

Chapter One

Natalie Gray checked off the last of the items on her To Do list. Her nuptials would be the best A Wedding to Remember had ever seen. From the art deco centerpieces to chic accommodations for their out-of-town guests, she had seen to every last detail. As a personal organizer, planning was second nature but this time, she'd really outdone herself. She still had three weeks before the big day, and nothing left to worry about but getting lots of sleep and drinking a ton of water to make sure she looked radiant.

She leaned back into her black designer office chair and breathed a satisfied sigh. When the Style Network series had asked if they could feature her and fiancé Zane Robertson's funky downtown wedding, she'd jumped at the opportunity. Cameras at the event would only add to the soiree's cache and the publicity would do wonders for her fledgling business, Life Solutions. If she could organize the wedding of the decade, sorting through her clients' messy closets should be a cinch.

The front door chime pulled her from her thoughts. Ethan Frazier walked in sporting what seemed to be the hangover of the century. Ethan was Zane's childhood best friend and soon to be best man.

He was as fair as Zane was dark but today, he looked ghostly. He closed the door behind him, and leaned against it. Hot, Bougainvillea-scented air wafted into the studio.

Natalie laughed. "Wow. You look like hell. I guess I don't have to ask you if you had fun in Vegas." Of the two friends, Zane was definitely the party animal.

Ethan crossed the room, looking worse by the minute.

"Geez, he really put you through the ringer. I told him to take it easy on you."

Ethan shook his head. "I'll be okay. It's not me. Something happened."

Concern and fear twisted her gut and she sprung from her chair. "Oh, my God. Is Zane okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine."

"Then what is it?" Then it dawned on her. "Don't tell me he got into a fight again. Goddamnit. He's going to have stitches for the wedding, isn't he?"

Ethan's steel blue eyes clouded over and a muscle pulsed at his temple. "No. We didn't get into a fight. I think you're going to need to sit down for this one."

She glanced at his hands, clenched at his side, and a chill went up her spine. Ethan could be pretty intense at times, but something was definitely wrong. "You're scaring me." She ushered him across the shiny floor to the sitting area.

He breathed in deeply and rubbed his temples.

She poured him a cool glass of water from the pitcher she kept on hand for customers. "Drink up." It was well over a hundred degrees out there and she didn't want him passing out on her. After a few sips, a bit of color returned to his features. "Okay. Now spill it. What's going on?"

"Zane's gone."

Natalie shook her head. "What do you mean, Zane's gone?"

"When I woke up this morning, he was gone."

Ice spread through her stomach. There must be a misunderstanding. She smoothed her jaw-length Sassoon bob and tucked a stray strand behind her right ear. "Did you try calling him? Maybe he left early."

Ethan spoke, his eyes fixed on a spot on the hard wood floor. "I tried calling him, I looked for him at the airport, I even checked his place when I got back. He's gone."

She clenched her hands together to stop them from shaking. "Gone where? Tell me exactly what he said to you."

"Last night when we were out, he said, he couldn't go through with it. That he couldn't be a good husband, that he couldn't be the man you need him to be. I thought it was just nerves."

"Shit, Ethan. How could you let this happen?"

Anger creased his brow. "You think I planned this? That I wanted to be the one to tell you my best friend just up and left you, three weeks before your wedding?"

Confusion, grief and anger knotted in her throat. "I'm sorry. It's not your fault. I'm just..." Her eyes burned with unshed tears. "What else did he say?"

"He said he needs more time."

"More time for what? We can't change the date now. Everything is set. The venue, the caterers, entertainment, the guests, the cameras – Our wedding is going to be televised for Pete's sake." She shook her head. "You've got to find him."

Ethan grabbed her by the arm. "Listen to me."

She pulled away from his grip and moved to the other end of the sofa. "Ouch. Ethan, chill out. What is wrong with you?"

"Zane is gone." Anger punctuated his words. "And he's not coming back, Natalie." He sighed and pulled a piece of paper from his jean pocket. "Here, he left you this note."

She snatched the sheet from his hands, immediately recognizing Zane's stylized handwriting. And there, in the center of the page, Zane's words stared her in the face. 'Nattie, I'm sorry. I'm not ready. I can't do this.'

A pang of panic raced through her stomach and tightened her throat. Why couldn't he tell her in person? Was she that hard to talk to? How could he leave her like that? "But he was excited about it. We planned it together. The wedding, the camera crew, the guests – " Her voice trailed off. She had planned it that way. And Zane had gone along with it, like he always did. Until today.

Anger began mixing with the hurt. It was too late to walk away from everything. She'd already paid for everything. The photographer, the entertainment, the flowers, she'd even splurged and bought plane tickets to fly her entire family from Montreal to L.A. The invitations

had gone out weeks ago. The color drained out of everything around her, and the room spun on itself. She closed her eyes for a moment. This is not happening to me.

She opened them again to find Ethan staring at her, a worried look creasing his brow.

Her mouth filled with the bitter taste of defeat. Her mother would have a heyday with this one. No way. She cleared her mind and pictured herself walking down the aisle in her Dolce & Gabbana gown. Much better. Filled with new resolve, she stood. There would be a wedding. Period. "I'm sure it's just a phase. He'll come to his senses and be back in a couple of days."

Ethan raked his hand through his sandy blond hair and sipped his water in silence. A whole week later days later, and still no sign of Zane. He hadn't returned any of their calls or been back to his apartment. Zane was gone. Ethan flipped over the 'back-in-five minutes' placard and closed the heavy metal door that led into his architectural design studio. From the corner of his eye he spied a group of tourists coming his way. They were probably participating in the yearly Studio Walk. He locked the door for good measure. Customers always tried walking in, no matter how big or bright the 'closed' sign was.

He crossed the Factory Lofts' parking lot shielding his eyes from the scorching July sun. When he'd first moved to downtown L.A. it hadn't been far from Ridley Scott's Blade Runner vision of the future. Gray, dirty and dangerous. But Natalie had convinced him buy a place despite his better judgment. Zane, on the other hand, hadn't wanted to tie himself down to a place and he still rented a space in the Valley.

Recently, developers had clued into the area's potential and the studios he and Natalie had bought for cheap, with a hefty loan from the bank, had tripled in value. The city had even thrown

in money toward the neighborhood's landscaping initiative. He was glad he'd followed her advice. The girl had one heck of a knack for business.

Her studio door was open and a sea foam green sign invited newcomers to follow the new-agey music inside. He crossed the threshold, marveling at the space's warmth and serenity. Every stick of furniture and work of art had been carefully selected as much for its design as for functionality. Natalie favored sleek lines and bold colors. The deep reds and vibrant oranges of his Firesky canvases punctuated the studio's warm sunflower-colored walls. Sunlight streamed in from the French-windowed skylight and bounced into the room lending the entire space an amber glow.

In the back, Natalie talked to a redheaded woman Ethan recognized as one of the handful of photographers who kept studios in the Factory Lofts complex. Zane and Natalie's wedding photographer, no doubt. Despite his best intentions, he stared at his diminutive friend, unable to pull his gaze away. She wore a pair of black Capri pants that flawlessly molded her heart-shaped buttocks, topped off with a bright red camisole and a large amber colored necklace. Her outfit perfectly matched the décor. Surely, she'd planned it that way. Nothing Natalie did was ever left to chance. He watched with pride as she showed the woman the various storage solutions her business was famous for. People hired her to organize their lives and when they needed space solutions, she hired Ethan to design and build them.

Zane was an idiot. She was perfect. He never would have walked away from her. Good thing he'd always be there for her.

She glanced in his direction and smiled. "Ethan. You remember Gina Ray? She's going to be shooting our wedding."

Our wedding? Ethan sighed. The poor girl was still convinced Zane was coming back. He stared back at her and the photographer. "Uh, hi Gina. Nice seeing you again."

"There's fresh coffee in the kitchen. Make yourself comfortable. We'll join you in a minute."

Ethan crossed the room to the black tiled area of the sixteen hundred square foot space. He knew every inch of its design, having lovingly sketched it himself. Granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, counter island, built in cabinetry – her kitchen was still one of his favorite projects. He smiled at the framed vanity plate on the wall. 'Kitchen an exclusive Ethan Frazier Design.' They'd become a great team over the past few years. She sent her clients his way for any of their storage solution builds and he recommended her services every chance he got.

Snippets of her conversation drifted his way. "Organizing your personal space is not just about sorting through old pictures and putting your stuff into nicely labeled boxes in your closets. It's about gaining peace of mind."

He smiled. She couldn't resist pitching her services, even when she was buying someone else's. Ethan watched as a ray of light caught the warm chestnut tones of her chin length bob. Her cute upturned nose and the dusting of freckles on her cheekbones belied her true nature. Beneath that pixie look and tiny five foot two frame, there was an iron will. His chest squeezed at the sound of her cheerful voice. Zane wasn't coming back. And once she finally admitted it to herself, she'd be devastated.

He pulled open one of the cupboard doors. Three rows of neatly stacked red coffee cups, arms all facing left, stared back at him. How she managed to keep the place in such amazing order with a slob like Zane hanging around half the time was a miracle in itself.

He poured some of the fragrant brew into a cup and pulled open the utensil drawer in search of a spoon. Everything down to the potato peeler was systematically arranged in order of size, frequency of use and overall most effective use of space. Life Solutions specialized in organizing people's lives and anyone from college students to the rich and famous could benefit from her services. Whether you needed your closets or your twenty-room mansion organized, Natalie had the solution to the clutter in your life.

And she was doing extremely well. In the past year she'd developed quite a reputation and a following of rich clients who had more cars, shoes and clothes than they knew what to do with. And Los Angeles was the perfect city for her business to flourish – a place where people defined their success by how little they had to do for themselves.

"Find everything okay?"

Ethan turned and grinned at Natalie and Gina. "How could I not? This place is catalogued better than a reference library. Although, I did find the placement of the sugar a little counter-intuitive."

Natalie opened her mouth in protest, then grinned. "You almost had me." Turning to Gina she added, "Have a seat. I'd like to show Ethan your portfolio."

The redheaded woman sat to his left and flipped open a big black binder. "You must be getting excited. Natalie tells me your family is coming down from New York?"

He looked into the woman's inquisitive green eyes. She thought he was the groom. He glanced over at Natalie whose face was a study in nonchalance. He raised his right eyebrow at her. What the?

"Oh, you know men," she piped up. "He's been acting as though this is just another party but I know deep down he's excited. Right, Babe?" Her warm brown eyes filled with supplication and another emotion he couldn't identify. As soon as Gina turned to him for his response, Natalie mouthed the words 'play along'.

"Uh, right, Hon." There was no harm in helping her save face in front of one of the neighbors. Still, she'd have to eventually admit Zane wasn't coming back. This was more than false hope. It was down right denial.

Natalie laughed and sidled up to the back of his chair. She was so close, he felt her body heat between the rungs. He turned his attention to the photos and tried to ignore the warmth spreading through his gut. Damn. She was his best friend's fiancé. And she had obviously lost her mind. Besides, she was his best friend, too. When he and Zane had met the cute brunette in Design 101, they'd both been interested in getting to know her better. Much better. But Zane with his rugged good looks and unparalleled charm had swept her off her feet. And he had been relegated to the role of best friend. Friends were forever, boyfriends obviously weren't.

Natalie wrapped her arms around his shoulders, brought her mouth inches from his right ear and whispered, "Thank-you." Her sweet cinnamon-scented breath tickled his neck and her

touch nearly sent him running out of the room. Little shivers of electricity ran down his back and he closed his eyes for a second, too dazed to do anything but savor the moment. Any onlooker would have thought them madly in love.

After a good twenty minutes of talking about her services and showing them her portfolio of black and white documentary-style wedding photos, Gina Ray left with the second of three payments for the big day. Saving face was going to be expensive.

They escorted her to the door and stood arm in arm as she walked to her car, leaving a cloud of patchouli in her wake. As soon as she'd rounded the corner, Ethan closed the door and locked it. He turned, crossed his arms and waited for Natalie to speak. She didn't. Instead, she smoothed back her hair and tucked her chin length bangs behind her ears. If he weren't so perturbed by the whole scene, he might have found the gesture kind of cute. "What was that all about? The longer you wait to cancel everything, the harder it'll be."

She raised her gaze, her soft brown eyes pleading with him. "It's too late to cancel everything. There's too much riding on this. The TV show, my business, my reputation. I am getting married in two weeks come hail or high water."

"Is that so? And who the hell are you going to marry if Zane doesn't find himself and come back?"

"You."