.” The rest of the women laugh in understanding. A full heaping of stress is lifted off my shoulders, but only momentarily.

Zoocy texts me that Paul has arrived with the chairs. “I’ll be back in two minutes to help with your dress,” I say, patting Naomi’s shoulders before exiting the tent. “Paul, thank you for scrounging up more chairs for us,” I say, speed-walking his way.

“Anything for you, Mo,” he says, opening the double doors of his delivery truck.

I look around for one person in particular. “Leslie! Can you come over here, please?” She nods and jogs our way, her light blue pantsuit shimmering in the setting sun. Her pace slows the second she sees Paul.

“Can you help Paul unload the chairs? I need to finish getting the bride ready.”

“Naomi isn’t ready yet?” I give her a tight expression and she turns toward Paul. “Um, sure. Hi, I’m Leslie,” she says, holding her hand towards the man who reminds me of a jolly elf. He’s always been overly helpful with our weddings, but Leslie has never been around when he makes deliveries.

“I’m Paul. Nice to meet you.” They hold each other’s gaze for a few seconds too long before getting on with their task.

Their voices fade to murmurs as I give myself a moment to steady my nerves before returning to the tent. I catch a reflection of myself in a car window and stop. I was afraid of what I might feel looking in the mirror if I were to go with Janine’s design. I’ve been challenged with staying true to my mission or caving under pressure. I can proudly say that I’m happy with the reflection staring back at me, and it has nothing to do with my stunning outfit.

I snap out of my trance and jog back to the bridal tent, knowing my job is far from over. “That was intense,” I say to Naomi, releasing a breath dramatically.

“Looks like you survived,” Naomi says with a smile.

“It’s amazing how such a little woman can be so scary.”

“Don’t I know it?” Naomi says with a laugh. “My mother is all bark and only some bite. So, what kinds of things can I expect here? You keep mentioning surprises.”

“Time will reveal those, my dear,” I say sneakily, looking at my watch. “Which, we’re currently out of.”

“Listen, Monica. I saw your face when Janine told you how much money is at stake here. I don’t want you to worry. This is my wedding...”

“And I ruined your inheritance by going with the less formal version,” I say quietly. I’m glad I didn’t know they were dangling this over Naomi’s head. I might not have made the most recent decisions if I had.

“You didn’t ruin anything,” Naomi says with a shake. “I don’t care about the money, Monica.” I stare at her in surprised confusion. This twisty wedding is making me dizzy! “I love my job, and I’m not planning on leaving it no matter how much money my parents want to give me to continue to be their puppet. Jonathan has a comfortable trust fund and we’ll be just fine. I haven’t seen what you’ve done yet, but I’m sure it’s amazing. No matter what, I’ll be married to Jonathan by the night’s end,” she says. It’s the smile confirming I’ve made the right decision. I’m not free from what I fear will be a waterfall of insults, but this is enough payment. My bride is happy.

“Then why go through all of this? Why not just have a destination wedding or go to the courthouse?”

She stands an inch taller with a deep breath. “I’ve been working my whole life to impress my parents. Even if this isn’t their favorite wedding, I’ll still raise in standing with them by being married.”

“Speaking of, it’s time to get you in your dress! We don’t have long. I can hear the crowd out there.” Naomi’s face goes pale beneath her makeup. “No worries. It’s just you and Jonathan.”

“I’m a teacher, and I don’t like crowds,” she says with a fake chuckle. “It’s the heckling I don’t like.” I take a deep breath, knowing I can’t fix it for her.

“Come on, I can’t wait to see you in white.”

Naomi doesn’t move. I study her face for any hints of her dashing out of here. I must admit, the makeup shows up stunningly on her, bringing out features I thought were already striking.

Amy holds up the dress. I toss my chin her way, prompting Naomi to turn around. She gasps upon seeing the beaded dress instead of the one her mother picked.

“Monica, you chose the one I wanted! Oh, I can’t mess up your makeup!” She fans her eyes before giving me a quick hug. She touches the dress, eyeing the shiny silverish-blue beads Amy and her daughter, Lilly, spent hours sewing on. “Did you do this?”

“My daughter and I did,” Amy says with a nod.

“It’s beautiful. It’s perfect. I haven’t even seen the venue yet, and it’s all so perfect,” she says in a crying voice. “Thank you so much!”

It’s only part of the response I’m after tonight. I still have to orchestrate the whole event and await the final judgment on everything under the tents themselves. With Naomi’s approval, I feel like I’ve won.

Stick it where the sun doesn’t shine, Aunt Edna.

It seems easy to ensure the bride walks down the aisle. There’s so much more to the process. After facing Mrs. Elridge and somewhat having her blessing, the rest seems as easy as serving one of the four cakes to everyone.

Amy helps Naomi into her dress while I check on the guests’ arrival status. I check in with my assistants via text messages. Should I receive payment tonight, one of my goals is to purchase a headset unit to talk to each other instead of using our phones. We have tried walkie-talkies, but they were clunky, and the noise disturbed the ambiance of the occasion.

Naomi parts the white curtains and steps out of the dressing room a few minutes later. It always fascinates me how wearing white transforms a person. Everyone glows in this clean, innocent color.

The once simple dress has been transformed into a masterpiece with white and powder blue beads. The low neckline doesn’t show cleavage, just as her mom wanted. The straps are lined with lace and have a gentle poofy frill at the top. The back of the dress dips down, showing Naomi’s lovely figure.

“Naomi, you...”

“It’s perfect,” she interrupts, smiling at her reflection. “You’ve brought this to life. All of you, thank you.”

“Let’s go get you married!” I say with a smile.

Naomi’s eyes grow in fear at my statement. She looks around, reaches to her right, and grabs a mimosa from a bridesmaid. “Give me

one of those!” She downs it in three seconds, hands the glass back, and breathes. “There, now I’m ready!”



Chapter 12

Winter Wedding in July

I stay by Naomi's side as I walk her to where her father awaits her arrival. His face lights up upon seeing his daughter. Naomi beams a smile back as she takes his arm. It's incredible how an expression can unite people, mending past hurts.

"You look beautiful, my Pony Naomi," he says with a light kiss on her cheek.

"Not 'Homely Naomi' anymore, am I?" She glances at me as her smile falters. "Thanks to Monica."

"You had the bone structure. I just added makeup and a dress," I respond in truth.

Naomi lets out a laugh I don't understand. "Bony Naomi," she says in between breaths. "I've been called all the flattering rhyming names."

"That's right," her dad says with feeling. "We love our Naomi. Maybe the nicknames weren't the best way of showing it." He sighs and looks ahead to the longest aisle we've ever had. We had to double our usual white carpet aisle to accommodate all the extra seats. It's illuminated by the lights I added to the sides of the carpet. With the sun setting behind our enormous surrounding mountains, I can see this was a good idea. "Let's hope I don't trip over the ridiculous white cloth they have on the ground," he says. Naomi looks at me with a slight shake at the complaint. "Let's do this," he says with a fist pump.

This is where I part from my bride. It takes months to prepare everything. I spend countless hours to make the evening perfect. One of the byproducts is solidifying a motherly bond with the bride. Naomi

and I had a different story, but as I send her to her destiny, I'm filled with the same sentiment. I understand what this wedding is about now that I've been let in on the family secrets. The inheritance ups the ante even more, and though I feel pride that I've come through for her, I'm still hopeful I can satisfy some of her mother's requirements.

"Better get ready for a sprint!" shouts someone.

"You better make sure she doesn't have a getaway car ready!" someone else hollers.

I take a deep breath and step forward, ready to give these 'classy' people a piece of my mind.

"Stop the music," Naomi's father puts his hands in the air, and the music stops. He glares into the crowd for a good fifteen seconds before proceeding. "I've allowed these comments for too long. The rehearsal dinner proved that I should have said something years ago. This is where they stop. This is Naomi and Jonathan's wedding, and you'll show them respect." The crowd stays silent, with more than a few people nodding their approval.

Returning to his daughter's side, Naomi takes his arm and holds her chin high, a smile warming her face. She takes a few steps down the aisle, looks over her shoulder at me, and mouths, 'Thank you,' with her eyes glistening.

Naomi is happy.

I let out the sigh I've held for the last three months. How did I get sucked back into Janine's grasp and her mother's as well? "No more," I say with a lightness I haven't felt since I scheduled this wedding on my whiteboard. This type of career may seem trivial to some, but seeing the beautiful wonderland I created squashes any doubt that I'm meant for this calling.

"Let's hope you chose correctly?" Alice says, coming out of nowhere.

"Did you hear how Monica talked to Mrs. Elridge?" Pricilla says.

“Oh, go busy yourselves somewhere else!” I say in a hushed whisper. “Aren’t you supposed to be watching Naomi and Jonathan getting married?”

“Why would we do that when the show is out here, honey? We can’t wait to watch you scramble around doing last-minute wedding preparations,” Alice says. The two women link arms and giggle away. I shake my head, deducting that they are mostly harmless.

It’s my standard practice to busy myself while the bride and groom solidify their love with a set of vows. I stand back to admire what I’ve put together for this event. I’ve taken cues from the master, David Tuter, while adding a few of my own touches. As I gaze upon the beautiful white tent, I can finally say it’s all been worth it.

Twenty minutes later, the roar of applause and cheers indicates that Naomi made it to the ‘I do’ part of the wedding.

“It’s action time,” I say to whoever is nearest. “Spread the word; we’re ready.”

It’s the time I’ve been waiting for: the big reveal of the tent. Every nervous fiber in my body is on fire when Naomi and Jonathan trot down the aisle to a shower of artificial snow. My bride and groom stop in front of me with smiles from ear to ear. It looks like the mimosa has kicked in for Naomi as she allows Jonathan to hug her to his side and kiss her on the neck. Or, perhaps, it’s the wedding bliss coming through. Her wiggle and giggle are more similar to what I see at these events.

Just friends, my ass!

“Are you ready to see what we’ve done for you?” I ask outside the closed-off tent. An announcement is being made to allow the bride and groom five minutes to view their reception area before everyone arrives. My normal nervousness is multiplied by one hundred tonight.

“Let us see, Monica!” Naomi says in atypical excitement. It’s funny how different people can be once a significant stressor has been lifted. I

should know as I'm feeling these effects, having finally been grounded back to my purpose.

I bite my bottom lip to keep my smile from taking over. I give Bailey a nod, and we pull the ropes to open the curtains. "Mr. and Mrs. Elridge, welcome to your reception!" Jonathan puffs himself up at the mention of his name change, no doubt to keep the Elridge empire alive since Naomi's side of the family has five girls.

They both gasp upon seeing the white and blue winter wonderland we've created. It's just the reaction I was hoping for. This is why we have worked so hard, and I want nothing more than to make it an event they'll never forget.

After last night's reception party, I stayed up nearly all night, changing every inch of this venue from red to blue. Lights are strung along the ceiling and cascade down the walls in the thousands. Faux, bare trees are decorated with blue lights, icicles, and tufts of stuffing around the bottom, adding a wintery feel. I have tasteful, illuminated wedding balloons that look like glass, which are all the rage right now. Everything emits a blue glow from the black lights Brandon added, giving the place a serene ambiance.

My centerpieces turned out as big and spectacular as I expected. I layered several tiers of white and blue flowers, added baby's breath, and filled decorative balls with LED lights.

Naomi's eyes grow as she takes in the scene before her. "Monica, this is amazing! How did you do this?"

"Really, this is beautiful!" Jonathan says, touching some of the lights. "It's a good birthday present."

Naomi walks through the threshold to a shower of snow, but this time, it's not the fluffy fake stuff her guests threw; this is real. Upon my idea, Brandon found a machine that grinds snow and mounted one above every entrance into the tent. Huge ice blocks sit in the reservoir, waiting for the motion sensors to detect when a person walks beneath. The handy gadget shreds ice and releases a small amount when a person

triggers the sensor. Every person who enters the tent will be welcomed into our winter-in-July theme.

Naomi holds her hands out and looks up as the white pieces fall on her head and shoulders.

“It’s winter. You designed a winter wedding for me... with snow!” She does something completely unexpected: she hugs me. Not just any hug. She throws herself at me and squeezes around my waist before sagging in relief. “I’m glad I wasn’t a part of the planning. Look what you’ve done!” Naomi gushes about everything she loves, singing my praises. All the work I have put into this is paying off, and not in the way I expected. I envisioned Janine to be the one to relieve the pressure I’ve been under, not Naomi’s happiness.

“The other tent is for dancing and all the cakes,” I say excitedly, pointing to the other tent we put right up to this one.

“The cakes!” Naomi screams before grabbing Jonathan’s hand and dragging him to the other tent. I give Bailey a thumbs-up as I pass her, relieved by how our effort is spot on. “Look at the cakes.” Naomi rests her forehead on Jonathan’s shoulder and starts laughing.

“Which one?” Jonathan asks, joining in her laughter.

The first guests filter in through the four openings, each with eyes full of wonder and awe. Half a dozen ice sculptures added a popular flare, and several guests reach out and touch the slick surfaces. Several guests notice the bride’s uncharacteristically happy nature and look on in amusement.

I spy Naomi’s parents outside the tent and rush to greet them personally. In the glow of the settling dusk, I open the entrance to the tent, casting my hand to usher Mrs. Elridge inside. A slight, audible gasp escapes her mouth once she sees what my team and I have put together. She clears her throat as a coverup and turns away from me. If I had this moment on camera, I would play this repeatedly as they do to make sports calls.

She takes a few steps around. Her beige and pink dress twinkles with sparkly beads that match the light blue around us. She keeps her chin up as her gaze takes it all in. There's no way she can see all the details in the thirty seconds she spends here, but apparently, it's enough time for her to judge. No matter what, I know I've made the right decision. There's no more wondering what she and Janine think. There's no more staying up late with my chest gripped with the fear of failing and the echoes of my kids' excitement for our family vacation ringing through my ears.

"It's fine," she says in a higher pitch than usual. It isn't her words I'm after; the expression tells me she more than approves.

"Not embarrassing?" I ask. It's not necessarily a question but rather my way of opening the grounds for a compliment.

The woman gives a whisper of a smile as she walks by. "I guess I won't try and put your little operation out of business, but we'll see how the rest of the evening goes."

I give a little dance when she moves on, my one-person celebration from hitting this high. After all, it's me I've been up against, striving to one-up my previous performances to prove myself, well, to myself.

My eyes land on Pricilla and Alice across the tent. They each nod with a smug yet approving smile. I haven't been planning this wedding for them, but it adds to my win, knowing they'll take the news of my victory and spread it through town.

Mrs. Elridge approves, but the main queen in my book has yet to bequeath her opinion.

"Monica, I have something to say," Naomi says, finishing a glass of wine.

"Yes?"

"No, I have an announcement. I want to say something to everyone," Naomi says, standing on her tippy toes as the guests flow in. Seeing the guests' faces as they enter the tent and feel the coolness of fresh snow falling on them is as rewarding as it gets.

“Oh... okay,” I say in surprise. “Everyone, can I have your attention?” I say, waving my arms in the air. Bailey steps in and hands Naomi a microphone.

Naomi takes her heels off and stands on a nearby chair. Every action she makes stuns me further. “I had nothing to do with how this wedding turned out. I mean, I said ‘yes.’” Naomi smiles at her new husband, loosening up further as hoots and hollers ring out. A few people shout, ‘kiss him!’ She does something different for her—she leans down and plants a kiss on his lips! “I didn’t help Monica and her team at all. I even told them to make all four cakes because I couldn’t choose just one!”

“You’re saying that like it’s a bad thing,” a big man shouts, patting his round stomach as those around him laugh.

“Thank you for being here. Most of you know my story and the journey of getting here. I needed the right man to get me down the aisle,” she says, smiling warmly at her husband. “Monica and her team had the task of a lifetime to make my dream wedding a reality. Did she come through or what?” Naomi holds her hand my way as the crowd lets out a cheer. “I toyed with eloping or going to City Hall. Look at what I would have missed out on! Enough from me; let’s have fun!”



THE MOUNTAINS SWALLOW the setting sun, the final rays illuminating every nook and cranny in the tent more brightly with every minute ticking by. The scent of the four-course meal wafts through the tents, and three hundred forks clatter away. Naomi and Jonathan escape for a quick half-hour of pictures as everyone digs into their meals under a curtain of twinkling lights. White and blue lights illuminate everything, giving off a snow glow in the moonlight I was after.

I wasn’t sure if Naomi’s family would be as prickly as Janine. Naomi warned us that everyone would wear monocles and judge this wedding to the nth degree. After attending last night’s dinner and seeing how the reception has been so far, this family can party!

Naomi smiles more than ever. She talks genuinely with everyone who passes by her wedding table. This wedding has been a big hurdle to overcome in her life. Her ever-present smile and how she eats with gusto show she's as relieved as I am. Hopefully, now she has appeased her mother and can take a break from familial expectations.

I nibble on a small plate of chicken marsala, but my job is to ensure the night flows easily. Dancing starts shortly after dinner, with the music changing from classical piano to the latest hits.

"Mother, I'm here in my wedding dress. It's been a big hit. What more do you want?"

The voice changes my direction to the area by the cakes, throwing my defenses up. I approach Naomi and her mom slowly, not wanting to intrude but also wanting to be here for her.

And maybe I'm being a little nosy.

"It doesn't meet the Elridge criteria, Naomi. Look at this wedding; it's out of control!" Mrs. Elridge says, glancing around and flinching as someone pops the cork from a bottle. Her frown deepens after she sees me. "And you. You had one job! This party is fit for a sixteen-year-old, not a married couple."

"It's beautiful, mother! Just because you have your opinions on how things should be doesn't mean..."

"What?" her mother prods.

"It doesn't mean we must jump through your flaming hoops to prove ourselves. Amanda went through the pain of your stupid wedding checklist. She hated every minute of it. Janine actually enjoyed it. Marisa doesn't even speak to any of us anymore because of how you've treated her single status. Here I am, married to the man I love and having the time of my life at this beautiful wedding with my family. I don't even care about the money. I just want you to be on my side for once. Isn't that what matters, that I'm happy?"

A group in the crowd erupts in laughter in perfect timing, solidifying what Naomi is preaching. Mrs. Elridge rolls her eyes with a dra-

matic sigh. "I suppose." She looks down at Naomi's body before lightly grasping her daughter's arms. "You do look beautiful." She pauses for a long beat, lifting her chin, her sign of being in charge. "This does cross off all the requirements for your inheritance. Herman! Where are you?" she yells before stomping off to find her husband so the two peas can snuggle into their miserable pod.

Naomi sinks into my side with a huge sigh. "Oh my gosh, I stood up to my mother."

"You did!"

"And she doesn't hate the wedding! She said the lights were pretty."

"The lights? What about everything else?" I whine theatrically.

"Hey, one compliment is a big deal in our family." Naomi and I share a laugh, solidifying this special moment together.

A birthday serenade starts, and Naomi is whisked away by a group of men who parade her around on their shoulders. I look on with contentment and the feeling that I've brought this about for her. This started with a doom-and-gloom feel and ended like a fairytale.

A silhouette of two people walking hand-in-hand catches my eye. They stop under the wedding arch at the end of the aisle. It doesn't take me long to figure out that it's Bailey and her boyfriend, Kenichi. Despite their being together for three years and having a three-year-old son, Sammy, they have never gotten married. The shadow of the man bends to one knee, and my breath catches in my throat.

"Look!" I snag Leslie as she walks by. We gasp in unison as Bailey seemingly accepts and throws her arms around her new fiancé.

"Way to go, Bailey," Leslie whispers with her arm around my shoulder. "Why can't I get that lucky?" she whines.

"You'll have your time. Sooner than you think." I look over her shoulder and see Paul approaching us. He's about the same height as Leslie and has the sweetest cherub-looking face I've ever seen.

"Hey, um, would you like to dance?" he asks.

“Yes!” Leslie exclaims, taking his hand and allowing him to whisk her to the dance floor.

Bailey is still wrapped in emotion, looking down at the engagement ring on her finger when I snap a few photos with my phone. Our photographer, Ellie, is around here somewhere. Still, so many memorable moments are happening simultaneously that I can’t help but capture this one myself.

Someone clearing their throat makes me turn. Directly behind me are Brandon, Callie, and Mia. “Are you three having a good time?” I ask.

“Not as good as you’re going to have,” Callie answers.

“What do you mean?”

“Monica, we know how hard you’ve been working,” Brandon says with a sneaky smile. “What you’ve done here would make David himself proud. We have a little surprise for you.” They step to the side and reveal a poster board propped up on a chair. Pictures of sandy beaches and palm trees decorate the board, with the words ‘Family Vacation, 2024’ written in bubble letters.

“What’s this?” I ask with a hand over trembling lips.

“We know how upset you were about canceling our family vacation. I checked your calendar, and you have a week free in August. Would you care to join us in Hawaii?”

“Hawaii?” I look from the three faces to the poster board, back to my family. “What... how did you... I normally do the...”

Brandon steps forward and embraces me in a hug. “I can schedule things, too. I’ll take your fumbling speech as a good sign.” The girls circle their arms around us, and the four of us soon jam to the beat of ‘Up-town Funk,’ something I never thought this stuffy crowd would enjoy.

“I can’t believe everyone out there knows the words to this song!” I say, wiping my tears.

“They’re cutting the cakes!” Mia screeches before tearing off towards the four cakes. I hang back upon seeing Janine.

"I'll be right there," I tell Brandon.

Janine keeps her eyes on the cake display. "It looks like you pulled it off for my sister," Janine says in her Wicked Witch voice.

"Pulled it off?" I ask, playing dumb.

"It's not the classy event my mother wanted, but she didn't chew you out. Still, I doubt Naomi will get her inheritance," Janine says.

I keep quiet, knowing news about the inheritance that Janine isn't privy to yet. Naomi's laugh can be heard over the music as she twirls on the dance floor near us.

"Looks like a happy ending, which is all I'm after." I drive my statement home by dotting my finger on her nose. Janine's eyes sweep the tent, and I see something new: satisfaction. It's not the pat on the back most people want, but not getting an earful from Janine is the same as praise. There's something liberating about facing your demons and coming out on top. It's not about the fantastic wedding; I followed my heart and made the right decision. "Come on, Janine, live it up." I pass by her and swing my hip against hers to jostle her lousy mood away. She grunts and stumbles on her four-inch heels but turns away. "Suit yourself."

The party flows late into the evening, with no sign of slowing down at eleven o'clock. It's another reason I'm glad we are so far from the apartment complex.

Naomi waves me onto the dance floor, and I grab Callie and Mia and hop on with delight. "You've turned me into a swan tonight, Monica. Thank you. Who knew this 'Gloomy Na-oomi' could turn into something beautiful?"

"I did," I say with a squeeze of her hand. "I think we can change some of those nicknames from the years and make some new ones. How about..."

"Dreamy Naomi," Jonathan says, hugging his bride from behind. She allows the hug and snuggles the back of her head into his shoulder.

“I have no idea how you did all of this. You somehow managed to turn this into a winter in July,” Naomi says, looking over the tents.

“It looks like we both met some challenges tonight,” I say with pride and a wiggle of my eyebrows towards Janine. Naomi laughs and spins me around.

I’ve stepped up to meet this challenge head-on, stomping on my doubts and proving that my feet belong on this path. Whether I thought it could happen, I’ve solved several problems with this one mission. With the ultimate goal of bringing about the bonds of marriage, I’ve also made a bond of a lifetime. Unexpected tensions have eased while family ties have woven tighter.

I couldn’t have brought a better ending to this project, even if there were some blind and steep corners on this road. And, as usual, there’s always something fun and exciting happening in Garden Valley.

Thank you for reading *Winter in July*! This is just the tip of the iceberg regarding Garden Valley stories. Nearly every character in *Winter in July* will have her own book, starting with Joanie's story, coming out this August! If you want to read more about the lovable and fun characters in Garden Valley, click here to preorder¹ your copy of *Welcome to Garden Valley*.

Winter in July By Jean Shelby

1. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CW1DN6KL>

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About the Author

Jean Shelby wants to shine some light into this world with her sweet and fun stories. She wants to touch the lives of others through a commonality of life experiences that are wound into beautiful stories about women who are just like you. Jean wants to offer books that are guaranteed to brighten your day, characters you'll connect with, and stories that will put a smile on your face. Pull up a chair, grab a cup of tea, and let's get reading!

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