
Chapter 1

THE WEDDING...

Dax Dumont watched his bride, Dyani Deere, approach as he waited for her in the gazebo that was adorned with late summer flowers and twinkling lights at the center of the Oneida Farm grounds, giving it a fairytale look. The vision of his bride brought sudden and unfamiliar tears to his eyes. Once again, Dax found it hard to believe that this remarkable young woman who had burst into his life just a few months ago now held a place in his heart forever, as his wife.

Dyani wore her gleaming, straight, black hair loose so it hung almost to her waist. She wore a delicate but exquisitely beaded headband that had belonged to her grandmother. It sat across her forehead and around her head like a crown. Her grandmother's full length wedding dress was made of simple muslin but had been intricately hand embroidered with Wisconsin wildflowers around the neckline, waist, sleeves and hem. The dress had been altered to fit Dyani perfectly. In her hands, she carried a bouquet of purple, lavender and white asters that grew wild on the farm during the last days of summer.

As she walked up the gazebo steps to where the minister and Dax stood waiting, Dyani flashed him a brilliant smile that emanated from her heart. The smile finally did Dax in and he had to wipe his eyes before reaching out to her.

As she gave him her hand and looked up at him, Dyani was struck with Dax's impossible good looks as she was each time she saw him. He stood now, wearing a suit that must have been custom made for his tall, muscular frame and he smiled at her from his strong-jawed face. Her breath hitched and she stopped for a moment so that Dax had to gently tug her up the last step. As she looked up to meet his face, a tear slipped down her cheek. He wiped it away with his thumb as he said, "I love you, little girl." Then he kissed her on the forehead which drew a collective "Aww" from the guests.

The minister stepped forward then and asked the guests to form a circle around the gazebo and take a moment to ground themselves by relaxing, taking a deep breath and bringing Dax and Dyani to the front of their thoughts. Neither Dax nor Dyani had family at the wedding but there were dozens of good friends gathered at dusk at the end of a perfect September day.

The minister motioned for Annie to come forward and said, "The bride's best friend, Annie, will perform the smudging ceremony. As she lights the sweetgrass and sage, the cleansing smoke will help us to invite strength, energy and love into the hearts of this couple and all who are here today."

Annie lit the end of the bundle of herbs to be used in the ceremony, and as it began to smoke and emit a distinctive aroma that was pleasant and peaceful, she held it and a small bowl up in front of herself—as was the custom of their tribe—as she walked inside the circle of guests, saying, "We call on the spirits of all who care for Dax and Dyani—both here and beyond—to wish them beauty, love and grace as they

begin their journey together. May they stay grounded and remember to walk with balance, joy and harmony, all the days of their lives."

Annie had come full circle and stopped to put the still smoking herbs on a small altar near the back of the gazebo and the minister began the short official service that would affirm the vows they had made earlier in the year.

When Dax finally took Dyani in a deep and meaningful kiss, the guests clapped and cheered as they were invited into the Oneida Farm Community Center for a reception.

The couple greeted all guests at the entrance to the reception and thanked each one for sharing their day. Dax stood tall and protectively close to his small bride, who frequently stole glances up at her husband and could not help wondering again how she had come to this happily-ever-after life.

Lukas understood that Annie would be occupied at the start of the reception, receiving guests, checking on the food, directing the photographer and all the other duties she saw as her responsibility. Annie apologetically assured Lukas that, soon, she would join him to enjoy the celebration. He took her arm and pulled her in to kiss her forehead, saying, "Don't be long, baby. It's time for you to have some fun."

He made his way to the bar for a beer and then turned to lean on his elbows and watch his gorgeous girl direct the festivities. An older man who had been sitting a few stools away got up and made his way to Lukas. He held out his hand and said, "Hey. I'm Adam Skenendore. I happen to be related by marriage to both the bride and the girl you've got your eye on there."

The man's smile was genuine and warm, so Lukas took

his hand, smiled, and said, "Nice to meet you. I'm Lukas Mattson."

"I'll be honest with you and tell you that I've heard of you from my daughter Issi, who works here at the farm and will be taking the position assisting Annie, now that Dyani is married," explained Adam.

"That's great. I'm sure Annie will appreciate the help," said Lukas, taking another swig of beer.

"I raised Issi since her mother died, so she needs a female role model. I couldn't think of another woman I would want to serve as an example for Issi than Annie. She's smart, strong, compassionate and incredibly hard working. She's so competent that everyone around her relies on her—too much maybe. The only fault I can find with her is that her fearlessness puts her in risky situations sometimes," Adam said thoughtfully.

Lukas had only been listening casually as he kept his eyes on Annie gracefully moving around the room keeping everything running smoothly. Adam's words had Lukas putting his beer down, standing up straight and facing him. His expression became serious—very serious.

"What risky situations?" Lukas asked, trying to speak evenly.

Adam didn't seem to notice Lukas' mood change and continued. "Well, there was that time last winter when a young woman from the tribe was fleeing her abusive boyfriend and found her way to Annie's house in the middle of the night for protection after being beaten. Annie took her in, and as she tended to the girl's cuts and bruises, the boyfriend showed up, angry and drunk. Annie had the presence of mind to call both the tribal police and the sheriff before opening her door and greeting the guy with her Glock 19 trained on him. When he heard sirens, he tried to flee on foot but he was apprehended."

"What?" Lukas roared, not caring that many guests had stopped their conversations and were now looking at him. "She threatened him with a gun?" Lukas was nearly apoplectic.

Suddenly, Adam realized that maybe he shouldn't have shared this story with Lukas. As Lukas wildly scanned the large room for Annie, Adam tried to placate him by saying, "She didn't shoot him, Lukas—just scared him. But Annie is good with a gun. She's won a few marksmanship competitions, you know."

"No, I didn't know," Lukas said, almost in shock at what Adam had to say about Annie. "What happened then?" he asked, nearly choking.

"Annie talked the young woman into pressing charges, so the guy was arrested. Annie let the young woman live with her until she could make a go of it," Adam said with some pride. "She's one of a kind, that girl."

Lukas looked over at Annie, imagining the scenario he'd just heard about, and felt ready to explode. But he knew now was not the time to confront Annie with this information. He had to get outside to calm down. Adam was still talking when Lukas turned to stalk toward the back door of the community center. He needed some air—and space.

Lukas had felt his possessive and protective tendencies becoming stronger and stronger where Annie was concerned, but now he felt out of control. Knowing he would have to wait to talk seriously with her, Lukas headed for his truck to dig out a pack of cigarettes. He grabbed one, lit it and took a long drag. He had stopped smoking about a year ago but still found that a smoke could help him keep calm when necessary. After a second drag, he wandered out to the gazebo where the ceremony had taken place. It was a still, cool night and the sky was clear and star-filled. Lukas took a deep drag as he looked out over the lit yard that ended several hundred

feet away at the edge of the woods. It was a beautiful night and he felt himself wind down enough to think straight.

The plan he had for Annie tonight seemed even more appropriate now. He was going to take her home with him and explain his feelings for her. He planned to stress that he would be involved in all things relating to her health and safety. She would need to know that he would be in charge going forward and that while they would discuss things, there would be consequences for her if she continued to take dangerous or unhealthy chances. He hoped to hell it was not a deal breaker but he needed to be honest with her about who he was and what he needed from her if they were to have any hope of a lasting relationship.

Standing there, Lukas reflected on his feelings for Annie. He was a Dom. There was no question that it was part of his make-up and he couldn't—and didn't want to—change that. He had a need to protect and care for the woman he was with. That tendency was always present, but with Annie, it was intense. Perhaps this came from the situation when they met. Lukas had been instrumental in rescuing Annie from the extremely dangerous position she was in. She had been kidnapped and beaten and it was just luck that his experience and connections with law enforcement allowed him to respond quickly when Dax Dumont called needing help to find his girl Dyani. He had been successful in rescuing both girls but it was a close call. Looking back, he realized that it was love at first sight when he saw Annie that night, and his need to keep her safe roared to the forefront of his psyche.

After months of going the traditionally persuasive route to get her to follow his lead, he decided that after the wedding, he would give in to his nature, take her in hand and hope she would not leave him in the dust. Lukas had planned to get her alone after tonight and explain that she needed to lighten her load for her own physical and mental health. But

His Reluctant Little Girl

after hearing Adam's story, he was convinced Annie definitely needed a keeper. She had lessons to learn about risk taking and he wanted to be the man to teach her—if she'd allow it.

Lukas crushed his cigarette under his boot and resolutely made his way back to the reception.