

Chapter 2

The Lafayette Club overlooked Lake Minnetonka, the largest lake in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. I had been to the club often enough to know it was an elegant setting, but tonight, guests were transported to another world. White netting arced across the ceiling and tiny lights shimmered over the Crystal Ballroom, which had been transformed into a lush flower garden. Candle and flower centerpieces accented each table, giving the feeling that we were dining outdoors under a canopy of twinkling stars. The oblong windows behind the bridal table overlooked Crystal Bay and against the backdrop of a cotton-candy–streaked sunset, a few boats were silhouetted against the evening sky.

An army of servers in black attire circulated with silver trays brimming with finger foods as the bridal party formed a reception line in the center of the ballroom. As Paul and Pamela greeted guests, I chatted with coworkers, family, and old friends, and we shared the universal lament that the only time we all got together was to marry or to bury someone. We were, at last, doing the former.

Dinner was announced, and we took our places at the head table, where we looked out across the full ballroom. I had attended more wedding dinners than I could possibly count, but they did not often include filet mignon and lobster tail. Throughout the sumptuous meal, there were frequent interruptions of silver tinkling on crystal, a sign for the bride and groom to kiss, and they happily obliged.

Once the dessert of chocolate mousse wedding cake was served, all the single women gathered as Pamela threw a pink rose bouquet, which Ruthie promptly caught. As tradition dictated, Paul removed Pamela's lace garter and threw it into a crowd of single men; this time the lucky recipient was Ron's last remaining single brother, Brian, which prompted hoots and hollers from his siblings.

This had been a very long day for the children, and Michelle's parents, Jeanne and Don Daly, would be taking them for the night. Sam had fallen asleep, and they determined it was time to go. On their way out, they stopped by the bridal table to say good night. Sam slept peacefully on Jeanne's shoulder, but Ruthie was excitedly showing off her bridal bouquet. "See my flowers, Mommy! It means I'll be the next one to get married," she said, waving the flowers in front of her parents.

"Well, let's hope not for a while," Michelle said with a laugh.

"Like not until you're 35," Jack deadpanned. "Hey, thanks for coming, Jeanne and Don. We appreciate your taking the kids for the night."

"Our pleasure," Don replied.

"Bye, Mommy. Bye, Daddy," Ruthie said, still waving the treasured bouquet.

Shortly after 10:30, the wedding dance commenced. As Paul and Pamela took the floor for their first dance to Nat King Cole's romantic ballad "Unforgettable," Michelle sat next to me, her voice soft and tinged with regret.

"I'm sorry to keep bringing this up, but I still feel guilty about what happened and how I reacted. But that night at the Lake Elmo Inn, all I saw was a drunk, gold-digging tramp, not in love with Paul but definitely in love with his money. I'm grateful you were so persistent that I hear Pamela's side, but even then, it wasn't easy to forget."

I remembered the incident, an agonizing experience that had caught everyone off-guard. Shortly after Paul and Pamela had announced their engagement on New Year's Day, Jack and Michelle, along with Tim and me, took them out for a celebratory dinner. We chose the Lake Elmo Inn. It had been the setting of many Pierson family special occasions, from Easter brunch

to anniversaries, and was our first choice for such happy circumstances. The inn was tucked along the main street of Lake Elmo, a small town that retained a rural charm while surrounded by sprawling cities and burgeoning suburbs. Only a few miles from the Wisconsin border, it meant driving from one side of the Twin Cities to the other. The food, service, and memories made it well worth the trip. Here, we would toast Paul and Pamela's happiness and hear their plans for the wedding.

The evening had started well, with the couple asking each of us to participate in the ceremony. Both had been through major life traumas, and as their gift, Mother and Dad had offered to pay for the wedding. I remember that Pamela had started drinking the moment we were seated, ordering a double-shot of Jack Daniel's. Her manner transformed from charming to surly; her voice grew louder and more obnoxious with each drink.

As Pamela described her designer gown, the custom bridesmaid dresses, the invitations, and the flowers, our waiter appeared, carrying a tray of lemon sorbet. "What the hell is this?" Pamela demanded.

"It's a sorbet, ma'am, to cleanse your palate before the main course."

"I don't want that! Just get me another fucking drink!" She swatted at the waiter as if he were an annoying fly.

"Pamela, keep your voice down," Paul begged, his tone colored by embarrassment.

"You can't tell me what to do," Pamela snapped. "I just need to relax, and you're being an asshole." The other patrons stared at our table; we were acutely aware of this, but Pamela was indifferent. "Has Paul told you about our honeymoon? Three weeks in Paris, London, and Rome, staying at the best five-star hotels."

"That sounds expensive," Jack commented.

Pamela sneered. "It's not like your parents can't afford it, Jack—"

"Mom and Dad are paying for that, too?" I interrupted.

Pamela was undeterred. "Of course they're paying for it," she shot back. "They said we could plan the wedding and honeymoon that we wanted, and this is what I want."

"What *you* want?" Michelle repeated. "What about what Paul wants?"

Our waiter had returned, preparing to serve dinner. Pamela, however, demanded her drink. "Where the hell's my Jack and seven?"

"Ma'am, if I could just serve the main course—"

"I want another drink and I want it now!" she shouted. A second waiter intervened, saying he would bring her cocktail right away, as the five of us stared in appalled silence.

Under the influence of large amounts of alcohol, Pamela was oblivious to her surroundings, blithely describing the trip that she and Paul had made to Dayton's department store to choose their bridal registry items. The list was excessive: Waterford crystal in the Lismore pattern, covering every imaginable piece; Irish linens; a sterling silver coffee service. The china and sterling flatware were special-order only. Even the ordinary items needed to start a home—cookware, appliances, sheets, towels—were top of the line. Pamela relished describing the list, chattering nonstop about our parents' wealthy friends and who she expected to "pony up" expensive gifts.

As our celebration deteriorated, I excused myself to use the ladies room. I rose from the table; Michelle was at my elbow. "I'll go with you," she said, and we made our way across the crowded main dining room, conscious of the stares. The bridal registry had been the end for Michelle. As we entered the ladies room, she threw her evening bag across the white-and-green tiled lounge in a rage, the contents spilling across the floor.

“This is not the girl we want Paul to marry! We have got to put a stop to this wedding!” she shouted. Michelle’s outburst had left me gasping for a response. She slammed her fist against the vanity, continuing her angry rant. “We’ve all been duped! Pamela Schaeffer is a world-class gold-digger!”

I couldn’t deny that Pamela’s behavior was inexcusable, but as a recovering alcoholic I knew firsthand about the stinging consequences of being drunk in public, talking too loudly, stumbling across a room, and making an all-around fool of myself. I also knew that if this was an isolated incident fueled by stress, it didn’t necessarily point to deeper problems. I thought we owed Pamela the opportunity to explain herself.

We replaced the contents of Michelle’s purse; I begged her to give Pamela a second chance, but she was furious. As we returned from the restroom, the evening was coming to an abrupt end; Jack was asking for the check. I hoped we could depart without Pamela’s making any more of a scene than she already had, but a discreet exit was not to be. We had been seated in the center of the room, and as we made our way through the maze of diners, Pamela lurched hard into the nearest table, clinking china and spilling wine as she slammed into it.

“Look what you’ve done!” one of the diners said angrily.

“Fuck you!” she snapped, and the dining room became eerily still.

“I am so sorry,” I intervened. “We will make this right.” From the corner of my eye I saw Jack motion to a waiter and hand him a credit card. He whispered something, no doubt giving instructions to purchase a new bottle of wine for the upset patrons.

Tim and Paul had each grabbed Pamela by an elbow and guided her out of the restaurant as gracefully as they could, given that she was still spewing venom at everyone. “Let go of me! You guys are such fucking assholes!”

Every pair of eyes followed us. In the throes of embarrassment, I felt as if I were burning up. Outside, despite the January cold, I tore off my wool coat.

“What are you doing?” Michelle asked in alarm.

“I’m so hot,” I gasped, the cold air sharp against my lungs. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so horrified.”

“And you want to give her a second chance?” Michelle seethed.

In her wobbly condition, Pamela slipped on the icy black street. Tim and Jack caught her before she fell, but it was a struggle as she flailed wildly to keep her balance. In the parking lot, the men supported Pamela until they could get her into the backseat, where she soon passed out.

We reached Paul and Pamela’s colonial-style home in Edina, 45 minutes later. It took both Jack and Tim to carry Pamela’s dead weight into the house, as Paul guided them to the bedroom. Paul was horrified, confessing he had never seen Pamela exhibit this kind of behavior. No one else had seen this side of Pamela, either, and on the drive home, Michelle remained insistent the wedding must be called off.

Pamela paid a heavy price for her overindulgence, suffering a head-pounding hangover, and her inability to recall much of the evening, particularly the end, caused her great shame. I hoped that Pamela did not have a drinking problem, but blacking out is one of the first signs of trouble ahead. Still, I was willing to forgive her. Pamela apologized to each of us, contrite in her quest for forgiveness. She said she had let the stress of her job and planning the wedding get to her, and she recognized her behavior had been abominable.

Pamela seemed truly sorry, and Jack, Tim, and I accepted her apology, believing this was an unfortunate instance of poor judgment. Michelle, however, would not be so easily convinced. Her response to Pamela’s apology was chilly, an attitude Pamela sensed immediately. I pleaded

with Michelle to give Pamela another opportunity to prove herself, reminding her of how far she had brought Paul.

Now in the position of regaining Michelle's trust, Pamela began by asking for her input. Jack and Michelle had held their wedding reception at the Lafayette Club, and Pamela consulted her for ideas on the menu, seating, music, and decorations. She asked if they would allow Ruthie and Sam to participate as the flower girl and ring-bearer. Michelle felt Sam might be too young, but Pamela explained it was important to her to have the children included in what she hoped would be a family affair. Michelle wavered and realized she was not being fair in using one unpleasant evening as a benchmark for ending the relationship that had brought Paul back from the dead.

Now, watching Paul and Pamela dance check-to-check across the polished hardwood floor, Michelle patted my arm and smiled. "I was wrong to be so judgmental. Paul is happier than I ever thought possible, and Pamela is the reason."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," I said. "It was a difficult situation for everyone, but Pamela made amends."

Michelle's smile was slightly self-conscious. "That also means I shouldn't be so concerned about how much our dresses cost."

I laughed, recalling Michelle's outrage upon discovering the bridesmaid dresses cost \$600 apiece. "Think of it this way," I said. "They're lovely and definitely dresses we can wear again."

"True," she responded, "And I'll be wearing it a lot because it's the most expensive piece of clothing I own."

I laughed again as Jack joined us.

"What are you two up to?"

"Oh, nothing," Michelle said. "We were just talking about our awful dinner at the Lake Elmo Inn and how wrong I was."

Jack smiled mischievously. "You weren't the only one. Fortunately for us, things worked out for the best."

"That they did," I said.

The next dance was dedicated to the bride and groom, dancing with their parents, but the DJ invited others to join the dancing as well.

"We'd better take this chance while we can," Jack said, offering a hand to Michelle, and they headed for the dance floor.

Tim and I also were able to enjoy a moment to ourselves. We danced to Etta James's "At Last," which we had always favored as our special song.

"You look great," he said quietly. "I love your hair up—think you could wear it like that more often?"

"You're a pretty good-looking guy yourself," I replied. "But as far as the hair—the salon appointment was an hour-and-a-half, so I'm thinking probably not." We kissed, and I smiled at my husband. "You know, I hear this song and I think 'at last' is right. We are so lucky, Tim. I really didn't think he'd ever recover."

Tim smiled. "It was a tough time for everybody, and I won't deny I had my doubts. Nobody goes looking for pain and suffering, but it's made us stronger and more appreciative of what we have."

Sometime around 1:00 a.m., well after Friday had crept into Saturday, Paul and Pamela retired to the bridal suite at the Lafayette Hotel, where they would spend their wedding night.

The rest of us headed to the gifts, where the piles had grown so large that the four designated tables were buried. We ferried the stacks of wedding presents to our cars and SUVs, where they would be kept for the night. Tomorrow we would gather at Mother and Dad's home on the shores of Lake Minnetonka for a leisurely brunch and to watch the newlyweds open their gifts.

Tim had finished packing our car and was closing the trunk. "I think that's about all we can take," he told Jack and Michelle. "See you tomorrow."

"What time did Mom say?" I asked.

"No earlier than noon. We've got to pick the kids up from Michelle's folks, so we'll be over around 12:30."

"I don't know about you, but I can use a good night's sleep," Michelle said.

She was right about that. We arrived home after 2:00 a.m., and by the time we were ready for bed it was close to 2:45, well past my bedtime. Just before I slipped off into peaceful slumber, my mind drifted over the past year and Paul's metamorphosis. It reminded me of the biblical story of Lazarus, given up for dead. For all practical purposes, Paul had died with Rachel, but our family had refused to give up, resolute in our belief that resurrecting his life was not only possible but imperative. The wedding had been a glorious event, and it filled us all with joy to participate in Paul and Pamela's happiness.