

THE GROOM

WORE RED

A Steve Cassidy Mystery

CHAPTER ONE

"Steve, what are your thoughts on marriage?" Dawn asked with a devilish smile as I navigated a large roundabout onto Howard Avenue, heading south toward today's destination.

"In general," I replied matching her grin, as my gaze wandered down to her left hand which had no rings on any fingers, "or from firsthand experience?"

"I keep forgetting you were married once." She paused and then added, "It was just the once, right?"

"As far as I know," I replied. "What would your parents think about you dating a divorced man?"

Dawn looked out the side window. "As long as he treated me right, continued to let me be a free spirit and didn't have a criminal record, they'd be fine with my choices."

"So close," I chuckled. "I'm like that Meat Loaf song – *Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad.*"

"We wouldn't have to tell them about your disreputable past during the first meeting."

"What about the tenth one?"

"Maybe not then either," Dawn laughed.

“On paper I’m a pretty hard sell – trust me, I know,” I agreed. “But I’ve come a long way since those scandalous times, don’t you think? Especially during the past two years.”

“Two years, one month, four days, and . . . ,” she glanced at her watch, “eleven hours, to be exact.”

“Seriously? I can barely recall the time, date or year of anything past last week. Are you sure about that timeline?” Before she could answer, I asked, “Are you going by the time I saw you at the beach with your boyfriend, or later that night when I stumbled into the Sunsetter Pub & Eatery to get drunk alone?”

“For the record, that was not my boyfriend,” Dawn declared. “He was a boy who was a friend.”

I nodded in agreement. “Sure he was.”

“So, the timeline – at least my relationship timeline – begins when you introduced yourself and I asked, ‘Well, Steve, what would you like to drink tonight?’”

“And the rest is history.”

“Speaking of history, you haven’t answered my original question.”

“Oh, yeah, the one dealing with marriage,” I begrudgingly acknowledged. “I guess I must be pro-marriage. The mere fact that in a former life I bought a ring, proposed to a woman, and said, ‘I do’ in a church filled with friends and family would prove that.”

“Any Elvis impersonators singing *Love Me Tender* or *It’s Now Or Never*?” Dawn playfully inquired.

“No, they came later as the reception entertainment, and as I recall, *All Shook Up*, *Bossa Nova Baby* and *Hound Dog* were the crowd favourites.”

Dawn smiled. “From what you’ve told me about how things ended with your ex-wife, I’m surprised *Jailhouse Rock*, *Suspicious Minds*, and *Return To Sender*, weren’t more popular.”

“Those were played during my divorce party,” I said. “Musician friends always told me that you have to play to the

crowd.”

“I dated a musician once. He even wrote me a couple of love songs that were played on the radio. Well, during a local station’s weekly Indie Hour, but still, I heard them playing out of my car speakers.”

“That’s cool. Do you remember how they went?” I pointed to her iPod that was hooked up to the van’s radio. “Any on there?”

“Oh, they are all on there, but I don’t think you’d like them.”

Something in her tone gave the impression the songs were of special importance and she wasn’t willing to share them with me for the time being. I’m sure she wouldn’t be interested in the book of poems a prostitute friend once wrote for me either and changed the subject, sort of.

“And what about you, my dearest Dawn? What are your thoughts on marriage? Are you waiting for the right guy to come along and sweep you off your feet, like your friend who is getting married this afternoon? What’s her name again?”

“Emily,” Dawn answered. “And I’m not sure she was exactly swept off her feet by Nick.”

“She’s eight months pregnant,” I said with a smile. “He must’ve swept her off her feet at least once.”

Dawn laughed. “The joke may be on him, because she’s not 100% certain he’s the father. When they were on a short break she hooked up with her old boyfriend, T.J. – who is also the best man – but swears it was only one time.”

“Wow – that’s some best man!”

“It’s complicated,” Dawn said.

“As for the pregnancy . . . it only takes one time, not that I would know,” I stated proudly. “Does Nick know about T.J. and Emily’s fling?”

“She says he doesn’t, but in a town as small as Amherstburg it’s hard to keep any type of secret. And when it comes to the decades old feud between the bride and groom’s families, everybody – and I mean *everybody* – knows

about their shared hatred for each other. Trust me – this could have been a shotgun wedding even without Emily being pregnant!”

I smiled at Dawn. “You have the strangest set of friends. Is there anything else I should know before the bullets start to fly?”

“Only that the groom used to date the maid of honour, who Emily thinks still might love Nick.”

My head began to hurt. “Let me get this straight: the bride doesn’t know if the groom or the best man is the father of her baby? The best man used to date the bride, and the groom used to date the maid of honor. Is that right?”

“Yes. Like I said, it is complicated,” Dawn confirmed. “Oh, one more thing. Despite what he says in public, Emily’s father still distrusts every member of the groom’s family, and thinks his precious daughter could have done better than mechanic Nick. Namely, he wanted her to reconcile with car salesman T.J. who just happens to work at his auto dealership.”

I almost pulled the car over to the side of the road. “But I thought Nick worked at the dad’s dealership.”

“He does.”

I gave Dawn a wide smile and shook my head. “I was worried about not fitting in with this crowd.”

“And now?”

“This is turning out to be the best date ever,” I proclaimed as I stepped on the gas, forgetting all about Dawn not answering what her thoughts on marriage were.

The road sign said it all:

Welcome To Amherstburg

The country’s safest community to live!

~ Three years in a row! ~

"This getaway is already shaping up better than our last romantic trip to Dannenberg," I said with a smile.

"Who knew we'd get involved in a six year old murder mystery?" Dawn replied. "I know I didn't."

"I blame you for going into that bookstore – what was its name – Bound For Glory?"

"Page 233."

"Right! Had you not needed a new book, we wouldn't have run into the mother-in-law of the guy convicted of killing her daughter."

Dawn turned to me. "Do you regret helping her out?"

"No, I only regret being sidetracked from spending the entire time alone with you."

"As I recall, the time we were together alone – if that is even possible – was fun."

"It always is," I said taking her left hand and kissing the top of it.

After the wedding invitation arrived, I did an online search for the fastest route to this quaint little community. Although it had a population of almost 22,000, as we drove down the delicious-sounding Sandwich Street it occurred to me a majority of the residents lived in the surrounding farming areas to the north, east and south. The west part of the city was coastal with a large river flowing steadily north to south to parts unknown, at least to us. It felt more like a small town – perhaps a village – than a city. There were a few mid-sized apartment buildings, but no high-rise office buildings in sight. Even with a few stoplights along the way, from the *Welcome To Amherstburg* sign to the *Thanks For Visiting* sign it might have taken five minutes to see the main business strip of grocery and hardware stores, a few fast food chain restaurants, and the obligatory Walmart. Before we were again out in the countryside, I turned onto Dalhousie Street and toured back toward the proper downtown, passing lovely shoreline houses with small boat docks, and finally

into the original heart of this historical settlement that played a huge role in the War of 1812. Our eyes were met with a row of two storey storefronts, most with apartment units above them, which only covered an area of maybe three to four short streets squared. It was obvious that over the years, progress – namely, bigger stores needing more land – had slowly eliminated the need for a concentration of actual retail outlets in the core.

As we cruised through the few streets near where the wedding was going to be held, looking from side to side, Dawn commented, “We’re good if we need a bank, a haircut, life insurance, or pizza.”

“And I’ve counted at least nine restaurants,” I added, as I found a spot to park.

“Emily texted me saying how relieved she was when the rain stopped last night.”

“Yeah, nothing worse than a wet outdoor wedding.”

Pointing up the street to a small white wood sided building, Dawn said, “I think that must be The Park House. I see a few people milling about on the sidewalk and a car decorated with pom-poms and streamers.”

“People still do that? I wonder if they’ve attached empty soup cans with strings and a *Just Married* sign to the back bumper. That used to be a big thing too for some reason.”

“I love when I see that in old movies,” Dawn admitted.

“When we get home I’ll check our cupboards for soup and the garage for a ball of string,” I said laughing as I exited the van. “You’re in charge of the arts and crafts part, deal?”

“Deal,” Dawn agreed. “The wedding starts at 2:00, so we have thirty minutes to kill. Want to stroll through the park or just sit on a bench watching the boats go by?”

“Sure.”

As we entered the park I saw a few people look in our direction. This wasn’t that unusual due to Dawn’s youthful, petite, mid-twenties beauty and flowing curly brown hair that bounces when she walks. Her smile is also out of this

world. Next, onlooker's attention fixates on the taller thirty-five-year-old male walking beside her. Their initial thoughts must be, *Why is she with him?* Believe me, I'm surprised myself some days, although in my defense I keep my body in relatively decent shape for a private investigator whose daily intake of food comes in a takeout bag. I am also keenly aware I still walk and talk like the street copper I was until getting booted off the force for a myriad of good reasons. When my out of style moustache was shaved off a few years back, I was told by plenty of women (before Dawn) it made me look younger and more attractive. Of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and by the stares of the locals I certainly wasn't the beauty in this relationship. I was the beast and had no problem fulfilling my role every day.

Along with its overabundance of nearby banks, pizza joints, and hair salons, it was obvious the Town of Amherstburg was serious about their award-winning park. A former Navy yard, the decorative old ship anchors, sculptures, large trees, open grassy areas, a gazebo, beautiful gardens, park benches galore and the wide walkway next to the fast-moving river, made for the perfect daytrip destination.

"I wonder if the wedding party will have their pictures taken here, it's so tranquil," Dawn said, taking my hand.

"And being next to The Park House is so convenient. Not organizing five cars with fifteen sweaty people in them to drive to a park halfway across town, to take a bunch of pictures only Emily and Nick will ever look at again." Dawn stopped walking and was looking quizzically at me. "What? I was agreeing with you. This would be a great place to have wedding pictures in."

"Do I want to know about the wedding circus with clown cars and fifteen sweaty--"

"No," I interrupted. "Hey look - a squirrel!" I said excitedly, pointing to the base of a tree where there actually was a squirrel chewing on a peanut.

"Timing is everything, Cassidy," Dawn said. "I wish I had something to give him."

I appraised the squirrel's round belly. "From the looks of it, he's doing just fine."

"Excuse me," a woman's voice from behind us said. "I love your dress."

Dawn and I turned to see a young woman in her early twenties wearing a summery outfit and clutching a folder.

"Thank you," Dawn replied. "Yours is lovely too. Are you here for the wedding as well?"

"I am . . . and I'm pretty nervous."

"Why?" I asked. "You're not the one getting married."

"True, but I am the featured singer for the couple," she said, waving the folder. "And it's my first playing gig."

"You'll be fine," Dawn said reassuringly. "By the way, I'm Dawn and this is my . . ."

"Insignificant other, Steve," I said with a laugh. "Unless, of course, she needs a plus one for occasions such as weddings, and then I'm indispensable."

"While your talent is obviously singing, Steve's is sarcasm," Dawn deadpanned. "Ignore him. I do most of the time."

It appeared our seasoned comedy act had a relaxing effect on this new stranger.

"My name is Martha," she revealed. "It's nice to meet both of you. How do you know Emily and Nick?"

"Ah . . ." Dawn began apprehensively, "when Emily went to college we were co-workers for a while and stayed in touch when she came back home. What about you?"

"I moved here about a year ago with my now ex-boyfriend accountant who got a job at Emily's family's car dealership," Martha answered. "Unfortunately, small town life was not his thing and he decided we'd move back to the city . . . but by then I'd fallen in love with this place and out of love with him. I opened a little music shop around the corner called *Noteworthy* and teach piano, as well as vocal training."

"That's awesome," Dawn said. Looking up at me she added, "Maybe one day we'll get out of the city."

"Maybe," I concurred. "It is very nice here, especially along the river. I'm just not sure there would be much work for private investigations, which is what we do."

"I don't know about that," Martha chimed in unexpectedly. "I could have used one to follow my not-so-faithful ex around a few nights. Do you do those types of cases?"

"Not as much as I used to," I said. "Dawn and I do mostly insurance cases now."

"And the odd cold case," Dawn added. She briefly rummaged through her clutch purse and produced a business card that she handed Martha. "I know we don't live around here – yet – but if you need a bit more background information on your next potential boyfriend than what his dating profile states, give us a call."

Martha took the card and put it into a dress pocket. "I've never met a P.I. before. Is it as exciting as it looks on TV?"

My eyes met Dawn's and I answered, "It can be."

To our left we heard a car horn honk and saw a long limousine come into view, then stop in front of The Park House.

"I really should get going," a once again flustered Martha said, starting to walk away from us. "I'll see you over there!"

"Good luck!" Dawn offered. "We can't wait to hear you sing."

I put my arm around Dawn's waist as we watched the driver run around the front of the limo to open the two passenger doors, allowing the bridal party to exit.

"Emily's dress looks fantastic," Dawn said.

"As a traditionalist I'm not sure it's the right colour," I suggested. "I read once a white dress symbolizes the bride's purity, innocence, virginity and positivity. And even though Emily's dress gives the impression she is only five or six months pregnant, we all know the truth, so there goes the

innocence and virginity aspects. And speaking about her purity . . . why did you lie about how you and Emily know each other?"

"I couldn't exactly say Emily worked on the weekends as a stripper at the club where I was a waitress," Dawn said semi-defensively. "I'm the only one who knows. Her father thought she was working as a hostess at an upscale restaurant."

"Oh, she was hosting all right," I said with a laugh. "And are you sure you only waitressed at that dive? What was its name again – The Lucky Boot?"

"The Slinky Slipper, and yes, I only waitressed there for a few months." She gave me one of her sly million dollar smiles. "I'm sorry to ruin the scene playing out in your mind, Steve."

"Don't you be sorry, I have plenty of other fantasies that involve you to keep me satisfied for a very long time," I replied. "As for Emily over there . . . I will say she looks quite positive about her impending nuptials, so maybe a white dress is appropriate after all."

"I knew you could find something nice to say. Now we should take our seats, it won't be long now."