

Prologue

1806

I am a bride. I am a wife.

It thrills me to know my life began today, as today I am no longer Astrid Grandville.

I am Mrs. Collin Poole.

When we met, barely a year ago, I loved. I loved not just his handsome face, his fine figure, for his twin, Connor, has the same. I loved the smile in his deep green eyes, the tenor of his voice, the dogged intelligence of his mind.

I loved his fairness, his knowledge of the world, his quick laugh, his dedication to his family and the business they built.

He is a shipbuilder, my husband, as was his father before him. I knew Arthur Poole only briefly, but grieved for him when a fall from his horse took him from this world.

Now the brothers man the wheel of the business their father established.

But not today. Today is a holiday for all in Poole's Bay, and in the home his father built there is music and dancing, food and wine, love and laughter.

On this wild cliff above the wide sea where Arthur built his sturdy stone castle, we make our home from this day, my beloved and I.

We will fill our home with children, children born of love. Perhaps we will create that first spark of light tonight. Our wedding night.

Arabelle, my dearest friend, a friend who will be a sister by law when she and Connor marry in the autumn, asked if I was nervous as I come—as she will in turn—to the marriage bed a maid.

No. Oh no, I am eager, eager to know what there is beyond the kisses that so heat my blood, so rouse my passions.

With my body I thee worship. I will keep my vows, one and all.

I look in the glass now in what will be our bedchamber, husband and wife, and see a woman so different from the girl she was.

I see the hair Collin calls sunlit silk worn up under a crown of roses with a short veil floating behind as my mother requested it. I see the white dress I worried so over. It floats as well, as I wanted, from the silk ribbon at its high waist.

I know I am not a beauty, whatever Collin tells me. But I am pleasing, especially today when the girl becomes a woman, and the bride becomes a wife.

I see the sparkle of the ring he gave me when he asked for my hand. When he said, *I love you with all of my heart. My darling Astrid, I will never love another, but love you through all of my life, and love you even after death takes me.*

Now that sparkle, that promise, that pledge is on my right hand, and the gold band, the circle that never ends, is on my left.

The woman I am becoming will love him throughout her life, and even after death takes her.

Now I must go back after this brief moment of quiet contemplation. Back to the music, the dancing, the celebration Collin insisted on to mark this day.

I will dance with my husband. I will embrace his family as my own, for so they are. As the pipers play, I will celebrate this first day of the long and happy life we will make together.

Or so I believed.

I turn to greet her as she comes into the room. I think she looks familiar, but before I can speak, she rushes toward me. I see the knife for an instant before she plunges it into me.

Oh, the pain! I will never forget it. The shock of it as the blade slices into my flesh, once, twice. And again, again.

I stagger back, unable to scream, unable to speak when she tosses the knife at my feet.

"You will never have him," she says. "Die a bride, and know he'll come to me. He will come to me, or by your blood on my tongue, bride after bride will join you in death."

To my horror, she licked my blood off her finger. As I fall, she takes my wedding ring.

And this act is somehow worse than the pain.

"A marriage isn't a marriage until it is consummated. Only a bride, forever lost. Be damned to you, Astrid Grandville."

She leaves me there, dying on the floor near the marriage bed I will never share with my beloved. But my ring, my wedding ring. How can I leave this world without it?

The bloodstain spreads over the white of my wedding dress as that desperate need pushes me to my feet. In agony, I stagger to the door. My hands, slick with my own blood, are barely able to open it.

But I must find Collin. I must have my ring. With this ring I pledge thee. My sight dims; every breath is torment.

Someone screams, but the sound comes from another world. A world I am leaving.

I see him, only him as all else fades—the music, the pretty gowns and waistcoats, the faces blurring, the shouts going quiet.

He rushes to me, calling my name. He catches me in his strong arms as my legs give way.

I want to speak to him. My love, my life. But the circle, the promise of a long, happy life, was stolen.

I feel his tears on my face, and see the fear and the grief in those deep green eyes.

"Astrid, my love. Astrid. Don't leave me. Don't leave me."

As it all fades away, I speak my last words, give him my promise with my last breath.

"I never will."

And I have not.

Chapter One

Present Day

Planning a wedding equaled insanity. Sonya decided that once you'd accepted that as incontrovertible fact, you could just get on with it.

If she had her way, she'd ditch the whole crazy circus. She'd buy a fabulous dress she could actually wear again, have family and close friends over for a backyard wedding. A short, sweet ceremony, then bust it all open for the best party ever.

No fancy, no formal, no fraught and fuss. And all the fun.

But Brandon wanted all the fancy and formal and fuss.

So she had a fabulous dress—that had cost the equivalent of two months' mortgage, and she'd wear it for a matter of hours before she had it cleaned and boxed away.

They'd booked a fancy Back Bay hotel for a guest list that crept over three hundred and might come close to four before the invites went out.

She'd designed the invitations—she earned her living as a graphic designer, after all. Then again, so did Brandon, so he'd had input there. Maybe the invitations had crept up to more formal than she'd envisioned, but they were gorgeous.

They'd done the Save the Date deal months before, and spent the best part of a day with a photographer for engagement photos.

She'd wanted to tap a friend to take some candid shots, casual, fun shots. And had to admit she'd resented his absolute veto there. Still, the photos were lovely.

Sophisticated. A sleek, sophisticated ad for the perfect, happy, upwardly mobile couple.

They'd spent what seemed like days going over the menu—plated and formal, of course. Then cake. She liked cake—she'd go to the ground believing something was intrinsically wrong with anyone who didn't like cake.

But Jesus, who knew building a wedding cake—flavors, filling, icing, design, tiers, topper—could become a study in frustration?

She did now.

And that didn't count the groom's cake. Or the petite fours with their initials in gold on the top.

Add the flowers, the music, seating charts, colors, themes, and despite the efficient and incredibly patient wedding planner, it all boiled down to nightmare.

She couldn't wait until it was over and done.

And that probably made her an aberration.

Weren't brides supposed to want the fuss and bother? Didn't a bride want her wedding day to be special, unique, a fairy tale?

She did want it to be special, unique, and she very much wanted the happy ever after.

But.

And those buts had been coming fast over the last few weeks. *But* it didn't feel like her day, her special, unique, gloriously exciting day. At all. Somehow, it had slipped right out of her control. When she reminded herself it was Brandon's wedding day, too, and he should have some say, it struck her he had *all* the say.

None of it reflected her vision or her wishes. It clearly reflected all of his.

And if their vision and wishes were so dramatically different, didn't that mean they just weren't suited?

If she dwelled on that, she worried. Like she worried when they spent three Saturdays house hunting and he pushed for the sleek, contemporary McMansion and she wanted the rambling old house with character.

But.

If she didn't dwell on it, if she remembered the last eighteen months of being a couple, she couldn't find anything to worry about.

A wedding day was just one day, and why shouldn't Brandon have the fuss he wanted? A house? It's what you put inside it that counted. They'd find a compromise, and make it a home.

Wedding jitters, she told herself. The Big Reality was setting in. And she had proof—literally—in the wedding invitation proof in her bag.

Accepting jitters, she canceled an appointment with the florist—couldn't face it—and headed home.

She'd have a couple of quiet hours. Brandon had some groom thing to deal with, so she'd have the place to herself until he got home.

She decreed when he did, they'd open a bottle of wine, go over the wedding invitation proof, finalize that, then finalize the ever-growing guest list. Order the invitations, and be done with it—since he'd hired a calligrapher to address them.

Something she could've done, but hey, she wouldn't complain about *not* addressing a couple hundred invitations.

She pushed through Boston's Saturday traffic with the windows down and the music up. In eight weeks, she thought, the color would have exploded with fall—her favorite season. And all this would be behind her.

She was twenty-eight, closing in fast on twenty-nine and the end of another decade. She was ready to settle down, start a family. And in eight weeks, she'd marry the man she loved.

Brandon Wise—smart, talented, romantic. A man who'd taken it slow and easy when she'd been cautious about starting a relationship with a coworker.

He'd won her over—and she'd enjoyed being won over.

They rarely fought. He was incredibly sweet to her mother, and that mattered. He enjoyed the company of her friends, and she enjoyed the company of his.

Sure, she could think of a lot of ways they diverged. He'd go to a cocktail party, dinner party, art opening—name the social event—every night. And she needed to spread those things out, hold on to the quiet-at-home times.

He had more shoes than she did—and she liked shoes.

When he talked about buying a house, he talked about grounds crews, and she imagined mowing the grass and planting a garden.

But who wanted to marry and live with a clone?

Differences added variety.

By the time she parked, she regretted canceling the appointment with the florist. She should've taken care of it. Flowers, like cake, should make you happy.

She'd make up for it by tossing something together for dinner.

A ploy to head off a let's-eat-out suggestion? she considered as she walked to her side of the duplex. Maybe, but he'd come home to a meal in progress, a bottle of wine, and that was a good deal.

They'd eat, drink, and finalize that damn guest list.

A big check mark in the done column would lift a weight.

Weight lifted, they could spend Saturday night naked in bed.

She heard music when she opened the door and stepped into the foyer. And saw, a few feet ahead as the foyer gave way to the living room, a woman's shoe.

A red stiletto.

She set her purse on the entrance table, dropped her keys in the bowl she kept there. And slowly bent down to pick up the shoe.

Its mate lay on its side near the turn toward the bedroom, along with a white, full-skirted, strapless dress.

Music flowed out of the bedroom, a quiet, sexy score punctuated by a woman's breathless cries and moans.

Brandon liked having music on during sex, she thought dully. He made a point of it.

She'd found it endearing. Once.

Since they hadn't bothered to shut the bedroom door, she stepped over the discarded dress, kicked the man's shirt and trousers out of the way.

Who knew, she thought, that love could snuff out like a candle in a stiff breeze? And leave no trace. None at all.

She watched her fiancé's ass grind as he thrust into the woman under him. The woman whose legs were wrapped around his waist as she called out his name.

She looked down at the shoe still in her hand, looked at that naked, cheating ass.

When she flung it, when it struck, she thought: Oh yeah, that'll leave a mark.

He reared up, scrambled around. The woman managed a quick shriek and tried to drag up the rumpled sheet.

"Sonya."

"Shut the fuck up," she snapped at him. "Jesus Christ, Tracie, you're my *cousin*. You're part of the bridal party."

Sobbing, Tracie dragged harder at the sheets.

"Sonya, listen—"

"I said shut the fuck up. I'm in the middle of a goddamn cliché. Get dressed, get out. Both of you."

"I'm sorry." Still sobbing, Tracie snatched at the bra and panties on the floor. "I'm so—"

"Don't speak to me. Don't ever speak to me again. If your mother wasn't my aunt, and someone I'm very fond of, I'd kick your slut ass here and now. Keep your mouth shut and get out of my house."

Tracie grabbed the dress on the run, dragging it over her head, sans underwear, as she went. She didn't bother with the shoes.

She didn't shut the door behind her.

"Sonya. I have no excuse. I slipped, I—"

"I see. You slipped, and your clothes just tossed themselves around the room while you fell naked on my cousin. Get out, Brandon. You can get out naked or pull on some clothes first. But get out of my house."

"Ours," he began.

"My name's on the mortgage."

"Sweetheart—"

"You'd seriously dare call me that? Try it again, and I swear to God you'll leave bleeding. I said get out."

He dragged on khakis. "We need to talk. You just need to calm down so I—Where are you going?"

"To get my phone." She walked to her purse, took it out. "To call the police so they can remove you from my home."

"Now, Sonya." The way he said it took on that you're-just-adorable tone. "You're not going to call the cops."

She stood, phone in hand, studying him. Gym fit, dark blond hair tousled from another woman's hands. The smooth, handsome face, the killer blue eyes.

"If you really believe I won't, you don't know me at all." She picked his keys out of the bowl, removed the key to the house, tossed the rest out the door. "Get out."

"I need shoes."

She opened the coat closet, pulled out a pair of his slides, tossed them at him. "Make do, and go, or I start screaming and calling nine-one-one."

He bent, picked up the slides, slipped them on. "We'll talk when you've calmed down."

"When it comes to you, to this? Consider that the far side of never."

She slammed the door behind him, turned the security bolt.

And waited for the tears, the despair, the misery. None of it, she decided, could burn through the rage.

She looked at the phone in her hand again.

Taking deep breaths, she walked to the sofa, sat. She started to send a text, realized she couldn't manage it the way her hands shook.

She called instead.

"Hey!"

"Cleo, can you come over? I really need you to come over now."

"Wedding crisis?"

"You could say. Please."

Amusement turned to concern. "You okay?"

"Not really, no. Can you come?"

"Sure. I'm on my way. Whatever it is, Sonya, we'll fix it. Give me ten."

I fixed it already, Sonya thought, and set the phone down.

* * *

On her second glass of wine, Cleo circled the living room. Long legs in tiny white shorts covered the ground. She had her mass of curling burnt-honey hair bundled back in weekend-at-home mode.

Her jungle-cat eyes flashed.

The more incensed she became, the more the traces of her Louisiana childhood flowed over the heat. And the calmer Sonya felt. This, Sonya decided, was love.

“That bastard. That lying, cheating, sonofabitching bastard. And Tracie? I don’t even have words slimy enough. Your own cousin! And that—that miserable, big-titted *slut* was helping me plan your wedding shower.”

“She ugly cried.”

“Not enough. Not close to enough. Oh, oh, she’s going to hear from me. You’d better believe she’s going to feel my wrath. Two-faced whore-bitch.”

“I love you, Cleo Fabares. You’re the best.”

“Oh, baby.” Dropping back down on the couch, Cleo set her wine aside to pull Sonya into a fierce embrace. “I’m sorry. I’m just so sorry.”

“I know.”

“What do you want to do?” Cleo pulled back, looked at Sonya with her long-lidded tawny eyes. “Tell me what you want, and it’s done. Murder? Decapitation? Castration?”

For the first since she’d walked in the door, Sonya smiled. “Would you use your great-grandfather Harurto’s samurai sword?”

“With pleasure.”

“Let’s keep that in reserve.”

“Why aren’t you screaming? Why aren’t you kicking something? I want to kick something. I want to kick Brandon in the balls. First, I want to go buy a pair of combat boots so I can wear them while I kick him in the balls. Then I want to go buy brass knuckles so I can wear them when I punch Tracie in the face.

“But that’s just me,” she added, and picked up her wine again. “What do you want to do?”

“I’m doing it. I’m sitting here drinking wine and watching my best friend get pissed off and outraged for me.” Sonya took Cleo’s free hand. “She ugly cried; I didn’t.”

“If you need to, I’ve got a shoulder right here.”

“I don’t. I’m not sure what that says about me. It was like walking into a scene in a movie. The clueless bride-to-be discovers her fiancé and one of her bridesmaids naked in bed.”

“You’re not clueless.”

“Well, I was about this, so . . . Beyoncé’s ‘Video Phone’ was playing.”

“Come on.”

“Seriously.”

Cleo struggled against the laugh. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. When I think . . . If I hadn’t canceled that appointment, if I hadn’t walked in on them—”

Now Sonya pushed up to circle the room, and her legs in running-Saturday-errands cropped jeans ate up the floor. She gestured with her wineglass with one hand, shoved the other through her hair.

And dragged out the tie that held her maple-syrup-brown hair out of its long, straight tail.

“That’s what gets me, Cleo. Really, fucking gets me. I’d have gone through with it. I’d have married the cheating asshole. And I’d’ve married him his way, and that kills me. The hotel

ballroom he wanted, the big, slick production of it he wanted, the stupid five-tier wedding cake with the fondant and gold sugar design he wanted.

"How the hell did I let myself get lost in there?"

"Looks like you're found now. I liked him. I actually liked him, and that kills me. Maybe I thought the wedding was over-the-top, for you, but hell, it's the day, right? So why not? But—and before I get to the but, let me say it's good to see you found your rage again."

"Oh, never lost that. I just liked seeing yours take over awhile."

"Okay. But. You did cancel the appointment, you did walk in on them. And you're not going to marry the asshole. The fates looked out for you."

"If fate looked out for me, I'd have told him to get lost a long time ago."

"You need more wine."

"Oh, I'm going to get it. And a lot of it."

Sonya pressed her fingers to her eyes, not against tears, but sheer frustration.

"Cleo, I have to cancel everything. The hotel, the photographer, the videographer, the cake, the flowers. Jesus, the stupid string quartet I never wanted, the band. I'm going to lose the deposits. Damn it, I just picked up the proof for the invitations. When I think of the hours and hours I worked on that design."

"Keep it. We'll put a curse on it, bury it and a pair of his boxers under a full moon. And every time he thinks about roping another woman in, he'll get a chronic case of jock itch."

"That's your Creole granny talking."

"*Bien sûr*. I'll help you cancel everything, and maybe we can sweet-talk some of the deposits back. And you bill the bastard for half of the rest. I never liked that you laid all the money out."

After huffing out a breath, Cleo slugged back more wine.

"And when I think about that, and I really look? I realize I didn't like him as much as I kept telling myself I did."

"He was paying for the rehearsal dinner, the honeymoon. Doesn't matter. Lesson learned. I could really use some help with the cancellations. Oh God, the registry."

Because it jittered, Sonya pressed a hand to her stomach.

"We just finalized the gift registry. And we had appointments tomorrow to look at two houses."

"What we're going to do is drink more wine. We'll order pizza. You'll lend me something to sleep in, and we'll go over everything that needs to be done."

"You're going to stay?"

"Whenever my best friend, my college roomie, my partner in crime and sister of the heart finds her fiancé in bed with her cousin, I spend the night."

For the first time, Sonya felt tears sting her eyes. But not from sorrow or pain, from sheer gratitude.

"Thanks. Just the thought of dealing with all this makes me want to crawl in a hole. No," she corrected. "It makes me want to bury Brandon in one. I—" She broke off at the knock on the door, glanced over. "You don't think . . ."

Cleo's tiger eyes flashed. "Let me answer. I wish I had those combat boots, but a knee in the balls works."