

Chapter 1

Perrin Williams hung up the dress bags and collapsed onto the tattered gray sofa in her design studio. Exhaustion still rippled through her in familiar waves. She felt both the dull ache and the immense satisfaction that typically coursed through her after an exceptionally long bout of clothing design, her favorite form of play.

The gentle light of the warm late-April-in-Seattle morning filled her boutique and design studio with a soft glow that made her want to just sprawl here and giggle madly. Somehow, against all odds, her life had brought her to work and create in this wonderful, safe space.

This time the exhaustion had been earned at the wedding of one of her two best friends. “Jo” Thompson had married Angelo Parrano at an event of grand proportions in the heart of the Pike Place Market.

Many of the Seattle elite had attended. More than a few had commissioned dresses from Perrin’s Glorious Garb. Which elicited another giggle that might have been a chortle of self-satisfaction.

No one around yet to tell her if her tired brain had tipped over the edge to gloating, so she let herself revel in the wonder of it all.

To see her designs flashing among the wedding crowd had filled her heart in a way that had left her speechless more than once last night. Because it was a Market wedding, after all, Jo was the new director of the Pike Place Market, the finest street musicians had added their music—including some great dancing music from the rolling-piano guy. The food was perhaps the finest Maximilien's had ever made. Perrin had put a giant sign on the kitchen door, "Angelo not allowed past this point." The groom, one of Seattle's most highly-acclaimed chefs, had it coming. Everyone, including Perrin, had made sure he was reminded of that sign often throughout the night.

The bride and groom had looked so beautiful dancing beneath the moonlight. They swayed together out on the patio overlooking Elliott Bay, a backdrop of scooting ferries and the brilliant glow of the ice-capped Olympic Mountains beyond. The couple had looked so in love. So happy.

Perrin shot to her feet and paced around the studio. She'd gone past tired and tipped right over into hyperactively awake. At some point soon she'd crash for a day or two, but not yet.

She unzipped the first bag. Jo's dress of shimmering pale blue cascaded forth. She'd have it cleaned and properly boxed before Jo and Angelo returned from a week in Hawaii. Neither of them had ever been there, and a week was all either of them could afford to be away at the moment. April was perfect weather in both Seattle and the resort on Kauai's eastern shore, especially known for relentlessly pampering its guests.

Perrin pulled Jo's dress in front of her and posed before the tall antique tri-fold mirror of beveled glass and dark oak. She turned on the lights, the early morning sun didn't reach into this corner of her studio. The pale blue had complimented Jo's Alaskan-dark complexion and flowing black hair. There had been no need for the dress to accent the curves, Jo's body had provided those perfectly.

Perrin tilted her head critically, and then had to roll it around a bit to loosen the crick from a serious lack of sleep. The dress wouldn't do at all on her own pale skin and slender frame. She hung it on the "to be cleaned" rack.

From the second bag she pulled out the bridesmaid dresses that she and Cassidy Knowles had worn. They had been as softly gold as the bride's dress had been softly blue. The gold had picked up highlights in the best man's suit that Perrin had dressed on Russell.

She'd also accented the mother-of-the-bride's dress with just a bit of the soft gold as well, which had made the photographs really pop. Russell had shared a few tips with her that only a professional fashion photographer would know. Seeing Eloise giving away her previously estranged daughter had brought tears to everyone's eyes.

Perrin sighed and hung the other dresses beside the wedding gown. Cassidy and Russell. Jo and Angelo. That left only Perrin without a man anywhere on the horizon. Part of her didn't want one.

"Avert!"

It was like some order from a space-captain's chair, "Evasive maneuver delta." "Avert!" It always made her smile, and because it was such a silly and simple thought it usually did track her away from thinking of her life prior to meeting Cassidy and Jo in college.

She didn't want a man because of the nightmare example of her family, but she also desperately did want one. One like Cassidy or Jo had found. The rough edges of Russell, the sensitivity of Angelo. And as long as she was making a list...

A knock on her door had her checking herself in the mirror: a simple light wool skirt appropriate for fall and a bright spring shirt topped with a summery sheer batik scarf. She was missing a season. Which one? Oh, winter. She really was tired, something to do with not having slept except for occasional catnaps in the last four or five days.

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“Wilson. Please tell me this is one of your crazy jokes.” Except the Director of the Emerald City Opera was not given to jokes, at least not practical ones. Bill Cullen glared at the display window of the fashion designer’s storefront that Wilson had led him to. The stuff in the window was cute, urban. He guessed it would draw a woman passing by into the shop, just as well as a dozen other places that he seemed to pass every day. They cropped up, more dreams than solid basis in either business acumen or common sense. Then they went away and someone else moved in the next day with their hopes and dreams clutched tight.

He turned away and studied the neighborhood.

Wilson Jervis had dragged him into the heart of the Belltown area to meet a designer. The old brick building did nothing to inspire his confidence. After Pioneer Square, this was one of the oldest portions of downtown Seattle, just north of the business core. Most of the area had been rebuilt, turned into condos and ad-agency-slick small business fronts. She was on a block that had somehow been bypassed by the neighborhood’s recent rejuvenation and gentrification.

Its age showed in many ways, darkened brickwork, cracks in the sidewalk. An abandoned tattoo parlor across the street with a “Half-off for Two” sign that might have once lured customers, but was now superseded by the “Out of Business” sign across the glass. Next to it, a small bike shop looked to be doing okay. Belltown wasn’t dangerous the way Pioneer Square had been before its restoration, this part of it was just old.

“My wife found her. Trust me,” was all the reassurance the rotund icon of the Seattle theater scene offered. He’d been leading the Opera with a confident and mostly unquestioned hand for decades. He’d taken a small company on the verge of insolvency and turned it into one of the five largest opera houses in the U.S., and one of the most respected in the world.

All that still didn't make Bill trust Wilson about this. They were mounting a new opera and it was up to Bill as stage manager to see that it happened perfectly, or at least on schedule and near budget. It was his job to make sure that every piece from set design to costumes to lighting came together by opening night, only six weeks away. What they were doing in Belltown, too early on a Monday morning, was beyond him. Well, not totally beyond him.

Carlotta Gianelli had thrown one of her world-famous tantrums and stalked out yesterday to fly back to Milan and now they needed a costume designer who could perform a six-month miracle in only six weeks. Gianelli had burned up over four months and achieved nothing except some sketches that no one liked or could interpret.

He glared back at the shop as Wilson knocked again.

The glass door bore bold-colored lettering so close to graffiti that he could barely read it. Except he could. The "P" and "G" were actually oversized, ornate letters in the Victorian style. Perrin's Glorious Garb, the second two words attached to the same "G" were actually artful slashes that he recognized as a variety of fashion styles ranging over the last fifty years, somehow done so that they made a unified whole. What he'd almost dismissed as tacky was actually a deeply nuanced understanding of design.

He peered into the window. The shop was dark, but a light shone in back. He spotted a waif coming through the store toward them, silhouetted by the light behind and pulling on a hat despite the warm day.

"We're not open yet," she called through the glass but was already unlocking the door.

She was dressed like some teenager that had been thrown bodily into a closet and crawled forth wearing whatever she fell against. She wore a form-fitting silk turtleneck of new-grass green, an unlikely mauve skirt that evoked autumn swirled in pleats about her calves, and a filmy batik scarf the red-orange of a summer sunset that looked as if it had attempted to throttle

her. All mismatched and crazy, the unlikely ensemble somehow looked good on her in a way he didn't care enough about to attempt to fathom. She'd topped it off with a knit winter hat with earflaps and a ridiculous pom-pom pulled down over pale-blond hair that brushed her narrow shoulders.

Wilson introduced them and talked his way into the shop as easily as he'd talked Bill away from the San Francisco Opera four years before.

Adira's death had made Bill a single dad at thirty-three years old. His need to escape "their" city and the needs of their two children had been the biggest factor by far. But Wilson had not played that card. Instead, he'd offered a new and interesting job in a different city, leaving it to be Bill's own realization that such a change was exactly what he needed to do for both himself and his kids. Tricky s.o.b. To this day he still didn't know quite how that had happened.

Bill followed Wilson into the shop, letting the Director deal with the sloppily dressed clerk. The shop had been set up like a 1950s diner, all chromed metal and red leatherette. Mannequins sat in booths in a quirky mash-up of eras. A '20s flapper cozied up with a '50s greaser and a '40s housewife. Yet that wasn't what they were. The housewife's wide, white collar wasn't on the housewife dress, it was on the flapper's, and it distinctly accented the cleavage. The greaser actually sported the classic lines of a '20s linen suit, but sewn in denim and flannel.

He could hear the girl bubbling away at Wilson about something. Sounded like a chickadee mixed up with one of those small singing birds. Disconnected flighty bits that, even if gathered together, wouldn't really communicate much.

The next booth included Victorian brocade set in a modern blazer, and a gown design that would be formal enough for an opera opening night yet remained racy enough for the hottest club. Even studying the piece didn't reveal how the two distinct messages had been combined in a single garment.

He glanced over at the shop girl, wondering when the owner was coming in.

This girl was all arms and legs and nerves. Her slender build was only emphasized by her height. Fingers flashed out to emphasize points, her gestures were twice life size. She made a grand sweeping gesture which suggested she might be a dancer as well.

She had rolled out a short rack which bore a set of dresses, wedding and two bridesmaids, and was showing them to Wilson as he slouched next to a particularly voluptuous mannequin in a Wall Street business suit. Cutting a suit to a full-figured woman was hard, and she'd made the outfit pop; that it was in hot '50s poodle-pink wool only made it more so. Then he focused on the wedding and bridesmaid dresses. Exceptionally fine work, yet wholly inappropriate for the stage, as it was a masterpiece of subtlety. He'd bet that the clerk would look good in the gold one.

The Director had really lost it this time. All of these clothes were studies of craftsmanship and nuance. But they weren't costumes, especially not ones that would play to the vast three-thousand seat expanse of the ECO Opera House at Seattle Center.

"Where's the designer?"

"Why?" The woman pulled down her winter cap as if to shield herself.

"We're here to see her for reasons that wholly escape me." Up close the girl wasn't so much of a girl. She was a woman, long and sleek. Her hair a long, thick, pale blond that looked too substantial for so elegant a neck. She looked him nearly in the eye despite, he checked, bare feet.

The hat of garish orange wool, with ridiculous ear flaps, had been pulled down almost far enough to hide her eyes, but they shone brilliant blue past pale lashes.

"Why?" Her voice was soft.

"Why what?"

"Why do the reasons escape you?" There was a real "duh" tone to her voice as if he were the one being exceedingly dense and not the other way around.

“Wilson wants to hire her and I want to tell the woman to her face that there’s no way in hell I’ll work with her.”

She regarded him with those bright blues for so long that he had to fight to not look away. There was a mind behind those eyes. And a force of personality all out of balance with the crazed attire and flighty first, second, and third impression.

“Boy, it’s going to really suck being you.”

“Why?”

“Because Director Wilson Jervis of the Emerald City Opera has just offered me the contract to design the costumes for *Ascension*, your next opera. And because it sounds like fun, I,” she turned briefly to Wilson, “thank you Mr. Jervis, yes” then she turned back to him, “have as of this moment decided to accept Perrin Williams at your service.”

She held out a hand and shook his numb fingers strongly when he held them out in shock like a trained puppy.

She was right, it was going to really suck being him.