

Chapter 1

This is...different. Natalya Lamont had been to a number of friends' weddings, but none like this.

"But it is *very* Becky," her mother agreed. That had them both smiling because it was absolutely true.

The double wedding, which appeared to be the first in Eagle Cove's history, held in what had once been Becky's father's cow barn, added an extra layer of merry confusion to the event. The best man for both weddings was the same person—one groom's brother and the other groom's son, as it was to be a father-son double wedding this actually made some form of common sense. Greg's brother Harry was marrying Becky and his father, three years after his wife's death, was also marrying again.

Natalya had come down from Portland to the Oregon Coast for the weekend to help set up and decorate, and it was going to be surprising...surprisingly wonderful.

The reception after the pending ceremonies would make this an even more Becky-esque event. She was a top craft-beer

brewer, so there was beer rather than champagne. In addition to being best man twice, Becky had twisted Greg's arm (which hadn't needed much twisting), to cater it. His restaurant had just been named the best on the entire coast, making both the Whale Cove Inn and the Heceta Head Lighthouse Bed & Breakfast rather tiffy, and promise of his food might have helped account for the amazing turnout. But most especially of all, the barn setting that was no longer a barn was completely Becky.

A classic January storm was rattling the Oregon Coast hard with intense winds and curtains of lashing rain. Eagle Cove in mid-winter didn't offer a lot of venues for weddings.

The Grange Hall—which for a while had also doubled as the Unitarian Church (which now held service in The Flicker movie theater)—had recently been converted into dog kennels and a training area for Catbird Service Assistance Dogs. Catbird had offered the use of the training space which was big enough, but since it smelled of wet dog...

Her mom's grand Victorian B&B, commanding the head of the beach, had hosted weddings in the past but couldn't accommodate the scale of Becky's. It seemed as if half the town had turned out for the doubled nuptials today. So maybe the draw was more than Greg's food.

"Doubt if you'd get a dozen people at my wedding," Natalya whispered to her mother as they waited for the first ceremony to begin.

Her mother threw her head back and laughed. Gina Lamont had the best laugh; she always gave in to it completely. The people around them joined in with bright smiles even though they couldn't have heard the conversation. Mom's laugh just did that to people. Natalya had always envied her mother's laugh.

"You'll have more than you think, dear. We'll invite Becky and she'll bring her friends."

"Thanks a lot, Mom."

"That is if you bother to marry one," her mother plowed on completely ignoring Natalya's sarcastic tone. "You know my advice."

She did. Her father, only ever referred to as “That Unholy Disaster,” had been gone before Natalya was born and her mother had never remarried. A few months ago a stray comment had made Natalya suspicious enough to ask whether or not they’d ever been married in the first place. Her mother had slyly avoided answering by wielding a fresh batch of her irresistible macadamia nut-chocolate chip muffins.

She turned to ask again now, but at that moment Becky’s mom, who was as short, blond, and buxom as the bride, made her way between Natalya and her mother like they were pool table bumpers.

“Sorry,” she gasped out and waved a cherry-flavored ChapStick as an excuse before plunging back into the crowded “bride’s room.”

The main room for the wedding was packed, but the smaller space where the two brides were getting ready was utter mayhem. Natalya and her mom had retreated to the big side-sliding door that opened into the main area just to avoid being trampled by the herd. There was no questioning Becky’s power to win people over.

And it *was* her influence.

Harry, her fiancé, was a high school troublemaker only recently returned. The other couple, Peggy and Judge Slater, were quiet fixtures of the community and had been for decades.

But everyone adored Becky.

Her mother too won people’s hearts effortlessly. Another gift Natalya had failed to inherit along with the big laugh. It was actually okay with her; Natalya often found the social whirl tiring. She had her good friends, and that was enough for her—except they were all here in Eagle Cove while she lived three hours away in Portland.

In another way, Natalya *had* followed closely in her mother’s footsteps, taking a lover when she wanted one and only keeping him until he became boring—which never seemed to take long. But now the second of her two best friends was tying the knot, she was less sure of her choices.

First Jessica and Greg. Now Becky and Harry. That left Natalya and...nobody. She didn't even have anyone to invite as a wedding date, never mind someone with potential for longer term. That wasn't good. But a quick flip through the mental contact list of past affairs also didn't unearth any regrets. Which was good. But it should tell her something...only she couldn't think of what.

However, it was impossible to feel too morose in the glorious mayhem that was a Becky Billings' event. Her friend absolutely knew how to throw a party.

"Aren't they starting yet?" Becky's father came up and asked for the twentieth time in the last ten minutes.

"Check your watch, Max," her mother told him for the twentieth time.

"Oh," he looked at it. "Right." And he was gone again.

"Do you think he actually saw the numbers this time?" Natalya asked.

"Not a chance." Her mom waved at Carl Parker then jabbed a finger in Max's direction. "They'll be talking cows and hogs in seconds."

"No," Natalya shook her head. "The weather." And sure enough, both men turned to look out the nearest window being splashed with rain. They'd been the two big farmers in town before Max Billings had given the farm to Becky and retired to Alaska.

Eventually, the winter venue options had come down to The Flicker movie theater (awkward and nowhere to dance afterward), Peggy's airplane hangar (chilly even with the big heaters running and presently mostly filled with a disassembled 1930s Beechcraft Model 17 Staggerwing that she was restoring), and Becky's barn (so much more inviting than it sounded even before they started dressing it up).

Becky's barn had won the day.

Over the fifteen years since they'd graduated high school together, Becky had converted the cow barn into one of the best craft-beer breweries on the Oregon Coast. The milking stalls

had been replaced with a giant copper cooking kettle, massive fermenting tanks, a bottling machine, lines of kegs, and all of the other strange and magical equipment Becky used to practice her art. She'd walled in a part of the upstairs hayloft as an apartment, which was a very cozy space combining bedroom, kitchen, and bath. They'd recently taken over another section of the hayloft for Harry's home office.

The old, ground-floor milk processing room had been converted into their living room. From there Becky could keep an eye on any batches she was brewing. She'd made it into a homey and comfortable space...that was now a whorl of bridal-prep mayhem.

Bridesmaids, best friends, well-meaning wedding guests, and family were all crowded about them in what had been the milk processing room and was now a very comfortable living room.

The wedding proper filled the former calving barn to capacity. Becky had turned it into a tasting room. She'd refinished the inside wood so that the Douglas fir planking glowed warmly under a wash of indirect lighting. A long oak bar took up one end of the big room. It now served as a backdrop for the ceremony.

Behind the bar were lined up a dozen beer taps, from Windy Wheat Ale at one end to Rushing River Stout at the other. And there was always a pony keg of Becky's Original Root Beer hooked up as well, a brew she'd started selling for a dime a bottle back in fourth grade. The taps were all shaped like bluebirds for Becky's childhood nickname, with the flavor clearly marked on each bird's wing.

Above the bar at the far end of the room was a massive painting of the town of Eagle Cove as if seen from a plane flying offshore.

It was one of the best things Natalya had ever worked on. It was also one of the last paintings she'd ever done. Her life in Portland was web and product design, and she'd only picked up her brushes a few times in the years since she'd helped do this.

The town filled the two-mile stretch of beach from the rocky headland of Orca Head with its proud lighthouse to where the

Eagle River arrived after a rushing descent out of the Coast Range mountains into the broad reach of Eagle Bay. The town proper was nestled where beach met bay and backed by the start of the dense state forest that covered the rugged slopes. No town history explained why it was called Eagle Cove when there was no cove to be found for miles around.

Natalya wondered how the Judge felt about that painting—and that he'd be married beneath it. It was based upon a photograph taken by his wife-to-be. But it had been painted by his late wife and Natalya. It was one of the last works that Ma Slater managed before the cancer drove her to bed. She'd been such a guiding hand for Natalya's own art. She didn't know about the Judge, but it certainly made her own heart hurt.

Ma had used the detailed style that had made her famous up and down the Oregon Coast to render the town she'd so loved.

Natalya had then painted the framing foreground of massive Douglas fir and coastal pine to the sides. She'd added the three-masted schooner *Wawona* that had transported massive loads of Oregon lumber and fish down to San Francisco in the late-1800s—though getting the perspective and rigging right had almost made her crazy. She'd had much more fun adding the mother-daughter team who had platted the town at that time. They had both been very fashion conscious so it had given Natalya a chance to render them in full Victorian style, her absolute favorite era, though it had been hard to resist steampunking them up a bit. Unwilling to mar the composition with their animosity (history told that they hadn't spoken once in the last forty years that they'd lived in side by side houses) but also not wishing to rewrite history, she had arranged for them to be looking in different directions.

The two women also had been avid birders. So they had divided the town, through intermediaries: the seaside half of the town to have streets named by the mother for land birds and the landward half by the daughter named for seabirds. Hence, the single question that the Eagle Cove Chamber of Commerce

received the most often. They'd divided the town's naming right down the middle of Beach Way, Eagle Cove's main street, then moved into the two grand Victorians at the end of town. Natalya and her mother were direct descendants of the daughter and the Slaters had bought the mother's property when she passed.

Natalya wished she'd worn a watch so that *she* could check it. With the bride's father happily catching up with his old friend and neighbor, Natalya was now the one impatient for the first ceremony to begin. Her own antsy feelings didn't extend to the crowd's though. Probably because Becky had the foresight to post Alex her assistant behind the bar. He was busy making sure that everyone had a brew to sip while they were waiting. A beer sounded good at the moment.

She turned to her mom to see if she wanted one, but she was busy catching up with Becky's mother—still clutching her unopened cherry ChapStick.

So much history here. Natalya had to try hard again to shake off the sadness. Eagle Cove was so rich and full; it had a texture and depth like a fine painting...and yet she lived in Portland rendering websites and marketing products.

It's a good job, she reminded herself. *You love your job*, she wished her internal voice had sounded more convincing on that second point. Natalya made her living from techno-retro design. She led a whole team of web and product designers specializing in it at ORTech4U2. Her Victorian division of Oregon Tech For You Too accounted for over a third of website and product designs, both period authentic and steampunk "updated." They were on the verge of breaking into film. It should be exciting, riveting, consuming...well it was certainly the last one. She'd definitely feel the pinch of taking off an extra day tomorrow. Tuesday was going to be hell.

By force of will, she focused back on the room itself.

To the sides of the long beer-tasting/wedding room stood an odd assortment of twenty tables and a hundred chairs that had been borrowed from The Puffin Bay Diner and other places

around town. Because Becky had cleared out the cases of bottled beer usually offered for sale, there was plenty of room for the dancing afterward.

But first there were two weddings to manage.

“Which of us is first again?” Her mom turned back as Becky’s mother rushed away once more. It wasn’t like her mother to be spacy about anything. She was a statuesque redhead with an easiness that Natalya had never managed to even emulate never mind possess. Yet being bridesmaid to Peggy Naron, who had been one of the other long-term single women of the town, had definitely put Mom off her game.

“I’m a bridesmaid first,” Natalya reassured her. “See?” she pointed to the Judge standing in front of the bar-soon-to-be-altar. He was an imposing man even without his black magisterial robes. In them today, with his shock of white hair and somber expression, he looked truly grand. If he was there, ready to go, then it was Harry and Becky’s ceremony first.

Her first cousin Jessica arrived in a flurry. She instantly started fussing with the gown Natalya was wearing. It was a long black sheath that matched Jessica’s—it had become tradition among them for the bridesmaids to wear black as they “mourned” the fall of another of their childhood trio into marriage.

Natalya had wanted to shift over to black steampunk. But Jessica had vetoed that—her own marriage had turned her into some kind of a spoilsport, though she and Becky had still been in favor of the black dresses.

Instead Jessica was now fussing with Natalya’s flowers (a beautiful bouquet of yellow winter jasmine and red poinsettia—which Natalya had successfully dubbed as Becky’s *Ironman* colors), her hair (dark and worn loose past her shoulders, nothing like Jessica’s trendy layer cut—though Natalya was the one stuck living in a big city), and then rearranging where the spaghetti straps crossed on her back. Finally Natalya had to slap at her hands.

“Stop it, Jessica. Is Becky ready?”

In answer, Tiffany—who had eased into the role of wedding manager as quietly as she did everything else—gave them both a light shove from behind and between one breath and the next she and Jessica were headed up the aisle, making way for Becky, the bride. Becky’s mother and father had come down from their Alaskan retirement to escort their only child. Becky had needed the steadying hand of both of them, so both parents were currently flanking her as they went up the aisle.

Except there weren’t really aisles. Some chairs had been moved to the front by the bar-altar to accommodate the elderly, but it was more a friendly gathering than anything organized. Bride and groom sides were utterly meaningless in the packed house.

“We’re like plowshares,” Natalya whispered as she and Jessica forged a pathway from the bride in the back to the groom waiting up front. She had to shoo Dawn and Vincent’s twin girls out of the way several times because they somehow kept popping up in successive layers of the shifting crowd.

“You’re next!” Jessica whispered. Then the last of the crowd fell silent as Becky began walking up the aisle.

Natalya didn’t get a chance to tell Jessica just *how* unlikely her being next was, though it did make a certain amount of sense. At least by the process of elimination.

The three of them had been best friends since, well, birth. After today she’d also be the last one to be “cheerfully single” as they had all proclaimed over the years.

But there wasn’t a soul on her horizon. There were always men hanging around, but none of them were interesting enough for more than a dalliance.

Was it any surprise? She’d never fit in.

Jessica and Becky were like younger twins of their mothers. Natalya’s brunette and dusky skin nothing like her friends, her mother, or the few photos of “That Unholy Disaster.”

They both had fathers to walk them down the aisles. Natalya could barely remember her father’s name most of the time.

“T.U.D.” her mother would say when referring to him until his name might as well be Tud. A missing “r” was always implied by her mother’s tone.

There was no more sign of Tud in the crowd than there had been over the last thirty-two years and Natalya didn’t miss what she’d never had. Not much anyway. She’d never really dreamed about finding a permanent man in her life, but her friends were planting the idea.

The crowd finally parted enough for Natalya to now see Harry Slater standing at the head of the aisle, vainly trying to catch a glimpse of his wife-to-be. Becky was six inches shorter than Natalya and Jessica’s five-ten. She and Jessica shifted together so that their shoulders were brushing, just to make it harder on Harry; the move earned them a pained smile. His brother Greg stood close beside him in his new suit; his eyes were only for his four-months pregnant wife.

“You should be banished,” she whispered to Jessica as they neared the head of the aisle.

“Me? Why?”

“Looking too damned happy.”

“You’ll see,” was all the frustrating response that her friend offered as she looked back at Greg all goofy-happy.

Natalya didn’t want to see. She wouldn’t mind a man someday, but they’d have to be cut out of a different cloth than any man she’d ever dated. But if she hadn’t found one in all of Portland, she certainly wasn’t going to find one here in Eagle Cove.

Now that the wedding party was all assembled—and Alex had served the last beer from behind the “altar,” at least until after the ceremony—it suddenly felt very real. The second of her two best friends was about to be married.

For a moment, Natalya wished there was someone here to look at her the way the groom and his best man-brother were looking at their wife and wife-to-be. The second groomsman was leaning down and chatting with the groom. He towered above both brothers and even the Judge.

Cal Mason Jr. was built on as massive a scale as the suit that actually looked damned sharp on him. Cal was the sort of guy you wouldn't think owned a suit but the charcoal gray three-piece looked amazing. Light-haired and blue-eyed, he could be the twin of his father. He'd crossed six foot in junior high and by the time he and Harry were lead strikers for the Puffin High soccer team, he'd topped out at six-four. He had a Nordic reindeer-herder sized frame more appropriate for football, though Natalya could still recall how agile he'd been as he raced up and down the field. Harry might have thought he'd ruled the games, or that it had been a cooperative effort, but Cal was simply in another league. The problem was that he'd known it—not arrogant perhaps, but still too cocky for her taste.

She could see him joking with Harry, probably being “bar” shallow even though they now stood at an altar. The instant Harry spotted his bride, Cal Jr. might as well have been babbling away on some other planet. *Tough luck, Cal.*

He caught on quickly and began scanning the room. His eyes slid past Natalya with as much recognition as—

He jolted and turned back to look at her. Not Jessica. And not Becky. Definitely her.

She made a point of shifting to a preoccupied expression and looking away as if he didn't exist. At least that was the plan. But Cal's attention had riveted on her and she couldn't ignore her reaction to that familiar smile that spread across his features. In fact, Natalya almost bumped into the groom at the head of the aisle, because she was having trouble looking away from Cal Mason Jr.

Only when Jessica pinched her, rather more sharply than Natalya felt was called for, did she veer to the bride's side. Even the Judge looked at her a little oddly.

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What the hell was up with weddings?

Cal wanted to ask Harry, but he was all busy with responses, vows, and the biggest shit-eating grin ever worn by man. Of course, marrying Becky Billings, it was hard to blame the guy. She was damned cute. Wedding white did absolutely nothing to hide how hot the woman was. It also didn't hurt that her smile was just as ridiculously oversized as Harry's.

After a bit of debate, Harry had chosen Greg to do the actual best man dance, carrying the ring and all that. It was fine with Cal; nice to see the two brothers getting along for a change. He'd have bet that to last mere minutes after Harry had moved back into town, but whenever they started getting out of hand one of their women stepped in and shut it down before it descended into one of the wrestling matches that had been their standard form of communicating. They got along better, so he'd have to admit that was one benefit of marriage. Just an unexpected one.

With nothing much else to do, other than make sure Harry wasn't dumb enough to nerve out at the last moment, Cal had set himself to surveying the crowd.

Not a soul from New Orleans for the groom's side. Man had been a hot-shit lawyer down there for a decade and he didn't even have the decency to invite a cute Creole "hot mama" paralegal for Cal.

As for the townies who'd shown up, Cal knew every one of them and had dated more than a few. He knew Dawn—who'd been a total babe since fifth grade—would give him a dance, but her husband would hog her most of the time—lucky bastard. And the way Greg was looking at Jessica, there wouldn't be much cutting in there either.

But even pretending he didn't already know, there was no question where he was going for the first dance. Which took him back to his original question: What the hell was up with weddings?

He'd known Natalya Lamont since before they'd done the old: if you show me yours, I'll show you mine. They'd been six

and they'd both chickened. When they were old enough for that question to take on a whole different meaning it had never come up again. She'd blended into the scenery of Eagle Cove until he'd no longer really seen her.

Oh, his hormones had tracked her whenever she'd crossed a room, her and every other girl of their thirty-four person high school class—a field of just eighteen women. Yet for reasons beyond him, he'd never so much as touched Natalya.

Then today she'd come walking through the brewery crowd with her hair the color of dark chocolate and shiny as a new penny, swept down over her shoulders. And those deep eyes catching the Christmas lights Becky had strung everywhere. If he could ever find someone to explain what it was that happened at weddings, he'd also ask them what was up with grown women and “twinkle lights.”

As the bride and groom were doing the “Until death do us part” thing, he had to glance over Greg's head to check out what Natalya had been wearing. Somehow that hadn't even registered as she'd come up the aisle. Just that hair and face and those deep eyes that stared straight back without even blinking. It was unnatural how long that woman could go without blinking; like she was casting a spell or something.

Jessica and Natalya wore long black straight dresses complete with black, paper flower corsages.

He got the joke right away. The death of another life of singlehood. Cute. Damned cute. No, that had described Becky Billings. It even described the sleek and shining blond Jessica. It so didn't cover the long shapely woman with smoke-dark eyes.

Natalya had never looked so...

“You can kiss the bride now, Son,” Judge Slater told his eldest and Cal had missed his chance to mess with the ceremony just to tease his best friend by protesting when the call for it was made. But he wasn't low enough to screw with “the moment” for his buddy. That didn't mean he was above trying to tap in on the first dance.

Other works by M. L. Buchman:

Angelo's Hearth

Where Dreams are Born
Where Dreams Reside
Maria's Christmas Table
Where Dreams Unfold
Where Dreams Are Written

Eagle Cove

Return to Eagle Cove
Recipe for Eagle Cove
Longing for Eagle Cove

The Night Stalkers

MAIN FLIGHT
The Night Is Mine
I Own the Dawn
Wait Until Dark
Take Over at Midnight
Light Up the Night
Bring On the Dusk
By Break of Day
WHITE HOUSE HOLIDAY
Daniel's Christmas
Frank's Independence Day
Peter's Christmas
Zachary's Christmas
Roy's Independence Day
AND THE NAVY
Christmas at Steel Beach
Christmas at Peleliu Cove

5E

Target of the Heart
Target Lock on Love

Firehawks

MAIN FLIGHT
Pure Heat
Full Blaze
Hot Point
Flash of Fire

SMOKEJUMPERS

Wildfire at Dawn
Wildfire at Larch Creek
Wildfire on the Skagit

Delta Force

Target Engaged
Heart Strike

Deities Anonymous

Cookbook from Hell: Reheated
Saviors 101

Dead Chef Thrillers

Swap Out!
One Chef!
Two Chef!

SF/F Titles

Nara
Monk's Maze