

Chapter 1

Melanie stood, poised, at the edge of the “wedoption” of her friend Perrin. The ceremony had tradition, spontaneity, and so much heart. A wild mix, just as Perrin was. She had taken vows with her husband as his two children stood by them in Angelo’s Tuscan Hearth Ristorante in the heart of Seattle’s Pike Place Market.

It was Perrin’s new ten-year old son who had named the ceremony. The wedding of Perrin and his dad, and her adoption of Bill’s children—the “wedoption.” The kids were adopting Perrin as much as she was doing so for them.

It was all so sweet that Melanie felt mushy and sniffly inside, not that she’d ever let it show. She pulled out no handkerchief, had no pockets in her sleek dress to carry one. She only showed emotions carefully, and never mushy and sniffly ones. Being one of the fashion industry’s leading models, she’d learned long ago that showing her own emotions was almost never appropriate. Everything she presented, both on the runway and off, was very carefully considered.

Occasionally she wished she could simply react, but that never seemed to work out.

She let her present boyfriend, Carlo, swirl her into a dance across the space cleared at the middle of the restaurant.

“That was *magnifico*, Carlo. Your *Ave Maria*.” The operatic tenor, just finished with a highly successful production at Emerald City Opera, had indeed filled the restaurant with liquid soaring tones that evoked the sanctity of a small church set in the Italian countryside rather than Angelo’s fine dining restaurant in the Market.

“This place and Angelo’s food made it simple. It looks and smells so Italian, I sing from heart. The couple...” he slipped his hand from her waist for a moment to toss a kiss to the sky.

“Yes, *molto bello*.” Melanie had dressed carefully, to not outshine the bride, but she needn’t have worried. One of the most innovative designers working today, Perrin had judged herself and her maid-of-honor daughter perfectly despite their sharply contrasting coloring. Perrin’s golden hair and fair skin and Tamara’s darkly flowing curls and her birth-mother’s dusky complexion had both radiated in Perrin’s designs.

“I could marriage her myself. So pretty.” Carlo swirled her among the other dancers with effortless control. Carlo’s French was as poor as her Italian and his English was non-existent. So, she always spoke in her school-girl Italian and he spoke to her in a child’s rudimentary French. That way they always understood one another and the inability to discuss more complex topics had not been a major issue. Carlo was not a deep man.

But he was a kind and considerate lover. Also, his Mediterranean-dark skin, classic Italian good looks, and international fame had made them a stunning couple, frequently gracing the tabloid covers. But his limitations had soon become apparent and were now wearying. Soon they would be finished. “I have received call on phone,” he whispered as they pulled together for a slow passage of the song. “Marko Lerano has taken ill and they need an Alfredo for *Traviata* at La Scala.”

“That’s such wonderful news for you. La Scala,” at least she thought it might be, so she offered her support. “When do they need you?”

“I have already called the taxi. They say the tickets at the airport will be. You keep hotel room as long as like.”

Well, that was abrupt, but she knew such contracts were rare, vital to a career, and lucrative. Still...

“There is more, isn’t there, Carlo?”

He nodded sadly.

She needed no other cue, she was about to be dumped. People didn’t dump Melanie, she dumped them. She considered getting angry, but she wasn’t, and hated people who put on a show for others. This was the perfect opportunity for a drama queen: a large audience, grinding someone else’s celebration to a total, upstaged halt. Why did some women do that? She’d never understood.

What she did know was that, being Italian and male, it would be hard for Carlo to say the next sentence. They had done well together but she too had known it was over, for her at least. She wouldn’t have minded if he had been left to pine away for her *un petite moment*, but if such was not to be, *c’est la vie*. She could at least be kind.

“It was a good run, Carlo, *oui?*”

“*Si.*” His appreciation shone on his face and the sagging relief in his shoulders. He kissed her on each cheek. “You are wonderful woman, Melanie. Never let persons tell you not.”

“You’re wonderful as well,” she patted his cheek.

He leaned in for a final kiss, but if they were done, they were done. He was wise enough to hesitate then pull back and nod. And just that easily, their six months was over. Moments later he had led her gracefully to the edge of the dance floor, offered a final bow, and, after offering congratulations to the groom once more, slipped quietly out of the restaurant.

She stood pillar-still at the edge of the room as dancers swirled about the dining room floor. Those still at the tables shared stories and smiles among candlelight and buffet dishes.

Melanie sought inside herself for pain, or relief. And found neither. Merely irritation that she had been dumped. The Ice Queen they often called her, due to that perfect mix of self-composure and immense sexuality she could project. It had earned her so many accolades: four swimsuit covers, Victoria's Secret signature model, ever increasing offers of obscene amounts of money from *Playboy* that she kept refusing.

Melanie didn't need the money and would never pose nude. She had caused two major photographers to be fired for taking candid shots while she was changing clothes during a shoot; her contract was very strict on that point. She wore sheer and skimpy, posed naturally with a well-placed arm and little else, or wore only a Godiva of her trademark waist-length blond hair. But that's where she drew the line. The stories of those high profile firings had ensured that all her photographers were very careful around her. Neither of those images had made it out of the studio; the second one she'd had to shatter a five thousand dollar camera in order to make her point. But it had been made and no one in the industry was likely to forget it.

It was *Playboy's* first offer years before that had led to the final fight, of so many, with her mother. She had taught her daughter many lessons. Melanie had discarded most of them, but two lessons she took to heart: care with her money, and only the work mattered. The professional standards and practices Melanie had worked out on her own.

Carlo had left her by two towering vases filled with lilac and rhododendron, not far from the front door; the flowers nicely accented her maroon dress. She could easily slip away, but found herself unusually reluctant to do so. Melanie never stayed until the end of a party—it might look too desperate—but she remained despite that. People came and greeted her and were greeted in return, having no idea that for only the second time in her life she had been dropped by a lover. She could forgive Russell because he hadn't known that's what he was doing at the time.

Carlo however, was a sign. Of what? That things were changing?

Jo, one of Perrin's best friends, and her husband Angelo dropped by.

"So glad you could attend," Jo's touch was friendly as they traded cheek-to-cheek kisses. It really touched her and she let her façade melt enough to let them know it. Angelo was Russell's best friend and knew of their failed relationship all too well. And Jo, the calm, cool clear-thinking powerhouse lawyer who now managed the Pike Place Market. Of all the people she knew perhaps Jo was the only one who didn't judge her as anything more than who she was—inside.

"The food. Angelo. Holy *Merde!*" Melanie flapped her hands as if she couldn't think of enough to say. And she couldn't; his cooking really was that good. Yet another reason she was still standing on the far side of the room from the banquet table. He was one of the best Italian chefs in the country and she'd already had too much to eat, but would eat more if she happened to pass too near the sumptuous table.

He positively beamed.

How odd that she and Jo knew each other so little, but knew each other so well. They had cemented their relationship in an airport bar over two photographs, both by the same photographer. One photo, the moment she had fallen in love with Russell as he captured an image he didn't understand; the other of the same moment for Jo and Angelo, though they hadn't yet known.

She and Jo didn't need to speak to recall the moment where they had set the photographs side by side and Jo's life had changed as she saw the images of herself with her future husband. Jo simply held her hands a moment longer and pressed their cheeks together, no air kisses, no need for whispered words, just understanding and acceptance—both rare items in Melanie's world.

The couple moved on but Melanie felt a better than before they'd arrived.

She took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter so that her hands would have something to do. She didn't really want any. The merriment that resounded around the crowded dining room brushed by her as lightly as the smell of Angelo's amazing marinated lamb—that must be wafting out the windows to tease the tourists walking the cobblestones of Pike Place Market this cool May evening.

Perrin, Jo, and Cassidy—friends since college. And Angelo's mother Maria. They were all so close. You could see it in every gesture. What would it be like to have such friends? She watched them, all happily married. Perrin and Bill dancing to a Fleetwood Mac tune that for some reason was causing their children no end of amusement. Jo and Angelo now with Maria, all tasting the latest dish to come from the kitchen. More food. *Impossible*. Cassidy and Russell also moving across the dance floor.

Melanie took a sip of champagne to hide the pang of envy. Russell was so handsome, having just the right kind of roughness to him, and disgustingly wealthy. Though she had been very careful and was quite well off herself, so that had been less of a factor. Still, they would have been a perfect couple...for about a year. Whereas he and Cassidy looked quite content enough to be together the rest of their lives. Again, she resisted the sigh of longing.

Marriage and lifetime were not for her. Still, she could envy the group of friends their stable husbands and their close friendship.

While the other three women were starting college together, Melanie had dropped out of high school to pursue her modeling career. By the time they'd graduated, Melanie had nailed her first swimsuit cover and had put out a restraining order against her ex-manager mother ever contacting her again.

That had been the day she'd legally dropped her last name forever—she wanted no ties to her past. She'd earned her GED through a correspondence course and her business skills through the college of hard knocks and intense study.

Melanie now hid her desperate, New Jersey past behind careful emotional control and a soft French accent acquired from a learn-at-home computer program and perfected on international photo shoots.

Yet Perrin had made her feel included and welcome rather than the supermodel outsider unexpectedly in their midst. And those who Perrin accepted, her friends accepted without question. It was so unlike Melanie's own world where everything was move and countermove; where the only things that mattered were image and your latest contract. The one escape she allowed herself was into novels, everything else she kept focused on her career.

She allowed herself to simply observe the wedding reception crowd packing the restaurant, taking microscopic sips of champagne to portray herself as content with standing alone.

Angelo's Tuscan Hearth was warm with mahogany tables, blues and yellows on the walls and the midnight dark tablecloths. The wall art was all photographs of the old country by Russell. She had never looked as good as when he was the one photographing her—his retirement from fashion photography had been a blow to the industry.

The dance floor had become more crowded in the few minutes since Carlo's departure. The women wore DKNY, Lauren, Armani, and a fair number of innovative Perrin's Glorious Garb designs. Perrin's work stood out, by not suffering from the classic couture problems. Wearing her designs, a woman could walk out the door and not be out of place strolling through Pike Place Market. They would stand out for their beauty or eye-appeal, but these were not runway-only showpieces.

Perrin's fashion design friends, her new husband Bill's Emerald City Opera companions, and both of their personal friends all jostled happily together, mingling one table to the next. It was a joyous event, laughter an ingredient more common than the regional wines or the amazing food. If she knew how, she would swirl down into the crowd and appear to be enjoying

herself. But the artifice usually so readily at hand eluded her and she remained, standing among the flowers.

Perrin swirled by in Bill's arms, laughing and shining with joy—a joy she had created in herself, despite her past.

Melanie found that the most surprising thing of all. She had always seen herself as too damaged to find a true relationship, yet Perrin's past had been far worse than hers. Here she was, Perrin outshining them all so effortlessly.

The bride's dress was a conceptual and technical masterpiece. The dress, and the complementary one that Tamara wore, emphasized a fairy lightness, a magic that made them both appear to float about the room; both too joyous to touch anything as mundane as the real world. The diaphanous gold over a form-fitting sapphire sheath—like sunset glistening on the ocean. On Tamara's emerging curves and mahogany red hair it modestly promised the woman yet to come.

"Truly, Perrin," Melanie had told her over appetizers, "even in Milan, such work would be valued." It was no less than the truth.

Russell came by, nudged her slightly closer to one of the flower vases and snapped a couple of quick photos. He may have retired from fashion photography, but his skills had grown rather than diminished. Without doing it consciously, she had watched him move through the room, arranging groups but making them look candid.

Jaspar, Perrin's new son, had taken to following Russell around and the two were now consulting on which shots to take and how to set them up. The boy drank it up like a sponge. Russell with children. Melanie put a hand over her heart to stop the pain at the image. He would be such an amazing father even if they were not to be hers.

The shutter clicked again. She stuck her tongue out at Russell, but pulled it back in before he could raise his camera once more. He laughed, then he and his protégé moved on to other subjects.

She felt her phone buzz. Business. She always let the business line through no matter where she was, except during the wedding

ceremony itself. Early in her career, jobs were offered, negotiated, and scheduled in the time span of a week. Now, if they didn't reach you immediately, the job could be gone before you called back. This was a text.

There was only one line: *Sorry. Swimsuit cast now set. Maybe next year. Sue.*

This should have been a contract, not a brush off. This should have been a shot at the cover; her chance to tie Elle for the record of five covers. Instead, she wouldn't be in the issue—for the first time in eight years. There had to be a mistake, but no matter how many times she reread the message, it didn't change. She never begged. She was Melanie. The demand for her modeling time was constant and costly. But this one time she texted back to make sure.

Sue answered immediately, *So sorry. If in my hands, you'd be in. S.*

White lie there, Sue was the editor-in-chief and could easily override any underling's decisions, but you never burned bridges in this industry. So, she wrote back a quick *Thanks and looking forward to next year. M.* White lie back.

It happened.

To others.

Not to Melanie. She'd never lost a contract before. Ever. Not since that photographer's cat had scratched her moments before her first big hand-modeling contract when she'd been eleven. The scar had healed long before the memory of her mother's head-wrenching slap for the lack of caution.

Melanie stood on the periphery of the wedding crowd and used all of her control to remain calm. Passive. *Immobile.* She had known it was time to start planning for her next step. She'd seen too many girls fall by the wayside with no backup plan and many, unlike Melanie, had not been careful with their earnings. There was always some seventeen-year old with perfect skin waiting to be discovered.

But she hadn't been ready for it yet. Tyra had her talk show and acting. Iman had her cosmetics and had married

David Bowie. Naomi was still working, though not as often as she'd like, for a variety of reasons. There were whole chains of supermodel restaurants, as if the skill in the studio and on the runway somehow translated across industries, which it almost never did. And there was only one Kate in the world, only one Claudia, only one Heidi.

It wasn't the death knell of her career, but people would hear that she'd lost the swimsuit issue. Soon, not this year but probably next, her contracts would start to go down instead of up in both money and frequency. She hadn't worked this hard to become second-rate. Even if Victoria's Secret renewed her as their signature model, the writing was on the wall.

She moved along the edge of the room to find a chair in which to sit, her *équilibre* was not being reliable at the moment.

Russell, of course, chose that moment to emerge from around the gently flickering fireplace and step in front of her.

She sighed and strengthened her shields.

"Wow! You look like you've just been gut-punched, Melanie. What's up?"

Russell. Of course. The one person who could see when she was upset. Kind, frequently oblivious, and married to Cassidy Knowles instead of to herself. Russell didn't know everything about her but he knew more than anyone else ever had. Ever. Including how to read the Ice Queen's true emotions if her guard had slipped in the slightest.

There was a time that hadn't been true, but her single failure at making their relationship a lasting one had changed everything, and now he could read her when no others understood. She had been the one to make the mistake of falling in love with him; he had been the one to not notice and leave her behind.

"I appear to have just lost my boyfriend and the next swimsuit issue in the same ten minutes." The shock of saying it aloud cut her inside, despite wearing her cloak of calm for the rest of the world.

“Carlo dumped you? Where is that shit? I’ll kick his damned ass for being so stupid.” Russell was tall, taller than she was if she hadn’t been wearing heels, and began scanning the crowd looking for him.

“Already on his way to Italy, I fear.”

“Does he have any idea what he just threw away? Asshole.” He sounded truly pissed on her behalf.

Melanie smiled to herself. Although Russell had done the same to her, worse because she’d been in love with him as she’d never been with Carlo di Stefano, he was ready to leap to her defense. She pulled Russell close for just a moment, to share an instant of his strength, then kiss him on the cheek.

“Hey, no falling for my husband.” Cassidy came over to join them, she said it with a smile.

“*Excusez-moi*. Too late.” Melanie could have bitten off her own tongue. Not that it was a secret, for Melanie had told Jo and whatever one of the three friends knew, they all knew. But the truth behind her words shifted her light joke over closer to envy.

Cassidy’s gentle hand of sympathy on Melanie’s arm made it both better and worse. The understanding was kind though, and Cassidy was always kind to the very core.

“What’s going on that’s made Russell so angry?”

Melanie told her.

“You lost the swimsuit contract?” Cassidy sounded deeply shocked on Melanie’s behalf. She at least understood which bit of news was actually important.

“Wait,” Russell spun to face her from his continued search for the departed Carlo. “You what? Crap! Is Sue even dumber than Carlo?” Melanie had met Russell while working on a swimsuit issue, had become a key model for Russell Morgan Inc., and shared his bed for almost a year. “I’ll give her a call and—”

“And,” Cassidy interrupted his growing tirade, “ruin any chance of her ever working with Sue again. No, Russell.” Though she was half a head shorter than Russell and looked even more slender than she was when compared with his broad-shouldered

frame, it was clear that Cassidy was indeed the right wife for him. She smoothed out Russell's hair-trigger emotions so effortlessly that neither of them probably noticed. They were that much in sync. Like Perrin and Bill, they were each so much better together than apart. Melanie would have gotten right up in his face and they'd have gone at it.

Once again, Melanie felt the stab of envy. Would she ever find a man to love her that much?

#

"Now what the hell am I supposed to do?"

Silence. No one answered. Because no one was there.

Josh Harper stood at the doorway and listened to the odd quality of his voice echoing about his empty Chelsea condo on New York's Lower West Side. No wife, not anymore according to last week's small sheaf of papers and a court ruling. No lawyer, done and paid off the following day. Not even a realtor, "Just leave the key on the counter. The new owners will be changing the locks tomorrow anyway."

He didn't know anything anymore. The underpinnings of his life had been abruptly pulled when the woman he'd adored had decided she was no longer interested in men, or being married to one. No acrimony. No alimony, their incomes were near enough identical. No hurt, at least on her side, just sadness and apologies and a chaste kiss to end the five happiest years of his life.

With the wondrous and painful insight of perspective, he could now see what she meant, who she really was that neither of them had noticed. But that did nothing to ease the pain. Rather it only added to his sense of feeling foolish. He'd been naïve...or dense...or stupid enough to marry and love a woman who... wanted another woman.

He ran a hand over the Gaggenau cook top where they'd made a thousand meals together, the big double oven that had delivered turkeys and pies to large gatherings of friends. Mostly

her friends, he could now see. Mostly women, though she swore that hadn't been conscious.

Josh still couldn't understand the echoing emptiness that had so recently been his cozy home. That had included his wife. Worse, she'd known for over half a year but had delayed telling him because she couldn't figure out how to approach the subject without hurting him.

At least she didn't have a girlfriend yet, she'd always been true to him just as he had to her.

One thing was clear, he needed a fresh start.

A completely fresh start.

And he could afford one. With his half of the money from the sale of the condo and furnishings, added to his half of their savings, he was set for a while. For several years if he was careful.

Josh pulled out his phone as he stood there at the door with his computer bag over his shoulder, his only constant companion. He'd left a dozen or so boxes, mostly cookbooks, with a storage company that would ship them if he ever figured out where they should go. His other belongings hadn't even filled the trunk of his BMW waiting for him downstairs. Perhaps he'd been too severe in shedding his past, but that was done now too.

He hit speed dial on his phone. When Shirene answered, he kept it simple.

"I quit."

"Don't be an idiot, Joshua. You can't. You're my senior editor. Your prose is part of what makes *Gourmet Week* hum."

"You have my four emergency articles already on file in case I was sick or something went wrong. Well, it's gone wrong. Consider them and my unused vacation as my thirty days notice."

"No, Joshua, my friend. For ten years you've dedicated your life—"

"To reporting about food. And it was fun. But it's not what I set out to do in the beginning. It's not what I want to be doing ten years from now. Call Elric, he'll come aboard happily and do a great job for you. Give you a fresh viewpoint."

“But Joshua—”

“I’m so done, Shirene.”

There was a long silence before she finally responded, “If you ever need a job in the industry, I get your first call?”

“You do.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“And if you need a friend to talk to, you call me anytime, day or night?”

“You’re the best, Shirene.” A friend to talk to. That finally gave him an idea of where he was going. “If you’re ever in Seattle, give a shout.”

“Seattle? What the hell’s in Seattle?” Spoken like a true New York publisher.

“Me. Bye.” Josh hung up, tossed the keys on the counter, and closed the door behind him without looking back.