

CHAPTER ONE



*A*LONE, WITH NORAH JONES WHISPERING THROUGH THE IPOD, Laurel transformed a panel of fondant into a swatch of elegant, edible lace. She didn't hear the music, used it more to fill the air than as entertainment while she painstakingly pieced the completed panel onto the second tier of four.

She stepped back to eye the results, to circle, to search for flaws. Vows' clients expected perfect, and that's exactly what she intended to deliver. Satisfied, she nodded, and picked up a bottle of water to sip while she stretched her back.

"Two down, two to go."

She glanced toward the board where she'd pinned various samples of antique lace, and the final sketched design for the cake Friday evening's bride had approved.

She had three more designs to complete: two for Saturday, one for Sunday—but that was nothing new. June at Vows, the wedding and event business she ran with her friends, was prime time.

In a handful of years, they'd turned an idea into a thriving enterprise. Sometimes just a little too thriving, she mused, which was why she was making fondant lace at nearly one in the morning.

It was a very good thing, she decided. She loved the work.

They all had their passions. Emma had the flowers, Mac the photography, Parker the details. And she had the cakes. And the pastries, she thought, and the chocolates. But the cakes stood as the crowning touch.

She got back to it, began to roll out the next panel. Following habit, she'd clipped her sunny blond hair up and back out of her way. Cornstarch dusted the baker's apron she wore over cotton pants and tee, and the slide-on kitchen shoes kept her feet as comfortable as possible after hours of standing. Her hands, strong from years of kneading, rolling, lifting, were capable and quick. As she began the next pattern, her sharp-featured, angular face set in serious lines.

Perfection wasn't simply a goal when it came to her art. For Icing at Vows it was a necessity. The wedding cake was more than baking and piping, sugar paste and filling. Just as the wedding photos Mac took were more than pictures, and the arrangements and bouquets Emma created more than flowers. The details and schedules and wishes Parker put together were, in the end, bigger than the sum of their parts.

Together, the elements became a once-in-a-lifetime event, and the celebration of the journey two people chose to make together.

Romantic, certainly, and Laurel believed in romance. In theory, anyway. More, she believed in symbols and celebrations. And in a really fabulous cake.

Her expression softened into pleasure as she completed the third tier, and her deep blue eyes warmed as she glanced over to see Parker hovering in the doorway.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

“Details.” Parker circled a finger over her own head. “Couldn’t settle. How long have you been at this tonight?”

“Awhile. I need to finish it so it can set overnight. Plus I have the two Saturday cakes to assemble and decorate tomorrow.”

“Want company?”

They knew each other well enough that it was understood if Laurel said no, there’d be no offense. And often, when deep in work, no was the answer.

“Sure.”

“I love the design.” Parker, as Laurel had, circled the cake. “The delicacy of the white on white, the interest of the different heights of each tier—and the intricacy of each. They really do look like different panels of lace. Old-fashioned, vintage, that’s our bride’s theme. You’ve nailed it with this.”

“We’re going to do pale blue ribbon around the pedestal,” Laurel said as she started on the next panel. “And Emma’s going to scatter white rose petals at the base. It’s going to be a winner.”

“The bride’s been good to work with.”

Comfortable in her pajamas, her long brown hair loose rather than in its work mode of sleek tail or smooth chignon, Parker put on the kettle for tea. One of the perks of running the business out of her home, and of having Laurel living there—with Emma and Parker right on the estate as well—were these late-night visits.

“She knows her mind,” Laurel commented, choosing a tool to scallop the edges of the panel. “But she’s open to suggestion, and so far hasn’t been insane. If she makes it through the next twenty-four that way, she’ll definitely earn Vows’ coveted Good Bride status.”

“They looked happy and relaxed tonight at rehearsal, and that’s a good sign.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Laurel continued the pattern with precisely placed eyelets and dots. “So, again, why aren’t you in bed?”

Parker sighed as she heated a little teapot. “I think I was having

a moment. I was unwinding with a glass of wine out on my terrace. I could see Mac's place, and Emma's. The lights were on in both houses, and I could smell the gardens. It was so quiet, so pretty. The lights went off—Emma's first, and a little while after, Mac's. I thought how we're planning Mac's wedding, and that Emma just got engaged. And all the times we played *Wedding Day*, the four of us, when we were kids. Now it's real. I sat there in the quiet and the dark, and found myself wishing my parents could be here to see it. To see what we've done here, and who we are now. I got stuck." She paused to measure out tea. "Between being sad they're gone and being happy because I know they'd be proud of me. Of us."

"I think about them a lot. We all do." Laurel continued to work. "Because they were such an essential part of our lives, and because there are so many memories of them here. So I know what you mean by being stuck."

"They'd get a kick out of Mac and Carter, out of Emma and Jack, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, they would. And what we've done here, Parker? It rocks. They'd get a kick out of that, too."

"I'm lucky you were up working." Parker poured hot water into the pot. "You've settled me down."

"Here to serve. I'll tell you who else is lucky, and that's Friday's bride. Because this cake?" She blew stray hair out of her eyes as she nodded smugly. "It kicks major ass. And when I do the crown, angels will weep with joy."

Parker set the pot aside to steep. "Really, Laurel, you need to take more pride in your work."

Laurel grinned. "Screw the tea. I'm nearly done here. Pour me a glass of wine."

★ ★ ★

*I*N THE MORNING, AFTER A SOLID SIX HOURS' SLEEP, LAUREL GOT IN a quick session at the gym before dressing for the workday. She'd be chained in her kitchen for the bulk of it, but before that routine began, there was the summit meeting that prefaced every event.

Laurel dashed downstairs from her third-floor wing to the main level of the sprawling house, and back to the family kitchen where Mrs. Grady was putting a fruit platter together.

"Morning, Mrs. G."

Mrs. Grady arched her eyebrows. "You look feisty."

"Feel feisty. Feel righteous." Laurel fisted both hands, flexed her muscles. "Want coffee. Much."

"Parker's taken the coffee up already. You can take this fruit, and the pastries. Eat some of that fruit. A day shouldn't start with a Danish."

"Yes, ma'am. Anyone else here yet?"

"Not yet, but I saw Jack's truck leave a bit ago, and I expect Carter will be along giving me the puppy eyes in hopes of a decent breakfast."

"I'll get out of the way." Laurel grabbed the platters, balancing them with the expertise of the waitress she'd been once upon a time.

She carried them up to the library, which now served as Vows' conference room. Parker sat at the big table, with the coffee service on the breakfront. Her BlackBerry, as always, remained at easy reach. The sleek ponytail left her face unframed, and the crisp white shirt transmitted business mode as she sipped coffee and studied data on her laptop with midnight blue eyes Laurel knew missed nothing.

"Provisions," Laurel announced. She set the trays down, then tucked her chin-length swing of hair behind her ears before she obeyed Mrs. Grady and fixed herself a little bowl of berries. "Missed you in the gym this morning. What time did you get up?"

“Six, which was a good thing, since Saturday afternoon’s bride called just after seven. Her father tripped over the cat and may have broken his nose.”

“Uh-oh.”

“She’s worried about him, but nearly equally worried about how he’s going to look for the wedding, and in the photographs. I’m going to call the makeup artist to see what she thinks can be done.”

“Sorry about the FOB’s bad luck, but if that’s the biggest problem this weekend, we’re in good shape.”

Parker shot out a finger. “Don’t jinx it.”

Mac strolled in, long and lean in jeans and a black T-shirt. “Hello, pals of mine.”

Laurel squinted at her friend’s easy smile and slumberous green eyes. “You had morning sex.”

“I had stupendous morning sex, thank you.” Mac poured herself coffee, grabbed a muffin. “And you?”

“Bitch.”

With a laugh, Mac dropped down in her chair, stretched out her legs. “I’ll take my morning exercise over your treadmill and Bowflex.”

“Mean, nasty bitch,” Laurel said and popped a raspberry.

“I love summer when the love of my life doesn’t have to get up and out early to enlighten young minds.” She opened her own laptop. “Now I’m primed, in all possible ways, for business.”

“Saturday afternoon’s FOB may have broken his nose,” Parker told her.

“Bummer.” Mac’s brow creased. “I can do a lot with Photoshop if they want me to—but it’s kind of a cheat. What is, is—and it makes an amusing memory. In my opinion.”

“We’ll see what the bride’s opinion is once he gets back from the doctor.” Parker glanced over as Emma rushed in.

"I'm not late. There are twenty seconds left." Black curls bouncing, she scooted to the coffee station. "I fell back to sleep. After."

"Oh, I hate you, too," Laurel muttered. "We need a new rule. No bragging about sex at business meetings when half of us aren't getting any."

"Seconded," Parker said immediately.

"Aww." Laughing, Emma scooped some fruit into a bowl.

"Saturday afternoon's FOB may have a broken nose."

"Aww," Emma repeated, with genuine concern at Mac's announcement.

"We'll deal with it when we have more details, but however it turns out, it really falls to Mac and me. I'll keep you updated," Parker said to Mac. "Tonight's event. All out-of-town attendants, relatives, and guests have arrived. The bride, the MOB, and the attendants are due here at three for hair and makeup. The MOG has her own salon date and is due by four, with the FOG. FOB will arrive with his daughter. We'll keep him happy and occupied until it's time for the formal shots that include him. Mac?"

"The bride's dress is a beaut. Vintage romance. I'll be playing that up."

As Mac outlined her plans and timetable, Laurel rose for a second cup of coffee. She made notes here and there, continued to do so when Emma took over. As the bulk of Laurel's job was complete, she'd fill in when and where she was needed.

It was a routine they'd perfected since Vows had gone from concept to reality.

"Laurel," Parker said.

"The cake's finished—and a wowzer. It's heavy, so I'll need help from the subs transferring it to reception, but the design doesn't require any on-site assembly. I'll need you to do the ribbon and white rose petals, Emma, once it's transferred, but that's it until it's time to serve. They opted against a groom's cake, and went for a

selection of mini pastries and heart-shaped chocolates. They're done, too, and we'll serve them on white china lined with lace doilies to mirror the design of the cake. The cake table linen is pale blue, eyelet lace. Cake knife and server, provided by the B and G. They were her grandmother's so we'll keep our eye on them.

"I'm going to be working on Saturday's cakes most of today, but should be freed up by four if anyone needs me. During the last set, the subs will put leftover cake in the take-away boxes and tie them with blue ribbon we've had engraved with the B and G's names, and the date. Same goes if there are any leftover chocolates or pastries. Mac, I'd like a picture of the cake for my files. I haven't done this design before."

"Check."

"And Emma, I need the flowers for Saturday night's cake. Can you drop them off to me when you come to dress today's event?"

"No problem."

"On the personal front?" Mac lifted a hand for attention. "No one's mentioned that my mother's latest wedding is tomorrow, in Italy. Which is, thankfully, many, many miles away from our happy home here in Greenwich, Connecticut. I got a call from her just after five this morning, as Linda doesn't get the concept of time zones—and, well, let's face it, doesn't give a shit anyway."

"Why didn't you just let it ring?" Laurel demanded, even as Emma reached over to rub Mac's leg in sympathy.

"Because she'd just keep calling back—and I'm trying to deal with her. On my terms for a change." Mac raked her fingers through the bold red of her gamine cap of hair. "There were, as expected, tears and recriminations, as she's decided she wants me there. As opposed to a week ago, when she didn't. Since I have no intention of hopping on a plane, particularly when I have an event tonight, two tomorrow, and another on Sunday, to see her get married for the fourth time, she's not speaking to me."

“If only it would last.”

“Laurel,” Parker murmured.

“I mean it. You got to give her a piece of your mind,” she reminded Parker. “I didn’t. I can only let it fester.”

“Which I appreciate,” Mac said. “Sincerely. But as you can see, I’m not in a funk, I’m not swimming in guilt or even marginally pissed off. I think there’s an advantage to finding a guy who’s sensible, loving, and just really solid. An advantage over and above really terrific morning sex. Every one of you has been on my side when I’ve had to deal with Linda, you’ve tried to help me through her demands and basic insanity. I guess Carter just helped tip the scales, and now I can deal with it. I wanted to tell you.”

“I’d have morning sex with him myself, just for that.”

“Hands off, McBane. But I appreciate the sentiment. So.” She rose. “I want to get some work done before I need to focus on today’s event. I’ll swing by and get some shots of the cake.”

“Hang on, I’ll go with you.” Emma pushed up. “I’ll be back with the team shortly—and I’ll drop the flowers off for you, Laurel.”

When they’d gone, Laurel sat another moment. “She really meant it.”

“Yes, she really did.”

“And she’s right.” Laurel took a last moment to sit back and relax with her coffee. “Carter’s the one who turned the key in the lock. I wonder what it’s like to have a man who can do that, can help that way without pushing. Who can love you that way. I guess when it comes down to it, I envy her that even more than the sex.”

Shrugging, Laurel rose. “I’d better get to work.”

*L*AUREL DIDN’T HAVE TIME TO THINK ABOUT MEN OVER THE NEXT couple of days. She didn’t have the time or the energy to think about love and romance. She might have been neck-deep in wed-

dings, but that was business—and the business of weddings demanded focus and precision.

Her Antique Lace cake, which had taken her nearly three days to create, had its moment in the spotlight—before being disassembled and devoured. Saturday afternoon featured her whimsical Pastel Petals with its hundreds of embossed, gum-paste rose petals, and Saturday evening her Rose Garden, where tiers of bold red roses layered with tiers of vanilla-bean cake with silky buttercream frosting.

For Sunday afternoon's smaller, more casual event, the bride had chosen Summer Berries. Laurel had done the baking, the filling, the assembly, and the basket-weave frosting. Now, even as the bride and groom exchanged vows on the terrace outside, Laurel completed the project by arranging the fresh fruit and mint leaves on the tiers.

Behind her, the subs completed table decorations for the wedding brunch. She wore a baker's apron over a suit nearly the same color as the raspberries she selected.

Stepping back, she studied the lines and balance, then chose a bunch of champagne grapes to drape over a tier.

"Looks tasty."

Her eyebrows drew together as she grouped stemmed cherries. Interruptions while she worked were common—but that didn't mean she had to like them. Added to it, she hadn't expected Parker's brother to drop by during an event.

Then again, she reminded herself, he came and went as he pleased.

But when she spotted his hand reaching for one of her containers, she slapped it smartly away.

"Hands off."

"Like you're going to miss a couple blackberries."

"I don't know where your hands have been." She set a trio of

mint leaves, and didn't bother—yet—to spare him a glance. “What do you want? We're working.”

“Me, too. More or less. Lawyer capacity. I had some paperwork to drop off.”

He handled all their legal dealings, both individually and as a business. She knew, very well, he put in long hours on their behalf, and often on his own time. But if she didn't jab at him, she'd break long-standing tradition.

“And timed it so you could mooch from catering.”

“There ought to be some perks. Brunch deal?”

She gave in and turned. His choice of jeans and a T-shirt didn't make him less of an Ivy League lawyer—not to her mind. Delaney Brown of the Connecticut Browns, she thought. Tall, appealingly rangy, his dense brown hair just a smidgen longer than lawyerly fashion might dictate.

Did he do that on purpose? She imagined so, as he was a man who always had a plan. He shared those deep, midnight blue eyes with Parker, but though she'd known him all her life, she could rarely read what was behind them.

He was, in her opinion, too handsome for his own good, too smooth for anyone else's. He was also unflinchingly loyal, quietly generous—and annoyingly overprotective.

He smiled at her now, quick and easy with a disarming flash of humor she imagined served as a lethal weapon in court. Or the bedroom.

“Cold poached salmon, mini chicken florentine, grilled summer vegetables, potato pancakes, a variety of quiches, caviar with full accompaniment, assorted pastries and breads, along with a fruit and cheese display, followed by the poppy-seed cake with orange marmalade filling and Grand Marnier buttercream frosting, topped with fresh fruit.”

“Sign me up.”

“I expect you can sweet-talk the caterers,” she said. She rolled her shoulders, circled her head on her neck as she chose the next berries.

“Something hurt?”

“The basket weave’s a killer on the neck and shoulders.”

His hands lifted, then retreated to his pockets. “Are Jack and Carter around?”

“Somewhere. I haven’t seen them today.”

“Maybe I’ll go hunt them down.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

But he wandered across the room to the windows and looked down at the flower-decked terrace, the white slippered chairs, the pretty bride turned toward the smiling groom.

“They’re doing the ring thing,” Del called out.

“So Parker just told me.” Laurel tapped her headset. “I’m set. Emma, the cake’s ready for you.”

She balanced the top layer with an offset stem loaded with blackberries. “Five-minute warning,” she announced, and began loading her bin with the remaining fruit. “Let’s get the champagne poured, the Bloody Marys and mimosas mixed. Light the candles, please.” She started to lift the bin, but Del beat her to it.

“I’ll carry it.”

She shrugged, and moved over to hit the switch for the background music that would play until the orchestra took over.

They started down the back stairs, passing uniformed waitstaff on their way up with hors d’oeuvres for the brief cocktail mixer designed to keep guests happy while Mac took the formals of the bride and groom, the wedding party and family.

She swung into her kitchen where the caterers ran full steam. Used to the chaos, Laurel slid through, got a small bowl and scooped out fruit. She passed it to Del.

“Thanks.”

“Just stay out of the way. Yes, they’re ready,” she said to Parker through the headset. “Yeah, in thirty. In place.” She glanced over at the caterers. “On schedule. Oh, Del’s here. Uh-huh.”

Leaning on the counter and eating berries, he watched her as she stripped off her apron. “Okay, heading out now.”

Del pushed off the counter to follow her as she headed through the mudroom that would soon be transformed into her extra cooler and storage area. She pulled the clip out of her hair, tossed it aside, and shook her hair into place as she stepped outside.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m going to help escort guests inside. You’re going away, somewhere.”

“I like it here.”

It was her turn to smile. “Parker said to get rid of you until it’s time to clean up. Go find your little friends, Del, and if you’re good boys you’ll be fed later.”

“Fine, but if I get roped into cleanup, I want some of that cake.”

They separated, him strolling toward the remodeled pool house that served as Mac’s studio and home, her striding toward the terrace, where the bride and groom exchanged their first married kiss.

Laurel glanced back once—just once. She’d known him all her life—that was fate, she supposed. But it was her own fault, and her own problem, that she’d been in love with him nearly as long.

She allowed herself one sigh before fixing a bright, professional smile on her face to lend a hand herding the celebrants into Reception.

CHAPTER TWO



*L*ONG AFTER THE LAST GUEST DEPARTED AND THE CATERERS LOADED up, Laurel stretched out on the sofa of the family parlor with a well-deserved glass of wine.

She wasn't sure where the men might be—back to their dens with a six-pack maybe—but it was nice, very nice, to unwind with just the women, and the relative quiet.

“Damn good weekend.” Mac lifted her glass in toast. “Four rehearsals, four events. Not a single hitch in any of them. Not even a blip of a hitch. That’s a record.”

“The cake was amazing,” Emma added.

“You had a forkful,” Laurel pointed out.

“An amazing forkful. Plus it was just sweet today, the way the groom’s little boy stood as best man. He was so cute. It got me weepy.”

“They’re going to make a nice family.” Parker sat, eyes closed, BlackBerry on her lap. “You watch some of the second-time-

arounds with kids, and think: Ho boy, rough sailing coming up. But this? You can just see she and the kid are nuts for each other. It *was* sweet.”

“I got some killer pictures. And the cake was awesome,” Mac added. “Maybe I should go for the poppy seed for mine.”

To ease the cramping, Laurel curled and uncurled her toes. “Last week you wanted the Italian cream.”

“Maybe I should have cake samplers. Small versions of several kinds, different designs. It would be a culinary orgy, plus amazing photography.”

Laurel cocked a finger. “Die, Mackensie. Die.”

“You should stick with the Italian cream. It’s your favorite.”

Mac pursed her lips as she nodded at Emma. “You’re right. And it is all about me. What are you leaning toward, cakewise?”

“I can’t even think about it. I’m still getting used to being engaged.” Emma studied the diamond on her finger with an undeniably smug smile. “Plus, once I shift into wedding plans and details, I fully expect to succumb to mania. So we should put that off as long as possible.”

“Yes, please.” Laurel sighed her agreement.

“You need the dress first anyway.” Parker kept her eyes closed. “The dress always comes first.”

“Now you’ve done it,” Laurel muttered.

“I’ve barely thought about it. More than a thousand times,” Emma added. “I’ve hardly looked at more than half a million pictures. I’m going for princess. Miles and miles of skirt. Probably an off-the-shoulder bodice, maybe a sweetheart neckline since I do have exceptional breasts.”

“It’s true, you do,” Mac agreed.

“Absolutely nothing simple. Lavish is my byword. I want a tiara—and a train.” Dark eyes glowed at the thought. “And since we’re squeezing it into next May, I’m going to design myself an incredible,

and yes, lavish, bouquet. Pastels, I think. Maybe. Probably. Romantic, heartbreaking pastels.”

“But she can’t even think about it,” Laurel put in.

“All of you in soft colors,” Emma went on, unfazed. “A garden of my friends.” She let out a sigh of her own, long and dreamy. “And when Jack sees me, he’ll lose his breath. In that one moment, you know, when we look at each other, the world’s going to stop for us. Just for a minute, one incredible minute.”

From her position on the floor, she rested her head against Parker’s leg. “We didn’t really know, all those times we played Wedding Day when we were kids. We didn’t really know what that one incredible moment meant. We’re so lucky we get to see it as often as we do.”

“Best job ever,” Mac murmured.

“Best job ever because we are.” Laurel sat up enough to toast. “We put it together so people can have that one incredible moment. You’ll have yours, Em—orchestrated down to the last detail by Parker, surrounded with flowers you’ve arranged yourself, captured in a photograph by Mac. And celebrated with a cake I’ll create just for you. A lavish one. Guaranteed.”

“Aww.” Emma’s dark eyes filled. “As much as I love Jack—and boy, do I ever—I couldn’t be as happy as I am now without all of you.”

Mac handed Emma a tissue. “I’m still first. I want a cake that’s just for me,” she said to Laurel. “If she gets one, so do I.”

“I can put little cameras and tripods around the tiers.”

“And little stacks of books for Carter?” Mac laughed. “Silly, but apt.”

“It follows the theme of your engagement shots.” Emma dried her eyes. “I love the way you set those up, with you and Carter on the couch, your legs all tangled together, him with a book on his

lap, you looking like you've just lowered your camera after taking his picture. Both of you just grinning at each other. Which leads me to ask you about our engagement portrait. When, where, how?"

"Easy. You and Jack in bed, naked."

Emma shot out a foot to give Mac a light kick. "Stop."

"Also apt," was Laurel's opinion.

"We do more than have sex!"

"You certainly do. You think about having sex." Parker opened one eye.

"We have a very layered relationship," Emma insisted. "Which includes lots of sex. But seriously—"

"I've got a few things in mind. We should look at our schedules and set something up."

"Now?"

"Sure. Parks must have both our schedules on her BlackBerry."

Mac reached toward it.

Parker opened both eyes, aimed a smoldering warning stare. "Touch it and die."

"Jesus. Let's go check my book at the studio. We should probably round up the guys anyway—and we'd have to have Jack clear the time."

"Excellent."

"Where are the guys?" Laurel wondered.

"Down with Mrs. G," Emma told her. "Eating pizza and playing poker—or that was the plan."

"Nobody asked us for pizza and poker." Laurel managed a horizontal shrug as eyes turned to her. "Okay, no, I don't want pizza and poker because I like it right here. But still."

"Anyway." Mac pushed to her feet. "Rounding up under the circumstances might take some time. Let's just plant the seed, then go figure the schedule."

“That’s a plan. Good job, girls,” Emma said as she stood.

As they left, Laurel stretched. “I need a massage. We should have an in-house masseur named Sven. Or Raoul.”

“I’ll put that on the list. Meanwhile, you could call Serenity and book one.”

“But if we had Sven—I think Sven is better than Raoul—I could have one right now, then I’d slide bonelessly into bed and sleep. How many days until vacation?”

“Too many.”

“You say that now, but once we’re free and get to the Hamptons, you’ll still have that BlackBerry attached to your hand.”

“I can give it up anytime I want.”

Laurel answered Parker’s smile. “You’ll buy a waterproof bag for it, so you can swim with it.”

“They should make them waterproof. We must have the technology.”

“Well, I’m going to leave you and your one true love alone, go soak in a hot tub, and dream of Sven.” Laurel rolled off the couch. “It’s good seeing Emma and Mac so happy, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“See you in the morning.”

*T*HE HOT BATH WORKED WONDERS, BUT LEFT HER WIDE AWAKE instead of relaxed and sleepy. Rather than spending an hour trying to will herself to sleep, Laurel turned on the TV in her sitting room for company, then sat down at her computer to check her week’s schedule. She browsed recipes—as much an addiction for her as the BlackBerry was to Parker—and found a couple worth bookmarking to tweak and personalize later.

Still restless, she settled down in her favorite chair with her sketch pad. The chair had been Parker’s mother’s, and always made

Laurel feel cozy and safe. She sat cross-legged on the deep cushion, the pad across her lap, and thought of Mac. Of Mac and Carter. Of Mac in the fabulous wedding dress she'd chosen—or that Parker had found for her.

Clean, sleek lines, she mused, that so suited Mac's long, lean body. Not a lot of fuss, and just a touch of flirt. She sketched a cake that mirrored the idea—classic and simple. And immediately rejected it.

Clean lines for the gown, yes, but Mac was also about color and flash, about the unique and the bold. And that, she realized, was one of the reasons Carter adored her.

So bold. Colorful fall wedding. Square tiers rather than the more traditional round, with the buttercream frosting Mac favored. Tinted. Yes, yes. Dusky gold then covered with fall flowers—she'd make them oversized with wide, detailed petals—in russet and burnt orange, loden.

Color, texture, shape, to appeal to the photographer's eye, and romantic enough for any bride. Crowned with a bouquet, trailing ribbons in dark gold. Touches of white in some piping, to bring out all the color.

Mac's Fall, she thought, smiling as she added details. The perfect name for it—for the season, and for the way her friend had tripped into love.

Laurel held the sketch out to arm's length, then grinned in satisfaction.

"I am damn good. And now I'm hungry."

She rose to prop the open sketchbook against a lamp. First chance, she decided, she'd show it to Mac for the bride's opinion. But if she knew Mac—and she did—this was going to get a big, happy *woo!*

She deserved a snack—maybe a slice of cold pizza if there was any left. Which she'd regret in the morning, she told herself as she started out, but it couldn't be helped.

She was awake and she was hungry. One of the perks of running your own business and your own life was being able to indulge yourself from time to time.

She moved through the dark and the quiet, guided by her knowledge of the house and the stream of moonlight through the windows. She crossed out of her wing, started down the stairs as she talked herself out of cold pizza and into a healthier choice of fresh fruit and herbal tea.

She needed to be up early to fit in a workout before Monday morning baking. Then she had three couples coming in that afternoon for tastings, so she'd need to prep for that, and get cleaned up.

An evening meeting, full staff, with a client to determine basic details of a winter wedding, then she had the rest of the night free to do what needed to be done—or what suited her fancy.

Thank God she'd initiated a dating moratorium so there was no worry about getting dressed to go out—and what to wear when she did—making conversation, and deciding whether or not she was inclined to have sex.

Life was easier, she thought as she turned at the base of the stairs. It was easier, simpler, and just less *fraught* when you took dating and sex off the menu.

She rammed straight into a solid object—male-shaped—then tumbled backward. Cursing, she flailed out to save herself. The back of her hand smacked sharply against flesh—causing another curse that wasn't hers. As she went down, she grabbed a fistful of material. She heard it rip as the male-shaped solid object fell on top of her.

Winded, her head ringing where it thudded against the stair tread, she lay limp as a rag. Even dazed in the dark, she recognized Del by his shape, his scent.

“Jesus. Laurel? Damn it. Are you hurt?”

She drew in a breath, constricted by his weight—and maybe by

the fact that a certain area of that weight was pressed very intimately between her legs. Why the hell had she been thinking about sex? Or the lack thereof?

“Get off me,” she managed.

“Working on it. Are you okay? I didn’t see you.” He pushed up partway so their eyes met in that blue dust moonlight. “Ouch.”

Because his movement increased the pressure—center to center—something besides her head began to throb. “Off. Me. Now.”

“Okay, okay. I lost my balance—plus you grabbed my shirt and took me down with you. I tried to catch you. Hold on, let me get the light.”

She stayed just where she was, waiting to get her breath back, waiting for things to stop throbbing. When he flicked on the foyer light, she shut her eyes against the glare.

“Ah,” he said and cleared his throat.

She lay sprawled on the steps, legs spread, wearing a thin white tank and a pair of red boxers. Her toenails were sizzling pink. He decided concentrating on her toes was a better idea than her legs, or the way the tank fit, or . . . anything else.

“Let me help you up.” And into a really long, thick robe.

She waved him off, half sat up to rub at the back of her head. “Damn it, Del, what are you doing sneaking around the house?”

“I wasn’t sneaking. I was walking. Why were you sneaking?”

“I wasn’t— Jesus. I live here.”

“I used to,” he muttered. “You tore my shirt.”

“You fractured my skull.”

Annoyance dissolved instantly into concern. “Did I really hurt you? Let me see.”

Before she could move, he crouched and reached around to feel the back of her head. “You went down pretty hard. It’s not bleeding.”

“Ouch!” At least the fresh ringing took her mind off the torn shirt, and the muscle beneath it. “Stop poking.”

“We should get you some ice.”

“It’s fine. I’m *fine*.” Stirred up, no question, she thought, and wishing he didn’t look so tousled, roughed-up, and ridiculously sexy. “What the hell are you doing here? It’s the middle of the night.”

“It’s barely midnight, which, despite the term, isn’t the middle of the night.”

He stared straight into her eyes, looking, she imagined, for signs of shock or trauma. Any second he’d take her damn pulse.

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“Mrs. G and I were hanging out. There was beer involved. Enough beer I decided I’d just . . .” He pointed up. “I was going to crash in one of the guest rooms rather than drive home with a buzz on.”

She couldn’t argue with him for being sensible—particularly since he was always sensible. “Then . . .” She mimicked him, and pointed up.

“Stand up so I can make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m not the one with a buzz on.”

“No, you’re the one with a fractured skull. Come on.” He solved the matter by hooking his hands under her arms and lifting her so she stood on the step above him with their faces nearly level.

“I don’t see any X’s in your eyes, no birds circling over your head.”

“Funny.”

He gave her that smile. “I heard a couple birds chirping when you backhanded me.”

She couldn’t stop her lips from twitching even as she scowled. “If I’d known it was you, I’d’ve put more behind it.”

“There’s my girl.”

And wasn’t that exactly how he thought of her? she thought

with a slippery mix of temper and disappointment. Just one of his girls.

“Go, sleep off your buzz, and no more sneaking around.”

“Where are you going?” he asked as she walked away.

“Where I please.”

She usually did, he mused, and it was one of the most appealing things about her. Unless you considered how her ass looked in short red boxers.

Which he wasn't. Exactly. He was just making sure she was steady on her feet. And on her really excellent legs.

Deliberately, he turned away and walked up the stairs to the third floor. He turned toward Parker's wing, and opened the door to the room that had been his as a child, a boy, a young man.

It wasn't the same. He didn't expect it to be or want it to be. If things didn't change, they became stagnant and stale. The walls, a soft, foggy green now, displayed clever paintings in simple frames rather than the sports posters of his youth. The bed, a gorgeous old four-poster, had been his grandmother's. Continuity, he thought, wasn't the same as stagnation.

He pulled change and keys out of his pocket to toss them on the dish set on the bureau, then caught sight of himself in the mirror.

His shirt was ripped at the shoulder, his hair disordered, and if he wasn't mistaken, he could see the faint mark where Laurel's knuckles had connected with his cheekbone.

She'd always been tough, he thought as he toed off his shoes. Tough, strong, and damn near fearless. Most women would've screamed, wouldn't they? But not Laurel—she fought. Push her, she pushed back. Harder.

He had to admire that.

Her body had surprised him. He could admit it, he told himself as he stripped off the torn T-shirt. Not that he didn't know her body. He'd hugged her countless times over the years. But hugging

a female friend was an entirely different matter than lying on top of a woman in the dark.

Entirely different.

And something it was best not to dwell on.

He stripped off the rest of his clothes, then folded down the quilt—the work of his great-grandmother in this case. He set the old-fashioned wind-up alarm clock beside the bed, then switched off the light.

When he closed his eyes, the image of Laurel lying on the stairs popped into his head—lodged there. He rolled over, thought about the appointments he had the next day. And saw her walking away in those brief red boxers.

“Screw it.”

A man was entitled to dwell on whatever he wanted to dwell on when he was alone in the dark.

*I*N THEIR MONDAY MORNING HABIT, LAUREL AND PARKER HIT their home gym at nearly the same moment. Parker went for yoga, Laurel for cardio. Since both took the routine seriously, there was little conversation.

As Laurel approached her third mile, Parker switched to pilates—and Mac trudged in to give the Bowflex her usual sneer.

Amused, Laurel throttled back to cool down. Mac’s conversion to regular workouts stemmed from her determination to have happening arms and shoulders in her strapless wedding dress.

“Looking good, Elliot,” she called out as she grabbed a towel. Mac just curled her lip.

Laurel unrolled a mat to stretch while Parker gave Mac some tips on form. By the time she moved on to free weights, Parker was shoving Mac to the elliptical.

“I don’t wanna.”

“Woman does not rule by resistance training alone. Fifteen cardio, fifteen stretching. Laurel, where did you get that bruise?”

“What bruise?”

“On your shoulder.” Crossing over, Parker fluttered her finger on the bruise exposed by Laurel’s racer-back tank.

“Oh, I tripped under your brother.”

“Huh?”

“He was wandering around in the dark when I went down for some tea—which ended up being cold pizza and a soda. He ran into me and knocked me down.”

“Why was he wandering around in the dark?”

“My question exactly. Beers and Mrs. G. He crashed in one of the guest rooms.”

“I didn’t know he was here.”

“Still here,” Mac said. “His car’s out front.”

“I’ll see if he’s up. Fifteen minutes, Mac.”

“Nag. When do I get my endorphins?” Mac demanded of Laurel. “How will I know when I do?”

“How do you know when you orgasm?”

“Yeah?” Mac brightened. “It’s like that?”

“Sadly no, but the principle of ‘you know when you get there’ is the same. Are you eating breakfast here?”

“I’m thinking about it. I think I’ll have earned it. Plus, if I call Carter to come over, he can talk Mrs. G into French toast.”

“Do that then. I’ve got something I want to show you.”

“What?”

“Just an idea.”

It was just after seven when Laurel, dressed for the day, sketchbook in hand, stepped into the family kitchen.

She’d assumed Del would be gone, but there he was, leaning

against the counter with a steaming mug of coffee. In a near mirror image of the posture, Carter Maguire leaned on the opposite counter.

Still, they were so different. Del, even in the torn shirt and jeans, projected a kind of masculine elegance, while Carter exuded a disarming sweetness. Not sugary, she thought. She'd have hated that—but an innate sort of *niceness*.

And despite Del's fumble in the night, he was agile, athletic, while Carter tended toward the klutzy.

Still, they were both so damn cute.

Obviously, the sturdy Mrs. Grady wasn't immune. She worked at the stove—French toast winning the day—her eyes bright, her cheeks a little flushed. Happy to have the boys around, Laurel thought.

Parker came in from the terrace, slipping her BlackBerry into her pocket. She caught sight of Laurel. "Saturday evening's bride. Basic nerves. All smooth. Emma and Jack are heading over, Mrs. G."

"Well, if I'm cooking for an army, some of the troops had better sit. Keep your fingers off that bacon, boy," she warned Del, "until you're at the table like the civilized."

"Just trying to get a head start. I'll take it over. Hey, Laurel, how's the head?"

"Still on my shoulders." She set down the sketchbook, picked up the pitcher of juice.

"Morning." Carter smiled at her. "What happened to your head?"

"Del beat it against the stairs."

"After she hit me and ripped my shirt."

"Because you were drunk and knocked me down."

"I wasn't drunk, and you fell."

"That's his story."

“Sit down and behave,” Mrs. G ordered. She turned as Jack and Emma came in. “Are your hands clean?” she demanded of Jack.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then take this and go sit.”

He accepted the platter of French toast, sniffed deeply. “What did you make for everybody else?”

She laughed and swatted at him.

“Hey,” he said to Del.

They’d been friends since college, and as tight as brothers since Jack had relocated to Greenwich to open his architectural firm. He took his place at the breakfast nook, movie-star handsome with his wavy, dark blond hair, smoky eyes, quick grin.

The fact that he was dressed in a suit told Laurel he had a client meeting in his office rather than an appointment on a construction site.

“Shirt’s ripped,” Jack said to Del as he nabbed a slice of bacon.

“Laurel did it.”

Jack wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Feisty.”

“Idiot.”

They grinned at each other as Mac came in. “God! This better be worth it. Come here.” She grabbed Carter, yanked him against her for a noisy kiss. “I earned that.”

“You’re all . . . rosy,” he murmured and bent his head to kiss her again.

“Stop that nonsense and sit down before the food gets cold.” Mrs. G gave him a flick on the arm as she carried the coffeepot to the table to fill mugs.

Mrs. G was in her element, Laurel knew. She had a full brood to fuss over and order around. She’d revel in the number and the noise of them, and when she’d had enough of both, she’d kick them all out of her kitchen. Or retreat to her rooms for some peace and quiet.

But for now, with the scents of coffee and bacon and cinnamon, with platters being emptied and plates filled, Mrs. G had things just as she wanted.

Laurel understood the need to feed, the desire—even the passion—to put food in front of someone and urge them to eat. It was life and comfort, authority and satisfaction. And if you'd prepared that food with your own hands, your own skill, it was, in a very real way, love.

She supposed she'd learned some of that right here when Mrs. G had taught her how to roll out a pastry shell or mix batter or test a loaf of bread for doneness. More than the basics of baking, she'd learned if you put some love and pride into the mix, the dough rose truer.

"Head okay?" Del asked her.

"Yes, no thanks to you. Why?"

"Because you're quiet."

"Who can get a word in?" she asked as conversations crisscrossed the table.

"How about a professional query?"

She eyed him warily over a bite of French toast. "Such as?"

"I need a cake."

"Everyone needs cake, Del."

"That should be your slogan. Dara's coming back from maternity leave. I thought we'd do a little office welcome back, happy baby and all that."

It was a nice thing to do for his paralegal, and very like him. "When?"

"Ah, Thursday."

"As in this Thursday?" Also just like him, she thought. "What kind of cake?"

"A good one."

“That’s the only kind I make. Give me a clue here. How many people?”

“Maybe twenty.”

“Sheet or layered?”

He sent her a pleading look. “Help me, Laurel. You know Dara. Just whatever you figure.”

“Is she allergic to anything?”

“No. I don’t think.” He topped off her coffee an instant before she thought to do so herself. “It doesn’t have to be spectacular. Just a nice cake for an office deal. I could go to the market and pick one up but . . . that’s what I’d get,” he said, pointing at the scowl on her face. “I can pick it up Wednesday after work if you can squeeze it in.”

“I’ll squeeze it in because I like Dara.”

“Thanks.” He reached over to give her hand a pat. “Gotta run. I’ll pick up that paperwork Wednesday,” he told Parker. “Let me know about the other stuff when you figure it out.”

He stood, then walked to Mrs. G. “Thanks.”

He gave her a quick, casual kiss on the cheek first. Then came the hug, and it was the hug that always made Laurel’s heart mush. Serious grip, cheek to the hair, eyes closed, just a little sway. Del’s hugs *mattered*, she thought, and made him impossible to resist.

“Pretend to behave yourself,” Mrs. Grady ordered.

“That I can do. See you.” He gave a wave to the rest of the group, then went out the back.

“I’d better get moving, too. Mrs. G,” Jack said, “you are the goddess of the kitchen. The empress of epicure.”

She gave her big laugh at that. “Go to work.”

“Going.”

“I’d better get started, too. I’ll walk out with you,” Emma said.

“Actually, I’ve got something I’d like your take on,” Laurel said to Emma before she could rise.

“Then I get to have more coffee.” She shifted to fuss with the knot of Jack’s tie, then tugged it until their lips met. “Bye.”

“See you tonight. I’ll drop those revised plans by, Parker.”

“Anytime.”

“Should I get out of the way?” Carter asked when Jack left.

“You’re allowed to stay, and even comment.” Laurel scooted out for her sketchbook. “I had a brainstorm last night, so I worked up an idea for the wedding cake.”

“My cake? Our cake,” Mac corrected quickly with a grin for Carter. “I wanna see, I wanna see!”

“Presentation,” Laurel said sternly, “is a watchword of Icing at Vows. So, while the inspiration for this design primarily stems from the bride—”

“Me!”

“It also factors in what the designer sees as qualities that attract the groom to said bride, and vice versa. So we have, I think, a blending of the traditional and nontraditional in both form and flavor. Added to this, the designer has known the bride for more than two decades, and has developed a deep and sincere attachment to the groom—all of which play into the concept—but will ensure that any critiques of said concept will be gracefully accepted.”

“That’s bull.” Parker rolled her eyes. “You’ll be pissed off if she doesn’t like it.”

“That’s only true because if she doesn’t like it, she’s an idiot. Which means I’ve been friends with an idiot for over two decades.”

“Just let me see the damn design.”

“I can adjust the size once you’ve nailed down your guest list. The current concept’s good for two hundred.” Laurel flipped open the book, held up the sketch.

She didn’t have to hear Mac’s breath catch to know. She saw it in the stunned delight on her face.

“The colors are pretty true to what I’d do, and you can see I’d

want to do a variety of cakes and fillings. Your Italian cream, and the chocolate with raspberry Carter favors, the yellow, maybe with pastry cream. It's just one way to do your cake sampler fantasy."

"If Mac doesn't like it, I'll take it," Emma announced.

"It doesn't suit you. It's Mac's if she wants it. The flowers can be changed," Laurel added, "to whatever ones you and Emma decide on for your bouquets and arrangements—but I'd stick with the color palette. You're not white icing, Mac. You're color."

"Please don't hate it," Mac murmured to Carter.

"How could I? It's stunning." He glanced over at Laurel, gave her a slow, sweet smile. "Plus, I heard chocolate with raspberry. If we're voting, it gets mine."

"Mine, too," Emma said.

"I'm thinking you'd better hide that sketch." Parker nodded at Laurel. "If our clients get a look at it, we're going to have brides fighting for that cake. Nailed it in one, Laurel."

Mac stood to step closer, to take the pad and study. "The shape, the textures, not to mention the colors. Oh, oh, the photographs we'll get! Which you considered," she added, shifting her gaze to Laurel's.

"It's hard to think about you without thinking photography."

"I love it. You know I love it. You knew I'd love it. You know me." She put her arms around Laurel, squeezed hard, then did a little dance. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Let me have a look at that." Mrs. Grady took the book out of Mac's hand and studied the sketch with narrowed eyes and pursed lips.

Then she nodded, looked at Laurel. "Good girl. And now, all of you, out of my kitchen."