



Chapter 1

Front Royal, Virginia

“I’m not sure I can do this,” Nick said.

“I believe in you,” Alena reassured him. “I know you’ve got it in you.”

“It’s just not right. There are things no man should be asked to do.”

“Now listen,” Alena said. “I’ve seen you pick maggots off a two-week-old corpse without even turning up your nose.”

“Good idea,” Nick said. “Think about happy times.”

“What I’m saying is: If you can do that, you can manage this.”

Nick looked at the sign again: WEDDINGS 'N' SUCH: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO MAKE YOUR SPECIAL DAY UNFORGETTABLE. He turned to Alena: “Is it hot in here or is it just me?”

“Nick—we haven’t even gone in yet.”

The door opened to the sound of electronic chimes playing Mendelssohn’s Wedding March. Nick took a quick look around the room; he saw leather scrapbooks of sample wedding announcements, satiny ring pillows with lace

embroidery, gleaming bridesmaid's and groomsman's gifts, and flowery silk nosegays. Nick had never felt so out of his element; he felt like an ant that had wandered into the wrong colony, secreting some noxious alarm pheromone as he went, so that at any moment hundreds of angry workers might swarm all over him and shear off his limbs with their mandibles.

Alena took his hand. "Nick. Breathe."

They sat in a pair of matching upholstered chairs that faced a large desk. On the desk was a silver dome-shaped bell; Alena leaned forward and gave it a tap. A moment later a woman emerged from a back room and stepped into the doorway with a blinding smile.

"Well, hello! Welcome to Weddings & Such! I'll be right with you two—just let me grab my calendar!"

Nick cringed. The wedding planner looked middle-aged, probably in her mid-forties, with unnaturally blonde hair and big bright eyes and a smile that seemed too big for her face. Nick thought the woman looked like she was waiting for the punch line of a joke—as if she might break out in laughter at any moment.

Alena leaned over to him. "What's the matter with you?"

"She's perky."

"What?"

"I can't do 'perky'—it's not in my genetic makeup."

"She's not perky, she's just friendly."

"Her face looks like one of those plasma balls at Radio Shack."

"Maybe she just likes her job."

"I like my job, but I don't glow in the dark."

“Nick, we just got here—would you give the woman a chance?”

The wedding planner returned a moment later, sat down at her desk, and opened the calendar in front of her with a flourish. Then she folded her hands, leaned forward on her elbows, and gave each of them a long lingering smile.

“I can’t do ‘perky,’” Nick said.

“I beg your pardon?”

Alena interrupted. “My name is Alena Savard, and this is my fiancé, Nick Polchak. We’re getting married.”

The woman gave them a look of astonished delight.

“Wow,” Nick said. “Are we your first customers?”

“Every customer is my first customer,” she said.

“So much for references.”

Alena ignored him. “We don’t know much about planning a wedding, so we thought we could use some help, and that’s why we’re here.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place.”

“What a relief,” Nick said. “We tried Ace Hardware, but they didn’t have a clue. By the way, why does your sign say ‘Everything You Need to Make Your Special Day Unforgettable’? Why did you pick that word? I mean, when the Titanic hit the iceberg—that was ‘unforgettable’ too. Don’t you think you’re underpromising a little?”

Alena slapped a hand on Nick’s forearm and smiled at the proprietor. “I should probably explain what’s going on here. My fiancé feels a little out of place right now, and whenever that happens he turns into a complete idiot. Try not to

take it personally—he does it to everybody. If it makes you feel any better, he gets a lot worse than this.”

The woman turned to Nick with a look of pure compassion. “I understand perfectly. Are you feeling a bit out of place, Nick?”

“I’d rather be staked down in a pit of flesh-eating beetles.”

“Now, Nick, I think you’re exaggerating.”

“No, that happened to me once. I actually preferred it.”

“It’s perfectly all right if you feel a little uncomfortable here—it’s only natural. Why, I’ve seen grown men have full-blown panic attacks in here.”

“Has anyone vomited yet? Because I want this day to be ‘unforgettable.’”

At that, the woman turned to Alena. “Perhaps it would help if we all got to know each other a little better. Tell me about yourselves . . . How did the two of you meet?”

“I suppose like anybody else,” Alena said with a shrug. “Nick was hired by the FBI to locate bodies in a lost graveyard. He needed a cadaver dog and I own one.”

“The soil in northern Virginia is very rocky,” Nick explained. “Ground-penetrating radar has a hard time distinguishing rock from human bone. Cadaver dogs are very effective at detecting human remains, and Alena happened to have a very good one—that one there, in fact.”

The wedding planner slowly leaned across the desk and saw a mottled gray dog reclining beside Alena’s chair. The dog had one paw propped under its chin; the other leg was missing entirely, severed cleanly at the shoulder. The dog made

no movement in response to the planner's attention; it just stared back at her with hollow blue eyes.

The planner's own eyes widened . . .

"Relax," Nick said. "It's not a cadaver, it's a cadaver dog."

"I live by myself in a private compound in the mountains up above Endor," Alena continued. "I don't have a telephone, and my gate is always locked, so Nick climbed my fence one night and I ordered one of my guard dogs to grab him by the throat and pin him to the ground. That's how we met." She took Nick's hand and smiled.

The wedding planner looked at Nick. "What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a forensic entomologist," Nick said. "I study the insects that are attracted to human remains, specifically in cases of suspected murder. These insects arrive at the body in a predictable order, and they develop at a measurable rate. That makes it possible for people like me to calculate the postmortem interval—the amount of time that's elapsed since the murder took place."

The planner lowered her voice to a whisper. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

Nick glanced around the office. "Who knows why people do what they do?"

"And I train dogs," Alena said simply.

The planner looked relieved. "How wonderful! You teach obedience school?"

"No, I train cadaver dogs to find human remains. I also train drug-sniffing dogs for the DEA and bomb-sniffers for ATF and Homeland Security; also search-and-rescue dogs, trackers, security dogs . . ."

Nick watched the planner's face as it slowly fell. He almost felt sorry for her; if she was hoping to draw a wedding theme from their occupations, she was out of luck. Nobody wants to see a cake with a chalk line around it.

"Have the two of you set a date yet?" the planner asked.

"The last Saturday in May," Alena replied.

"Good timing," the planner said, noting the date in her calendar. "You'll beat the June rush."

"Nick's done teaching his classes by then."

The planner turned to Nick. "So you're a teacher?"

"I'm a professor of entomology at NC State," Nick said, "but what I really love to do is—"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted. "The . . . bug thing."

Alena grinned at her fiancé. "They call Nick the Bug Man."

"I'm sure they do," the planner managed. "So where are you two planning to be married? Have you chosen the venue yet?"

"Resurrection Lutheran Church in Endor," Alena said.

"That's just a few miles from here," the planner said. "Terrific—that'll make my job a breeze. Now, what about the budget? How much are you thinking of spending on this wedding?"

"Your sign says 'Weddings & Such,'" Nick said. "We want a wedding, but we'd like to skip the such."

"You want a simple wedding."

"Now you're talking," Nick said.

"But not too simple," Alena corrected.

The planner turned to Alena. “Will you want flowers? Printed invitations?
A photographer?”

“Well, sure.”

“Hold it,” Nick said. “That sounds like such.”

The planner turned to Nick. “And what would ‘simple’ look like to you,
Nick?”

“I say, ‘I do,’ then she says, ‘I do’ . . . then we’re done.”

“Nick, it’s a wedding,” the planner scolded. “There are traditions to be
observed; there are customs to follow.”

“I refer to them as ‘bizarre pairing rituals.’”

Alena turned to face her fiancé. “Nick—are you trying to be obnoxious?”

“No, it just flows—only amateurs have to try.”

She gave him a look, and he got the message.

“Okay, we’ll have some such,” he said. “But how are we supposed to set a
budget when we don’t even know how much things cost?”

“Well, do you see that wedding cake in the corner?”

“Is that real?”

“No, it’s just a plaster model. A cake like that costs about six hundred
dollars.”

“Well, no wonder. Plaster is hard to work with.”

Alena cleared her throat.

“I’m just kidding,” Nick said. “That cake is way too big for us, that’s all.”

“Well, what size wedding are we talking about? What about the bridal
party and guest list? Have you discussed that yet?”

“Eight,” Alena said.

“Eight—that’s a nice size for a bridal party,” the planner said. “Eight bridesmaids and eight—”

“No, that’s the guest list.”

The planner looked at her. “Eight guests?”

“Only two for me,” Alena said, “but one of them is the minister, and his wife is playing the organ, so I guess we shouldn’t count them. Make it six.”

“But you must have extended family . . . grandparents? cousins? stepfamily?”

“Not me,” Alena said.

“There’s my mother in Pittsburgh,” Nick said, “but she doesn’t travel these days.”

“What about colleagues and friends?”

“My friends are my colleagues,” Nick said. “I suppose I’d have more, but my colleagues have a way of dying—it’s an occupational hazard in my line of work.”

“My friends are my dogs,” Alena said. “I never had much luck with people. Can my dogs be in the wedding? Not all of them, of course—I have thirty-seven. Just a couple, maybe.”

The planner just looked back and forth between them.

“Look,” Nick said. “I think I can save us all some time here. Alena and I are planning to get married in May, and the fact is neither one of us knows the first thing about weddings—that’s why we’re here. We’ve picked a date, and we’ve got

a church, and that's about it. So, what kind of cake do we want? We haven't got a clue—we never gave it a moment's thought before we—”

“I want this one,” Alena said. She reached across the desk and handed the planner a small photograph of a wedding cake torn from the pages of a magazine.

The planner nodded. “We can do that. It'll cost about a hundred and fifty dollars.”

“And I want to go here,” Alena said, handing over a second photo, “for our honeymoon.”

The planner smiled at the photo. “Very nice. Very traditional. I hear it's lovely there in the spring.”

“May I see those?” Nick asked, leaning across the desk and extending his hand. He took the photos and studied the faded images. One was a photo of a simple white two-tiered wedding cake with traditional bride-and-groom figurines perched on top; the other was a photo of a handsome young couple reclining in a heart-shaped bathtub, their perfect bodies tastefully concealed beneath mountains of carefully positioned bubbles. The banner atop the ad read: “Picture Yourself in the Poconos.”

The couple in the bathtub looked strangely out of date to Nick; the man's mustache and hairstyle were straight out of the eighties. He turned the photo over and checked the date of the magazine; sure enough, the photo was more than twenty years old.

Nick looked at his fiancée as if he were seeing her for the first time . . . What happened to the clueless neophyte who walked in here with him? What happened to the woman who had never given a moment's thought to wedding

cakes or rehearsal dinners or honeymoon locations? What happened to the woman who was just like him?

Nick now realized that Alena had been thinking about this event for a very long time—ever since she was a little girl—and she had very definite ideas about how things should be done, right down to the shape of their honeymoon tub.

“You already have a cake picked out,” he said to her.

“So?”

“What if I wanted a different one?”

“Do you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t even like cake.”

“Then what are you whining about?”

“My steering wheel doesn’t work.”

“What?”

“When I was five years old, my mom took me to Kennywood—it’s an amusement park near Pittsburgh. I wanted to get on the bumper cars, but when they started the ride I kept crashing into everything.”

“Nick, what are you talking about?”

“I grabbed the little steering wheel and started turning, but nothing happened. Then it dawned on me: The steering wheel didn’t work—it was just something to hold on to while I smashed into things.”

Both women just stared at him.

“Why don’t you girls go ahead,” he said. “I’ll be over here if you need me.”