

PRELUDE

The bride wept—not from happiness.

She threw her bouquet—in the garbage.

The bridesmaids looked helpless. The groomsmen looked sheepish. The mother of the groom looked like she'd rather be anywhere else. Finally, the minister made the announcement to the three hundred waiting guests.

Then the mother of the bride unzipped her daughter's gown and drove her home.

CHAPTER 1

My past sold quickly, despite the down market.

Of course, no one actually died under my roof. Just a couple of near-miss murders that my real estate agent assured me didn't need to be disclosed to potential buyers.

But now I needed to move fast and she promised me this was the place. "I have a feeling about you and this remodeled bungalow," Jan Meyer said. "The owner is anxious to leave town and just dropped the price twenty grand."

Jan enjoyed playing matchmaker between buyer and seller. Especially since she knew I'd made a killing on my own real estate deal and had plenty of cash to put down. So she took the key out of the lockbox and prepared to give me the tour.

"You might just fall in love with the kitchen," she said.

Not love at first smell. The house had a definite odor. And it didn't seem to be coming from the kitchen.

While Jan went to open some windows, I followed my nose to a closed door where the smell seemed strongest. Journalists prefer open doors. So I turned the knob and peeked inside. Then quickly slammed it shut before any flies could escape.

"What is that horrible smell?" Jan asked.

“I think it might be the owner.”

“Is he dead?” she gasped.

I nodded as I headed back outside to call the police from my cell phone.

“Did he have a heart attack?” Jan followed behind, anxious for details.

“In a manner of speaking.”

I hadn't gotten close to the man on the floor. But I could see the congealed pool of blood around his body and the knife sticking out of his chest.

That's when I decided to keep renting.

CHAPTER 2

Some days I wish I could just write about sweaters. After all, sweaters never hurt anyone. And no reporter ever got kidnapped, blindfolded, and paraded in front of Al Jazeera's audience for writing for *Vogue*. Of course, no sweater ever got a gold-medal 40 share in TV ratings either. Except perhaps Kathleen Sullivan's figure-hugging crew necks during the Winter Olympics in Sarajevo.

Sweaters are the mashed potatoes and gravy of a woman's wardrobe—the ultimate comfort clothing—unless gravy accidentally drips onto a pricey cashmere. But I was nowhere near the kitchen, so I could safely curl up in a hand-knit sweater of scratchy wool looking out an upstairs window at a narrow view of White Bear Lake. I don't actually live on the lake, but if I angle my chair and crane my neck just right, I can watch the whitecaps and fishermen on the legendary water.

I'm Riley Spartz, an investigative reporter for Channel 3 in Minneapolis. Close to five months ago I fled my highly sought-after urban neighborhood for a fresh start after a TV sweeps story went bad. Lakeshore homes in this northern Twin Cities suburb go for a million bucks plus, but the rest of the town is quite affordable.

My landlord recently moved out, listing this place for rent because

his next-door neighbor held perpetual yard sales that attracted traffic at annoying times. Always looking for a bargain, I'd even checked out the inventory myself, but found only overpriced junk.

Today I paged through the weekly *White Bear Press*, delighted by irksome crimes that wouldn't merit a mention on a major-market TV newscast. Nothing makes a woman living alone feel safer than reading police reports about teens caught smoking behind the school and bicycles stolen from open garages.

A want ad for an item I definitely wasn't looking to buy caught my eye and my imagination.

FOR SALE: WEDDING DRESS. NEVER WORN

Mystery and emotion, all in one line.

Forget sweaters. A wedding dress is much more likely to garner a 40 share. Viewers love weddings. The research proves it.

In the world of television ratings, two weddings stand out. And both brides would probably have been happier if their wedding dresses had never been worn.

In 1969, when Miss Vicki married Tiny Tim on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, 45 million viewers made that episode the highest rated in talk-show history.

That was nothing compared to the wedding of the century. A dozen years later 750 million viewers worldwide watched as Prince Charles and Lady Diana promised to forsake all others. That royal wedding delivered royal ratings, but ultimately royal scandal. The bride and groom learned (as I reluctantly learned from my own brief marriage) no "I do" guarantees happily ever after.

When it comes to TV weddings, happiness and ratings may be mutually exclusive. While Prince Charles's sequel ceremony to Camilla Parker Bowles tanked in the ratings department, the marriage seems to be thriving in the happiness arena.

Now TV weddings are typically interactive events, like the *Today* show where viewers choose gowns, cakes, rings and honeymoon destinations for the happy couple, or reality shows, like *The Bachelor*, in which grooms propose marriage before our voyeuristic eyes.

I circled the “Never Worn” want ad with a red pen and pondered whether the story behind the wedding dress might be worth a television news story.

Perhaps a lesson about love and loss, if I could sort through the he said/she said of a broken engagement. Was the big day called off because of a tragic parachuting accident? A philandering groom caught with a bridesmaid after the rehearsal dinner? Or perhaps a wedding guest revealed a juicy secret when the minister inquired whether anyone knew any reason why this man and this woman should not be joined in holy matrimony.

Doubtful that the truth would prove as irresistible as the scenarios in my mind, but maybe the story could be a lesson about second chances if the gown made it successfully down the aisle on the back of a new bride.

As an investigative reporter, I seldom get a chance to tell love stories.

The May ratings book loomed, just on the fringe of the June wedding season. A tantalizing tale of doomed courtship might spike the overnight news numbers. The Channel 3 bosses were always anxious this time of year because the May sweeps were arguably the most important—Christmas holiday ad rates are based on those figures. Jingle all the way.

I had no blockbuster investigation up my sweater sleeve this sweeps. I’d sat out the February ratings book because I was a mess personally and the November book remained an unpleasant reminder of my blood, sweat, and tears.

My hypothetical wedding-dress chronicle was unlikely to require a major investment of time or money, so if the backstory was compelling, Channel 3’s news director, Noreen Banks, would probably give me a green light. Another reason: we had a mandate from the suits upstairs to attract more women viewers because advertisers think they control the household cash.

In May, Minnesota ladies also control the TV remote, because fishing season opens and their menfolk flock to boats like ducks to water.

Noreen might certainly seize this wedding-dress opportunity to throw the big bosses upstairs a bouquet . . . I mean a bone.

So I reached for the phone to dial the number in the “Never Worn” newspaper ad to find out who dumped who.

“YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL,” Madeline Post said as I twirled this way and that in front of a full-length mirror in her little-girl-pink bedroom.

I hadn’t intended to try on the gown. But when she insisted, it did occur to me that it would be harder for Madeline to kick me out the door when she learned I was a reporter if the garment was literally on my back.

The dress looked even better up close than on the e-mail fashion photo she’d sent me the previous night. The kind of dress a fairy-tale princess might wear. Satin. White. Strapless. Fitted at the waist with a ball-gown skirt that flared at my hips. Interesting sparkles around the bustline. The dress accentuated my figure, decent but not voluptuous. And it contrasted nicely with my brown shoulder-skimming hair. I’d checked the designer’s reputation online and knew this almost bride had spent nearly fifteen grand on her dream dress.

Not exactly. Her mother had actually written the check. Because, according to Madeline, it was her mother’s dream dress.

“She wanted me to look like Cinderella,” Madeline explained. “But I wanted an outdoor wedding and would have been happy wearing a sundress or even jeans.”

“Why didn’t you tell her?”

“The big wedding meant the world to her. Because she compromised on having the ceremony outside, I compromised on the dress. And she’s done so much to raise me and my brother after our dad died.”

Because I was trying to pose as someone other than a reporter—a self-absorbed bride, in fact—I didn’t follow up on that nugget, though I was quite curious to learn more about her father’s death.

Besides checking out Madeline's dress, I'd also checked out Madeline and her fiancé, Mark Lefevre. Or rather, I had Lee Xiong, our newsroom computer geek, check them out with a crime database he'd assembled from several law enforcement and court agencies. Xiong came to the United States as a toddler refugee from Laos. He flourished in Minnesota, despite his parents' poverty and the state's winters, and became a respected producer at Channel 3.

His cyber report showed the bride had a clean record here in the state, while the groom had been picked up on a minor marijuana possession charge a decade earlier that netted nothing more serious than a small fine and the requirement that he attend drug-education classes.

Madeline's place was not far from mine. I'd left her name, phone number, and address with Xiong along with instructions for him to call the cops if he didn't hear from me in three hours.

Normally I wouldn't have hesitated answering her ad alone, but the recent Craigslist nanny murder—in which a disturbed young man posed as a local mother in need of child care before killing the coed who answered the ad—did cross my mind and made me more cautious than usual about meeting strangers in nonpublic places.

Those precautions might not save my life, but they'd make it easier to find my body if things got ugly. And this way my parents could console themselves with the knowledge that at least they were able to give me a Decent Christian Burial. And I could console myself that at least my murder would lead the late news although I wouldn't put it past Channel 3 to bump me down to the second section just so the station had something lurid to tease at the top of the show and again at the first break to hold viewers into the second quarter hour of the newscast.

I'd found Madeline and Mark's engagement announcement and photo online. At twenty-four, she was ten years younger than her fiancé. Her face pretty, not stunning. Her most noticeable feature, her splendid golden hair, long and flowing.

The first thing I observed about Mark was an odd, diagonal scar

across his forehead. Not a lightning bolt like Harry Potter's, yet still mysterious in this age in which plastic surgery can fix most facial flaws. Mark's hair was dark, frizzy, and shoulder-length, and he had black Groucho Marx eyebrows and mustache.

She was beauty to his beast.

I read that he was a comedian and I wondered if that was supposed to be a joke or a euphemism for unemployed. Especially when I saw that Madeline came from M-O-N-E-Y. Big money. Old money. Trust-fund money. Her great-great-grandfather on her mother's side had been a founding partner of one of Minnesota's Fortune 500 companies—a maker of countless useful office products and industrial items most folks take for granted. Her mother was sitting on an impressive pile of family money and company stock. So when Madeline spoke of all her mother had done to raise her, well, she wasn't describing working a shift job and stretching a baked chicken over an extra meal.

Which made me mildly curious just why she was selling her never-worn wedding gown. And extremely curious why it was never worn to begin with.

"So what do you think?" Madeline asked, startling me out of my internal dialogue. "How about two thousand dollars?"

It was a steal at that price. But my bridal days were over and it was time to level with her.

"You see, Madeline," I began.

"Okay, fifteen hundred."

While she came from money, it was quite possible the young Miss Post might not have actual access to it yet, or might even have run through her share already. But she clearly wanted the dress gone. And a minute later, after I explained who I was, she wanted me gone, too.

I'm generally considered among the best-known TV reporters in the Minneapolis–St. Paul market, so I was surprised, yet pleased, when Madeline didn't recognize me right away at the door. Not everyone watches the news, I reminded myself, as she now fumed visibly.

"You're a reporter?" Madeline's voice trembled with outrage and

her wide blue eyes got wider. “I thought you were interested in the dress.”

“I am interested,” I assured her. “I think the dress might make a great story.”

“A *story*?” She threw open the door and waved me out of her condo with all the gusto I had anticipated. I turned and asked if she minded unzipping me first.

“Think of it as a free television ad,” I said. “Soon as we get that dress on the late news, you’ll have a bidding war.”

That image stopped her. She shut the door.

“Do you think I care about the money?”

Madeline buried her face in her hands and started to cry. Tears made her engagement ring sparkle like the diamond it was—a real big one, at least two carats. Between sobs, she grabbed me like the sister I wasn’t and dripped wet splotches all over the expensive satin dress that still clung to my figure.

I generally don’t like people I don’t know touching me. But I didn’t say anything because I sensed Madeline’s embrace meant she would soon share her deepest secret.