

# Chapter One

The wedding was more than I ever could have wished for. The church was dark and simple. White candles in glass sconces lined the gray stone walls, and a gigantic candelabra cast a golden glow on the altar. The pews were trimmed with sprigs of bittersweet and branches of Chinese lantern plant tied with brown and orange gauzy ribbons.

The wedding was perfect, except for two things. The satin bridesmaids' gowns that were ordered in deep, rich cinnamon showed up two days before the wedding and were bright Halloween pumpkin. And instead of standing across from the groom, beaming, I was standing across from his first cousin, Norman, smiling a hollow smile like a jack-o'-lantern.

That, and I probably wouldn't have gone with *brown* roses. I tried to talk Janie out of them.

"Brown is the color of dead flowers, Janie."

"But they don't look like dead flowers, Van. They're elegant."

It was a lost cause. *Martha Stewart Weddings* had a spread of fall bouquets, and Janie's mom made a ton of trips out to Connecticut to ex-

actly the same florist to have exactly the same bouquets made for Janie's wedding.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Janie's cousin Libby standing next to me, dabbing at her eyes with a lace-trimmed handkerchief. Not only did she have the teary smile down, but she somehow managed to look fabulous in bright orange. I couldn't see Bethany, Janie's college friend, from where I was standing, but I was sure she was crying appropriately as well. She seemed like the type. At least she looked awful in her dress too.

I spent the whole ceremony with my hands wrapped around my bouquet of bittersweet and Janie's brown roses, digging my nails through my orange satin gloves into the back of my other hand.

I missed the part about anyone having any reasons as to why these two blah blah blah blah blah . . . I missed the "I do's" and all that crap. I just stood there and concentrated on pressing hard enough to feel pain through two layers of thick satin.

I tried not to look at Peter, in his slate gray tuxedo and shiny shoes, as perfect as the porcelain groom Janie ordered for the top of their wedding cake. And I tried not to look at Janie, glowing in the reflection of candlelight sparkling off of the crystals hand-sewn along the neckline of her dress. I stared at the brown roses and tried to make it look like I was solemnly meditating on the meaning of marriage and the serious commitment being made before my very eyes.

Then they were kissing and the whole deal was done. Janie pressed her hand against Peter's chest to keep him from kissing her too long or too hard or in a way that might be inappropriate for the photographer to capture. I would have held him as close as I could for as long as I could, but I tried not to let myself think about it. I put the jack-o'-lantern smile back on my face and handed Janie her brown flowers.

Norman and I followed them down the aisle, my hand positioned just above the crook of his elbow the way Vanessa, the wedding planner, showed me. We walked in "step-pause" time. Norman reached across with his other arm and put his hand over mine. I kicked him in his calf during the pause part of our procession walk, and hissed, "Don't

get ideas, Normy,” through my smile. He dropped his hand back to his side.

At the reception at the Kittle House, Norman rambled through a long and painful toast that started with how he and Peter used to think girls had cooties and ended with a diatribe about his divorce and how he couldn't have gotten through it without Peter. We raised our glasses of champagne before switching over to spiced wine for the traditional Thanksgiving feast, spread out across the tables like a picture of gluttony from the time of kings and knights.

I was thankful that Janie's father decided it was tacky for the maid of honor to toast the couple. This was a rule he probably made once he realized I was going to be Janie's maid of honor, no matter what he had to say about it. Charles Driscoll hated me ever since I taught Janie the f-bomb in fourth grade. Janie got sent home from school for saying it in front of her teacher, leaving a permanent mark on her pristine school record.

Charles will always blame me for Janie not getting into Harvard and having to go to Brown instead. He will forever be convinced that the f-bomb blemish on Janie's permanent grade school record had kept her out. In reality, she stuffed her application in my book bag instead of the mailbox. Every time I see him now, I want to scream, "It's not because I taught your daughter to say *fuck*, it's because she didn't want to go to Harvard, you dumb ass!" but in honor of the wedding, I resigned myself to, "Mr. Driscoll, you must be so proud."

After the first course, Peter stood up to say a few words about his lovely bride and the joyous occasion. He described Janie as *angelic*. He kept calling her Jane. He used the word *joyous* more than once, and quite frankly, it was overkill.

Just when I thought he was finally done, he said, "I also want to thank Savannah Leone for being such a wonderful friend to me and my wife." He laughed softly and looked into his champagne flute. "Wow, my wife. It's so strange and amazing to say that word." He reached over and kissed Janie on the cheek. The wedding photographer had a field day. "Anyway," Peter continued, "as I was saying, Van is the real deal. She's a true friend, and

I would have stolen her for my best man, if Jane had let me—no offense, Normy—but I think Van would look far more stunning in that tux, don't you?" He laughed again and waited for the crowd to laugh too. "The truth is, if it weren't for Van, Jane and I never would have met. So if we're going to raise our glasses to toast to this union, let's also raise our glasses to Van for starting it all."

The room filled with clinks and the murmur of three hundred of their closest friends saying, "Cheers." Janie clinked her glass against Peter's and then turned to tap mine, but hugged me instead. "I love you," she whispered into my ear. "I don't know what I'd do without you." Her ribs pulsed against mine and her breath quickened.

"I love you too, but nobody likes a weepy bride," I said, pulling away, trying my best to smile. "Pull yourself together, lady!" I picked up my napkin. "Look up." Janie looked to the ceiling and I used a corner of the white linen to soak up a tear that was balanced on her lashes before it could make a mess of her makeup. "We can be sappy another day."

I wished I could vanish, just melt into the floor, leaving behind nothing but a puddle of orange satin and shoes dyed to match.

When Janie and Pete got up to get ready for their first dance, I started seriously contemplating hiding in the coat closet with a bottle of champagne and an armload of Jordan almonds wrapped up in that stupid white netting. I was supposed to be happy for them. I was supposed to be cheering them on. That's what it means to be a maid of honor—it's about being eternally excited and supportive for every single little second of the wedding, and I couldn't even bear to watch them dance.

"Well, Vannie, I haven't seen you in ages." Peter's aunt Agnes sat down next to me. She never had her own children, and as far as she was concerned, the sun rose and set around Peter. Peter worshiped her, but I called her Aunt Agony. She took us out to dinner a few times up at school, but a good meal was never worth listening to her talk. "We have to catch up. Tell me everything about everything, dear."

"First dance." I pointed to the dance floor as Peter and Janie walked toward each other and met in the middle. "I'd better go. Maid of honor."

I gave her a big closed-mouth smile and got up to stand at the edge of the dance floor. I wasn't sure which form of torture was worse.

While I stood with the crowd, watching the happy couple dance to "The Way You Look Tonight," Diane Driscoll came over and put her arm around my waist. She leaned against me and rested her head on my shoulder.

"We did a good job with our little girl, don't you think, Vannie?" she said.

I didn't know if she meant tonight, or in general. And I couldn't tell if I was included in the "we" or if she just meant her and Charles.

But then she said, "I wish Natalie could see this," and I knew the "we" meant her and my mom. "You know, you look just like she did the first time I met her," she said, and lifted her head to kiss my cheek. She put her head back on my shoulder, and I felt her tears run down my arm while we watched Janie and Peter finish their dance with the complicated turn Vanessa taught them.

She wiped at her eyes quickly and turned toward me, grabbing both my arms. "You're coming back to stay at the house tonight, right?" she said. "I set up the carriage house with junk food and movies. I thought we could celebrate like old times."

My mom and I used to live in the Driscolls' carriage house, which was two hundred and eighty-two steps from the front door of the main house (Janie and I counted the summer before we started fourth grade) on their sprawling property in Chappaqua. It was weird to think of Diane commandeering it for her own celebration. Even though it was technically her carriage house, I always thought of it as mine and my mom's.

You can't substitute me for my mom, I wanted to tell Diane. But I didn't. "I have to go back up to Rochester tonight," I said. "I've got a big grant due next week, and I didn't bring my laptop."

"Oh no you don't. No one works on Thanksgiving weekend, Savannah Leone. Not even you." She patted my arm, and then squinted up her eyes like she was staring into the sun. "That dress is unfortunate," she said, grabbing a handful of the skirt of my satin dress and letting it fall again. "I

can't believe those idiots at the bridal store got the color so wrong! Why would there even be an option for bright orange? Who would choose this on purpose?"

"It's not that bad," I said, trying to downplay the error. We'd already been through hours of dress drama prior to the ceremony. Diane was livid. Phone calls were made, threats were screamed. There were tears. There was cursing. And none of it made the dresses any less orange.

Diane let out a disgusted sigh and shook her head. "You look like a pumpkin, dear," she said, flatly. Then she kissed me on the cheek. "I'll see you back at the carriage house. We'll have fun." She gave me a broad smile and a nod like it was decided, and ran off to hug Janie.

I missed the way Diane's eyes used to crinkle at the sides when she smiled. My mom nursed her through her face-lift and a few months later Diane nursed my mom through all the chemo.

I stood there, watching Diane brush a curl of hair off of Janie's cheek. I wished for a way to clean out my head so I could just be happy for Janie instead of thinking about Peter, or about how even if I did get over Peter and found someone else to fall in love with, my mother would never be there to fix my hair at my wedding.

I felt a cold hand on my shoulder.

"Van?" Peter said. "I need a favor."

I turned around and looked at him. His tie was loose and the top button of his shirt was undone. His cheeks and his nose were flushed bright red, and I couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to have all that breathless excitement be about me instead of Janie.

"Sure," I said, trying not to make eye contact. I was certain that looking into Peter's blue-gray eyes would break my heart.

"I know you're enjoying the wedding, but . . ." He stopped and looked at Norman, who was slumped over the bar getting yelled at by the woman bartending. "Norman was supposed to go over and set up the room. But he's not—" He tilted his head in Norm's direction and raised his eyebrows. "Can you?"

"No problem," I said, hoping the relief at having an excuse to leave wasn't oozing down my face.

“You’re the best, Van.” He grinned from ear to ear and slapped my back like we were locker room buddies. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He handed me a set of keys attached to a silver Playboy bunny with a diamond eye. “Norman’s car,” he said, rolling his eyes. “The box is on the front seat. It should be self-explanatory.” He hugged me and rested his chin on my bare shoulder for a second. “You’re okay to drive, right?” His breath was hot. He pulled away to give me a good look, like he was making sure.

“Okay,” I said, staring at his shiny new platinum wedding band.

“Thanks, Van. I owe you one.” He gave me a quick peck on the cheek before running off. I felt the pressure of his lips on my face even after he’d disappeared into the crowd.

Janie and her dad had just started dancing to “Thank Heaven for Little Girls.” Creepy. I took it as my cue to go. I ducked into the coatroom to grab the brown faux fur wrap Janie gave me as a bridesmaid’s gift, and made my escape to the parking lot.

I walked around the lot, clicking the door opener until the lights on a silver BMW lit up. The license plate read LADEZMAN.

When I put the key in the ignition, Michael Bolton blared from the speakers. I took out the CD and threw it on the backseat. Flipping through the CDs in the console, I found Boston. I slid it into the CD player and backed out of the parking space to the opening chords of “More Than a Feeling.”

My mom and I were closet Boston fans. We kept all of our Boston records under her sweaters on the top shelf of her closet and listened to them only when we knew there was no chance of anyone coming over.

I tore down the gravel road away from the Kittle House and made the tires squeal when I turned onto paved road. Normy’s car hugged the turns of the Saw Mill River Parkway as I made it from Chappaqua to Tarrytown in record time.



I drove down to Westchester early, and Janie and I spent the two nights before the wedding in the bridal suite at a hotel called the Castle on the

Hudson in Tarrytown. It was awful. I had to sit next to her in the spa getting my nails painted some color called Raisin Sunset, listening to her go on and on about every little detail, and every last thing she and Peter had said to each other about the wedding. I tried my best to act like the friend I was supposed to be. Thankfully, Janie was too wrapped up in everything to notice how miserably I was failing.

“Oh, Van,” she gushed, waving her unpainted hand at me, while the woman doing her nails struggled to keep her other hand still. “I can’t wait until you fall in love!”

My stomach lurched forward. I felt like the truth would spill out of my mouth if I didn’t fight to keep it down. I pictured the words coming out of my mouth like those shadow people on *The Electric Company*, syllables at a time, hanging in midair until they spelled out *I am in love with your fiancé*, while Janie watched in horror.

“I want you to feel like this,” Janie said, “like there is one person for you and you’ve got him. The first time I saw him, that night in your dorm, I just knew. You know it when you find it, Van.”

But what happens when you find it and it doesn’t find you back? I thought about all the substitutes, the guys I dated in secret so I wouldn’t discourage Peter from picking me if he had the chance to again—the one with the contraband iguana in his dorm room and the Mr. Spock costume in his closet, the one who could burp the periodic table of elements, the one who plucked his eyebrows and swore he didn’t, the sweet one after college who wanted me to move in, right when Janie and Peter were going through their rough patch and I thought maybe, just maybe, I’d finally have a chance. All of them paled in comparison to Peter. It was like they weren’t even men. They weren’t the same species or something. They didn’t make me feel anything, but with Peter, all he had to do was look at me and I felt everything. I felt pretty and special and important and smart. When he looked at me, I felt like we were the only two people who mattered.

I looked over at Janie, who was chattering on about her honeymoon plans, and felt like the worst maid of honor in the history of maids of honor. I silently vowed to stop thinking about her future husband com-



pletely, even though I knew it was a false promise. The manicurist coated each of my nails in three quick strokes. I tried to focus on that and clear my head of everything else. One. Two. Three. My thumbnail was brown. One. Two. Three. Index. One. Two. Three. Middle finger.

“When we plan your wedding,” Janie said, breaking my focus, “we can do everything we didn’t get to do for mine.”

I couldn’t think of anything that hadn’t been done for her wedding. From the Rube Goldberg ice sculpture for chilling shots to the potted orchid centerpieces on each table, every element of the wedding had been planned with lavish precision. Janie had yet again forgotten that there was a very big difference between being the daughter of Charles and Diane Driscoll, and being the daughter of Charles and Diane Driscoll’s housekeeper.

If I ever did fall in love with someone other than Janie’s husband, my wedding would probably be more of a city hall and Best Western affair. Maybe there’d be trays of baked ziti congealing over Sterno candles or desiccated stuffed cod swimming in lumpy cream sauce, but certainly not three separate dessert courses and a ten-piece jazz band.

After we got our nails done, I had to go with Janie to pick out lingerie for the wedding night.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, breathlessly, handing me hangers as she pulled gowns off the rack to take to the dressing room. “Mom wanted to come, but this just isn’t something you do with your mother! And I’ve been dreaming about shopping for my wedding with you since we were like seven at least.” She looked up at me. I thought she might get teary for a second, but then she bounced over to the next rack. “Ooh, we haven’t seen those yet!”

She was so happy. I felt awful about feeling awful.

“Why don’t you start trying these on.” I ushered her into a dressing room. “I’ll scope out the rest and bring over the good ones.”

I grabbed every nightgown in the size-four section in one scoop and fed them to her one at a time over the door. The nightgowns were so tiny. I held one up to myself in front of the mirror. It looked like a doll dress. But then, Janie’s waist was like the size of my thigh. We were cut from very

different molds. Next to a normal-size person, I was average—a little on the tall side, and maybe I could stand to lose a few pounds—but next to Janie, I was an Amazon woman. Where she was angled, I was rounded. Where she was diminutive, I was bulky. I had a full seven inches on her five-foot-two frame. And to make it worse, she had this annoying habit of wearing ballet flats all the time. She didn't feel the need to compensate for her height at all. She liked to emphasize it, like she was basking in the simplicity of her stature and figure. Janie was the type of person who could wear a potato sack and make it look like haute couture. On me, it would look like a potato sack. Plus, it would be way too short, and so tight across my boobs and butt that it would be completely indecent.

There was a brief little span of time when it didn't bother me much. Janie was built like a twelve-year-old boy, and I was an early bloomer. In high school, most guys who wouldn't give her a second look would follow me with their tongues wagging. But now, she wasn't underdeveloped as much as refined. Everything about her was delicate, and everything about me felt overdone. Her hair was the perfect shade of chestnut. Mine was the kind of jet-black that almost looked blue in the wrong light. In the summer, even after hours in the sun, Janie would walk away a little golden, with perfectly pink cheeks. I'd turn a brash bronze instantly. Away from Janie, I felt like a normal person. Sometimes, I even felt beautiful. But next to her, my ears were too big, my nose was too round, my hands were too manly, and I couldn't help but notice the way my thighs slapped together when I walked. And it was worse now that Peter was giving Janie so much more than a second look.

Janie was partial to a white satin gown with a high neck and a crisscross back, but then I handed her a red satin slip trimmed in black lace.

"Van! This is so un-weddingy," she said, trying to cover herself with her arms while I peeked in the dressing room. But she looked incredible and she knew it. With her dark hair piled up on her head in a sloppy bun, and the contrast of the red and black against her pale white skin, she looked regal and a little slutty at the same time. And she gave in, using me as her excuse to be wild.

“I guess you’re not going to stop pestering me until I get it, so I might as well,” she said, sighing and shaking her head like she was annoyed with me, even though she was grinning.

I wondered if there’s a special place in hell for jealous bridesmaids.



I was singing “Rock and Roll Band” at the top of my lungs when I got to the Castle on the Hudson, but I stopped singing before I pulled up to the front door. I turned the stereo off and gave Normy’s keys to the valet. I lugged the brown cardboard box out of the backseat. No one offered to help me with the box as I walked through the lobby to the elevator. My heels clicked on the marble and one of the orange gloves fell out of my purse. A bellhop rushed over frantically to hand it back to me. The concierge gave me a dirty look. I must have looked like a cheap hooker in my bright orange satin and fake fur. I couldn’t get to the elevator fast enough.

When I got to the room, I pulled the box apart quickly. I didn’t want to drag it out any longer than I had to. There was a big box of red rose petals, vanilla-scented votive candles in crystal holders, a book of matches, and a satin JUST MARRIED banner.

I threw big handfuls of rose petals on the bed, the floor, and the armchair, and tied the banner to the end posts of the bed. Peter could have had the concierge do this.

I couldn’t decide if I was supposed to light the candles. It was probably the point of having someone come get the room ready: so Peter could carry Janie over the threshold into a perfect, candlelit room. But I didn’t think burning down their honeymoon suite was the way to go, so I arranged them in a circle on the dresser and left the matches next to them.

In the bottom of the box was a white satin nightgown with a strappy crisscross back. I pulled the tags off and laid it out on the bed. I went into the bathroom and found Janie’s red slip hanging on a padded hanger. I took it down and tucked it in the bottom of her suitcase.