



Chapter 1

Front Royal, Virginia

“I’m not sure I can do this,” Nick said.

“I believe in you,” Alena reassured him. “I know you’ve got it in you.”

“It’s just not right. There are things no man should be asked to do.”

“Now listen,” Alena said. “I’ve seen you pick maggots off a two-week-old corpse without even turning up your nose.”

“Good idea,” Nick said. “Think about happy times.”

“What I’m saying is: If you can do that, you can manage this.”

Nick looked at the sign again: WEDDINGS 'N' SUCH: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO MAKE YOUR SPECIAL DAY UNFORGETTABLE. He turned to Alena: “Is it hot in here or is it just me?”

“Nick—we haven’t even gone in yet.”

The door opened to the sound of electronic chimes playing Mendelssohn’s Wedding March. Nick took a quick look around the room; he saw leather scrapbooks of sample wedding announcements, satiny ring pillows with lace

embroidery, gleaming bridesmaid's and groomsman's gifts, and flowery silk nosegays. Nick had never felt so out of his element; he felt like an ant that had wandered into the wrong colony, secreting some noxious alarm pheromone as he went, so that at any moment hundreds of angry workers might swarm all over him and shear off his limbs with their mandibles.

Alena took his hand. "Nick. Breathe."

They sat in a pair of matching upholstered chairs that faced a large desk. On the desk was a silver dome-shaped bell; Alena leaned forward and gave it a tap. A moment later a woman emerged from a back room and stepped into the doorway with a blinding smile.

"Well, hello! Welcome to Weddings & Such! I'll be right with you two—just let me grab my calendar!"

Nick cringed. The wedding planner looked middle-aged, probably in her mid-forties, with unnaturally blonde hair and big bright eyes and a smile that seemed too big for her face. Nick thought the woman looked like she was waiting for the punch line of a joke—as if she might break out in laughter at any moment.

Alena leaned over to him. "What's the matter with you?"

"She's perky."

"What?"

"I can't do 'perky'—it's not in my genetic makeup."

"She's not perky, she's just friendly."

"Her face looks like one of those plasma balls at Radio Shack."

"Maybe she just likes her job."

"I like my job, but I don't glow in the dark."

“Nick, we just got here—would you give the woman a chance?”

The wedding planner returned a moment later, sat down at her desk, and opened the calendar in front of her with a flourish. Then she folded her hands, leaned forward on her elbows, and gave each of them a long lingering smile.

“I can’t do ‘perky,’” Nick said.

“I beg your pardon?”

Alena interrupted. “My name is Alena Savard, and this is my fiancé, Nick Polchak. We’re getting married.”

The woman gave them a look of astonished delight.

“Wow,” Nick said. “Are we your first customers?”

“Every customer is my first customer,” she said.

“So much for references.”

Alena ignored him. “We don’t know much about planning a wedding, so we thought we could use some help, and that’s why we’re here.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place.”

“What a relief,” Nick said. “We tried Ace Hardware, but they didn’t have a clue. By the way, why does your sign say ‘Everything You Need to Make Your Special Day Unforgettable’? Why did you pick that word? I mean, when the Titanic hit the iceberg—that was ‘unforgettable’ too. Don’t you think you’re underpromising a little?”

Alena slapped a hand on Nick’s forearm and smiled at the proprietor. “I should probably explain what’s going on here. My fiancé feels a little out of place right now, and whenever that happens he turns into a complete idiot. Try not to

take it personally—he does it to everybody. If it makes you feel any better, he gets a lot worse than this.”

The woman turned to Nick with a look of pure compassion. “I understand perfectly. Are you feeling a bit out of place, Nick?”

“I’d rather be staked down in a pit of flesh-eating beetles.”

“Now, Nick, I think you’re exaggerating.”

“No, that happened to me once. I actually preferred it.”

“It’s perfectly all right if you feel a little uncomfortable here—it’s only natural. Why, I’ve seen grown men have full-blown panic attacks in here.”

“Has anyone vomited yet? Because I want this day to be ‘unforgettable.’”

At that, the woman turned to Alena. “Perhaps it would help if we all got to know each other a little better. Tell me about yourselves . . . How did the two of you meet?”

“I suppose like anybody else,” Alena said with a shrug. “Nick was hired by the FBI to locate bodies in a lost graveyard. He needed a cadaver dog and I own one.”

“The soil in northern Virginia is very rocky,” Nick explained. “Ground-penetrating radar has a hard time distinguishing rock from human bone. Cadaver dogs are very effective at detecting human remains, and Alena happened to have a very good one—that one there, in fact.”

The wedding planner slowly leaned across the desk and saw a mottled gray dog reclining beside Alena’s chair. The dog had one paw propped under its chin; the other leg was missing entirely, severed cleanly at the shoulder. The dog made

no movement in response to the planner's attention; it just stared back at her with hollow blue eyes.

The planner's own eyes widened . . .

"Relax," Nick said. "It's not a cadaver, it's a cadaver dog."

"I live by myself in a private compound in the mountains up above Endor," Alena continued. "I don't have a telephone, and my gate is always locked, so Nick climbed my fence one night and I ordered one of my guard dogs to grab him by the throat and pin him to the ground. That's how we met." She took Nick's hand and smiled.

The wedding planner looked at Nick. "What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a forensic entomologist," Nick said. "I study the insects that are attracted to human remains, specifically in cases of suspected murder. These insects arrive at the body in a predictable order, and they develop at a measurable rate. That makes it possible for people like me to calculate the postmortem interval—the amount of time that's elapsed since the murder took place."

The planner lowered her voice to a whisper. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

Nick glanced around the office. "Who knows why people do what they do?"

"And I train dogs," Alena said simply.

The planner looked relieved. "How wonderful! You teach obedience school?"

"No, I train cadaver dogs to find human remains. I also train drug-sniffing dogs for the DEA and bomb-sniffers for ATF and Homeland Security; also search-and-rescue dogs, trackers, security dogs . . ."

Nick watched the planner's face as it slowly fell. He almost felt sorry for her; if she was hoping to draw a wedding theme from their occupations, she was out of luck. Nobody wants to see a cake with a chalk line around it.

"Have the two of you set a date yet?" the planner asked.

"The last Saturday in May," Alena replied.

"Good timing," the planner said, noting the date in her calendar. "You'll beat the June rush."

"Nick's done teaching his classes by then."

The planner turned to Nick. "So you're a teacher?"

"I'm a professor of entomology at NC State," Nick said, "but what I really love to do is—"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted. "The . . . bug thing."

Alena grinned at her fiancé. "They call Nick the Bug Man."

"I'm sure they do," the planner managed. "So where are you two planning to be married? Have you chosen the venue yet?"

"Resurrection Lutheran Church in Endor," Alena said.

"That's just a few miles from here," the planner said. "Terrific—that'll make my job a breeze. Now, what about the budget? How much are you thinking of spending on this wedding?"

"Your sign says 'Weddings & Such,'" Nick said. "We want a wedding, but we'd like to skip the such."

"You want a simple wedding."

"Now you're talking," Nick said.

"But not too simple," Alena corrected.

The planner turned to Alena. “Will you want flowers? Printed invitations? A photographer?”

“Well, sure.”

“Hold it,” Nick said. “That sounds like such.”

The planner turned to Nick. “And what would ‘simple’ look like to you, Nick?”

“I say, ‘I do,’ then she says, ‘I do’ . . . then we’re done.”

“Nick, it’s a wedding,” the planner scolded. “There are traditions to be observed; there are customs to follow.”

“I refer to them as ‘bizarre pairing rituals.’”

Alena turned to face her fiancé. “Nick—are you trying to be obnoxious?”

“No, it just flows—only amateurs have to try.”

She gave him a look, and he got the message.

“Okay, we’ll have some such,” he said. “But how are we supposed to set a budget when we don’t even know how much things cost?”

“Well, do you see that wedding cake in the corner?”

“Is that real?”

“No, it’s just a plaster model. A cake like that costs about six hundred dollars.”

“Well, no wonder. Plaster is hard to work with.”

Alena cleared her throat.

“I’m just kidding,” Nick said. “That cake is way too big for us, that’s all.”

“Well, what size wedding are we talking about? What about the bridal party and guest list? Have you discussed that yet?”

“Eight,” Alena said.

“Eight—that’s a nice size for a bridal party,” the planner said. “Eight bridesmaids and eight—”

“No, that’s the guest list.”

The planner looked at her. “Eight guests?”

“Only two for me,” Alena said, “but one of them is the minister, and his wife is playing the organ, so I guess we shouldn’t count them. Make it six.”

“But you must have extended family . . . grandparents? cousins? stepfamily?”

“Not me,” Alena said.

“There’s my mother in Pittsburgh,” Nick said, “but she doesn’t travel these days.”

“What about colleagues and friends?”

“My friends are my colleagues,” Nick said. “I suppose I’d have more, but my colleagues have a way of dying—it’s an occupational hazard in my line of work.”

“My friends are my dogs,” Alena said. “I never had much luck with people. Can my dogs be in the wedding? Not all of them, of course—I have thirty-seven. Just a couple, maybe.”

The planner just looked back and forth between them.

“Look,” Nick said. “I think I can save us all some time here. Alena and I are planning to get married in May, and the fact is neither one of us knows the first thing about weddings—that’s why we’re here. We’ve picked a date, and we’ve got

a church, and that's about it. So, what kind of cake do we want? We haven't got a clue—we never gave it a moment's thought before we—”

“I want this one,” Alena said. She reached across the desk and handed the planner a small photograph of a wedding cake torn from the pages of a magazine.

The planner nodded. “We can do that. It'll cost about a hundred and fifty dollars.”

“And I want to go here,” Alena said, handing over a second photo, “for our honeymoon.”

The planner smiled at the photo. “Very nice. Very traditional. I hear it's lovely there in the spring.”

“May I see those?” Nick asked, leaning across the desk and extending his hand. He took the photos and studied the faded images. One was a photo of a simple white two-tiered wedding cake with traditional bride-and-groom figurines perched on top; the other was a photo of a handsome young couple reclining in a heart-shaped bathtub, their perfect bodies tastefully concealed beneath mountains of carefully positioned bubbles. The banner atop the ad read: “Picture Yourself in the Poconos.”

The couple in the bathtub looked strangely out of date to Nick; the man's mustache and hairstyle were straight out of the eighties. He turned the photo over and checked the date of the magazine; sure enough, the photo was more than twenty years old.

Nick looked at his fiancée as if he were seeing her for the first time . . . What happened to the clueless neophyte who walked in here with him? What happened to the woman who had never given a moment's thought to wedding

cakes or rehearsal dinners or honeymoon locations? What happened to the woman who was just like him?

Nick now realized that Alena had been thinking about this event for a very long time—ever since she was a little girl—and she had very definite ideas about how things should be done, right down to the shape of their honeymoon tub.

“You already have a cake picked out,” he said to her.

“So?”

“What if I wanted a different one?”

“Do you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t even like cake.”

“Then what are you whining about?”

“My steering wheel doesn’t work.”

“What?”

“When I was five years old, my mom took me to Kennywood—it’s an amusement park near Pittsburgh. I wanted to get on the bumper cars, but when they started the ride I kept crashing into everything.”

“Nick, what are you talking about?”

“I grabbed the little steering wheel and started turning, but nothing happened. Then it dawned on me: The steering wheel didn’t work—it was just something to hold on to while I smashed into things.”

Both women just stared at him.

“Why don’t you girls go ahead,” he said. “I’ll be over here if you need me.”

Chapter 2

Endor, Virginia

“But the wedding is in less than a week,” Alena said.

“I know,” Nick said, “and I’ll only be gone for one day.”

Alena slumped low in the passenger seat of Nick’s ’94 Plymouth Sundance with her bare feet pressed against the dashboard and her knees almost against her chest. Just above the glove compartment there was a crack in the plastic; when she pushed against it she could feel it pinch the heel of her leathery foot.

“But why do you have to go now?”

“I told you—they only meet once a month, on the last Tuesday. That’s today, so I have to go.”

Nick’s car sat idling in the wide gravel driveway in front of Alena’s double-wide trailer in the secluded mountains above Endor. The car’s heater, set to Low, was just enough to take the chill off the morning air. Outside, a light mist was beginning to lift from the ground, revealing the bluets and trillium and columbine in their brilliant spring colors. Across the gravel driveway, Alena’s

dogs pressed their noses against the kennel fence, watching the conversation shift back and forth between their master and her husband-to-be as if they were the gallery at a tennis match.

“You could at least turn off the engine,” Alena said.

“I don’t have time. The meeting’s at noon and it’s a three-hour drive to Philadelphia.”

“So you’re just going to drive off and leave me with all these wedding details?”

“What details?”

“There’s always details before a wedding—everybody knows that.”

“Like what?”

She turned and glared at him. “Details. Do I have to itemize them for you?”

“You’ve got your dress. The cake’s being delivered. Gunner’s setting up the church and Rose is bringing the flowers. All we’ve got to do is show up.”

“Well, that just shows what you know.” Alena sank even lower in her seat. She wished she could think of some major complication Nick’s one-day absence would cause, some last-minute detail that would make it impossible for him to leave—but she couldn’t. She hated to admit it, but Nick was right; it was a small and simple wedding, and there was very little left to do. She just despised the idea that Nick would want to leave. She wanted him to be there, with her—not because he had to, but because he wanted to.

But all she could think to say was, “But you just got here.”

“Alena.”

“Who drives off and leaves his fiancée the week of the wedding? Who does that?”

“Alena, we’ve been over all this. Do we really have to go over it again?”

“Yes. We do.”

Nick groaned.

“Stop moaning,” she said. “You sound like one of my dogs.”

“I feel like one of your dogs.”

“Just tell me again—what’s so important that you have to drive to Philadelphia less than a week before our wedding?”

“I’m a member of an organization called the Vidocq Society,” Nick said slowly. “I have been for several years. The organization was named after a famous nineteenth-century Frenchman named François-Eugène Vidocq, a pioneering detective who—”

“Skip the history lesson,” Alena said. “Just get to ‘why.’”

Nick let a moment pass before starting again. “The Vidocq Society is a group of volunteers from all over the world representing more than seventy different forensic specialties. We’ve got pathologists, odontologists, psychophysicists, fingerprint experts, blood spatter analysts, homicide reconstruction specialists, explosives experts, and even a forensic entomologist—me. Once a month we all meet for lunch at the Public Ledger Building in downtown Philadelphia, and after lunch we review cold cases for law enforcement agencies all over the country—cases that have left them stumped. We help solve those cases by bringing our various forensic disciplines to bear. To

remain a member of Vidocq, I'm required to attend at least one meeting per year—and my schedule hasn't allowed me to attend in months.”

“So go next month,” Alena said, “or the month after.”

Nick reached into his jacket pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. “And as I told you before, a couple of weeks ago I received a letter from an old friend of mine—a fellow member of Vidocq. His name is Peter Boudreau; he was at Penn State when I was doing my doctorate there. Pete is a forensic botanist—‘Pistil Pete,’ we used to call him. He wrote me this letter, and he asked me to attend today’s meeting. This is what he wrote—”

Alena took the letter from his hand. “I can read, Nick.” She opened the letter and looked at the single paragraph of hand-scrawled text. It said:

Hey Nick,

Haven't seen you at Vidocq the last few months. Where have you been? Probably out picking maggots off a corpse somewhere. Too bad—we've really had some interesting cases the last few months. I've been working on one since last fall and I think it's about to come together—but I could really use a bug's-eye view on this one. You're the man, Nick—I think you could help me crack this one wide open. Don't miss the May meeting, OK? Help me wrap this one up—it'll give us a chance to catch up too.

Pete

P.S. Heard you're getting married. Condolences to the missus.

Alena looked at Nick. “Is that what this is about? Professional pride?
‘You’re the man, Nick.’”

“It’s about helping an old friend,” Nick said. “And yes, it’s about professional pride too—what’s wrong with that? He needs a bug man, and I happen to be one. It’s what I do.”

Alena looked at him. “Do you love me as much as I love you?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“What kind of a question is that? There’s no possible way to quantify—”

“Stop that!”

“Stop what?”

“Thinking about everything. There are different kinds of questions, Nick. Some questions you’re supposed to think about and some you should just feel. Can’t you tell the difference?”

Nick paused. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Does everything have to make sense?”

“It helps.”

Alena shook her head. “Man—you are a piece of work.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

Alena looked at Nick’s eyes—the soft brown orbs that seemed to float behind his lenses like the undulating globules of a lava lamp. The thick lenses of his glasses made his irises look enormous; Alena thought they looked like drops of chocolate that might melt and drip away at any moment, leaving the lenses empty and white.

“It’s just for one day,” Nick said. “I’ll be back by noon tomorrow.”

“I know,” Alena said.

“Then what’s the problem?”

Alena fumbled for the words. “It’s like our cars have been headed down this road together, you know? Then all of a sudden I look up and your car is pointed toward Philadelphia. You’re there, I’m here—it just makes me nervous, that’s all. I won’t even be able to talk to you.”

Nick smiled. “That reminds me—I got you something.”

Alena sat up straighter. “You did? What?”

Nick opened the center console and took out a shiny new iPhone.

“You got me a cell phone?”

“So we can stay in touch while I’m gone. You don’t have a landline up here, and I worry about you sometimes.”

“You worry about me?”

“Sometimes.”

Alena grinned.

“You like it when I worry?”

“Worrying means you care. I like it when you care.”

“So the more I worry, the more I care; and the more I care, the more you like it. In other words, the more miserable I am, the happier you are.”

“Pretty much.” She punched a few buttons and watched the screen. “I’ve never owned one of these . . . It looks complicated.”

“If it’s too technical, get one of your dogs to explain it to you.”

“Funny.”

“You’ll get the hang of it. You don’t need all the bells and whistles for now—it’s just so we can stay in touch. I entered my cell phone number as a ‘Favorite.’ If you want to call me, all you have to do is push this and this.”

She did as Nick instructed, but nothing seemed to happen. “It doesn’t work,” she said.

“Well, there’s a small problem. There’s no cell tower way up here in the mountains.”

“You bought me a phone that doesn’t work?”

“It works—it just doesn’t work up here. But I tested it down in Endor, and you can get reception down there.”

“So I have to go down to Endor every time I want to make a call? Nick, you know I hate those people.”

“You’re not going down there to talk to them, Alena; you’re going down to talk to me—you just need a signal, and Endor is the closest place. So here’s the deal: I’ll call you tonight at exactly nine o’clock. All you have to do is drive down to Endor and wait for my call. Okay?”

She looked at the phone. “So what you’re saying is, if I fall and break my leg up here, all I have to do is drag myself down to Endor and dial 911.”

“Pretty much.”

“Thanks for worrying about me.”

“Any time.”

“Seriously,” she said, “it was sweet of you to think of it. So . . . nine o’clock tonight, right?”

“Nine o’clock.”

“What if you’re gone more than a day?”

“I won’t be.”

“What if you are?”

“Then I’ll call you at nine o’clock the next night and every night I’m gone.

Okay? Now let me get out of here, will you? The sooner I go, the sooner I’ll be back.”

Chapter 3

Nick headed east on I-66 and tried to enjoy the few remaining miles of quiet country scenery before he reached the creeping suburban sprawl from the capital that began around the town of Manassas. After that the land would smooth and flatten and the majestic century oaks would gradually disappear, replaced by flowering crepe myrtles and slender maple saplings planted in the front yards of seemingly endless subdivisions. What is it about the human species? Nick wondered. In less than a hundred years they've gone from living in a one-room farmhouse on fifty acres to a three-story colonial on a quarter-acre lot.

And the traffic—Nick knew that by the time he reached the beltway the cars would be bumper-to-bumper at seventy miles an hour, racing into the city like bees toward a hive. He would have to slug his way north around the beltway to the I-95 exit near Knollwood, then wade through the morning mire of traffic in downtown Baltimore, Newark, and Wilmington before he would finally reach Philadelphia. He checked his watch; he figured he could just make it if there were no major accidents or road repairs. That's a big "if," he thought.

Nick shook his head. Why did I waste so much time with Alena?

He opened his cell phone and punched in a number from memory.

After a single ring a voice responded: “FBI. Nathan Donovan.”

“Can you explain something to me about women?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “This isn’t a call-in show, Nick. I’m kind of busy here.”

“I just had a strange conversation with Alena.”

“The first of many, trust me.”

“There’s something I don’t understand about women.”

“Does that come as a surprise? You don’t understand the entire human race.”

“I have a Vidocq Society meeting in Philly today. I got a letter from Pete Boudreau a couple weeks ago inviting me up. You remember Pete, don’t you?”

“Yeah, Pete Boudreau—some sort of pathologist, isn’t he?”

“No, Pete’s a forensic botanist—a palynologist, to be exact.”

“A what?”

“Sorry—I forgot the FBI dictionary is limited to two syllables.

Palynology—the study of pollen and spores. Forensic botany is the use of plant anatomy and ecology in legal investigations, and palynology is a subdiscipline of botany. Actually, there are several subdisciplines of forensic botany . . . There’s limnology, and dendrochronology—”

“Nick, you called me forty-five seconds ago and I’m already bored. I think that’s a new record.”

“Well, anyway, Pete’s a palynologist and we go way back. I met him when I was doing my doctorate at Penn State and he was a professor in the botany department. I bumped into him for the first time there in DC, at the U.S. Botanic Garden over on Maryland Avenue. They had an *Amorphophallus titanum* on display, and I drove all the way down from State College to get a look at it.”

“I know I’m gonna hate myself for asking this, but . . . they had a what?”

“The titan arum, they call it—a carrion flower. Ever heard of it? It’s the world’s largest flower, and it only occurs naturally in the rain forests of Sumatra. The flower has to grow for years before it ever blooms, and then it only blooms for a single day—two at the most. Then the whole thing collapses and you have to wait years to see it again.”

“Since when have you been interested in flowers?”

“I’m not—but the amazing thing about the titan arum is that it smells just like rotting meat. Isn’t that amazing? A plant that pollinates itself by attracting the same blowflies and flesh flies that are attracted to a decomposing body. I just had to see that.”

“Gee, I hope you took some pictures.”

“I did better than that—I told them I was doing research for my doctorate and they let me test the thing with a temperature probe. Guess what? The plant generates heat—it not only simulates the scent of a decaying body, it simulates the temperature too!”

“The wonders of nature. I need some coffee.”

“Of course, I was interested in the plant from an entomological perspective, but Pete was fascinated by it as a botanist.”

“Nick.”

“Pete was a real pioneer in forensic botany, you know; the field barely existed before he did some of his research.”

“Nick.”

“What?”

“You said you had a question about women, remember? This is turning into a book report on People Who Are as Weird as I Am.”

“Oh, right. Well, Pete asked me to meet him in Philadelphia today and I’m headed up there now. I told Alena about the meeting weeks ago and she seemed fine with it then—but this morning she practically begged me not to go.”

“Nick—you’re getting married in less than a week.”

“So?”

“So she probably wants you around.”

“Why would she want me around? There’s nothing for me to do.”

“You’re asking me? I still can’t figure out why she’s marrying you.”

“She just wasn’t being reasonable.”

“Reasonable—you want her to be reasonable.”

“I’d appreciate it, yes.”

“Let me tell you something, Nick. When Macy was pregnant with our first we did the whole Lamaze routine—the childbirth classes, the breathing techniques, the whole nine yards. So when the baby was about to pop we headed for the hospital, and there I was in my powder-blue scrubs and my hairnet—and I had nothing to do. And it was taking hours, because the kid had a head like a bowling ball—and I still had nothing to do. So I casually mentioned that there

was a game on in the lounge . . . You know what that's called, Nick? That's called being reasonable. Thank God I left my handgun in the locker."

"Is this story supposed to encourage me?"

"No, it's supposed to make you think. Give up on reasonable, Nick—there's no such thing. 'Be reasonable' just means 'Think like I do'—and she doesn't. But hey, don't let that bother you; I don't think there's anybody on the planet who thinks like you."

"Give up on reasonable," Nick said. "That won't be easy—I'm a very reasonable person."

"Are you kidding? You're the most erratic and unpredictable person I've ever met—who's not in prison. And that could always change."

"'Erratic and unpredictable'? Seriously?"

"You're engaged, aren't you?"

Nick stopped to consider Donovan's words. He had a point—proposing marriage to Alena was probably the most unpredictable thing Nick had ever done, and everyone who knew him was flabbergasted by the news of his engagement. Some of them actually broke out in laughter, while others simply refused to believe. Everyone who knew Nick seemed absolutely convinced that pigs might fly, and the Cubs might win the Series, but the Bug Man would never, ever take a mate.

"Is that what I'm doing?" Nick wondered aloud. "Being erratic?"

"Now stop right there," Donovan said. "Let me tell you what's happening, Nick. It's a week before your wedding and you're starting to second-guess yourself. Everybody does that—men and women alike. 'Am I doing the right

thing? Do I really know this person? Am I about to make the biggest mistake of my life?”

“Am I?”

“You’re the only one who can answer that question. But I’ll give you my opinion: Alena’s one of the strangest women I’ve ever met—and believe me, that’s really saying something. But she’s strange like you, and that’s the thing that really matters. She’s good for you, Nick. You need her—or maybe a frontal lobotomy.”

“What if she is a frontal lobotomy?”

“Come again?”

“Have you ever watched praying mantises mate?”

“We don’t get those channels,” Donovan said.

“It’s fascinating to watch. When they’ve finished mating, the female twists around and bites off the male’s head—it provides a little extra protein snack for the female to help ensure the survival of her offspring.”

“So?”

“What if marriage is like that? Maybe for the female it’s just a snack, but for the male it’s the last supper.”

“Nick, take a Valium—you’re starting to freak out.”

“I sat with Alena for almost an hour this morning. I stayed so long that now I might be late for Vidocq. We kept going round and round about the same thing—why I had to leave right now. She said it made her nervous, and I kept trying to reassure her . . . But you know what I thought when I left? I thought, Why did I waste so much time with Alena? Is that what I’m doing, Donovan? If she’s never going to think like me, am I just wasting my time?”

“Are you planning on calling me every time you have a question about women? Because if you are, I want to get paid.”

“You’re my best man, Donovan—Isn’t this part of your duties?”

“No, it isn’t. ‘Best man’ just means I’m supposed to prop you up in church if your legs start to give out; and I have to come up with some lame toast at the reception. Oh—and I also throw your bachelor party.”

Nick groaned. “Do I have to come to that?”

“You’re the only bachelor I still know.”

“Is this going to be one of those humiliating, primitive male-bonding rituals?”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“Wonderful.”

“Look, I need to get back to work—but I want to ask you something, and I really want you to think about this.”

“Okay.”

“Why are you going to Philadelphia?”

“I told you. I have a Vidocq meeting—”

“You’re not listening, Nick. The woman you say you love is back in Virginia, and the event that will change your life forever is taking place in just a few days . . . So why are you going to Philadelphia?”

Nick paused. “I don’t know.”

“Well, you need to figure it out—because Alena wants to know too.”