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What Are
Friends For

Doing it Her Way



What Are Friends For

Doing It Her Way

Lainey Miles wants nothing more than to marry her sexy fiancé Jace Cannon. She's been putting off setting a date because she doesn't want the big white wedding her mother's counting on. Jace isn't hiding the fact he's getting antsy either. She knows something has to be done and fast. So she recruits her friends to plan a surprise wedding that Jace will never forget.

Jace doesn't understand why Lainey won't even talk about setting a date for their wedding. If she changed her mind, he wished she'd just say so, but with the way they were burning up the sheets he didn't think that was the problem. He was determined that as soon as he got back from his business trip they were going to sit down and work things out. One way or another he is going to get an answer out of her.

Genre: Contemporary

Length: 20,386 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

DOING IT HER WAY

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E-book ISBN: 1-60601-985-6

First E-book Publication: November 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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Letter from Rita Sawyer

Regarding E-book Piracy

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So, please, respect my hard work and do not pirate my books.

With deep gratitude,

Rita Sawyer

DEDICATION

To my kids, who keep me laughing and feeling young. And to my husband, who gives his all to support us.

DOING IT HER WAY

RITA SAWYER

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Chapter One

Lainey looked around the room at her friends. It was hard to believe that at one time they'd all been so wild, willing to break the rules any chance they got. *What the hell happened to us?* Back in junior high and high school, they had been the first girls they knew to swear loudly, cut class, and kiss boys. The nuns at Saint Mary's, the all-girl Catholic school they attended from sixth to twelfth grade, had complained, telling their parents they were sisters in sin. Once it had gotten out, the other kids in school thought calling them "The Sin Sisters" would be some kind of put-down. Instead, they'd embraced it, and the name had stuck. The name and its connotation had given them all some sense of freedom none of their other friends had. Wherever one had gone, the rest had soon followed. Their open wildness had welded their friendship, giving them an even stronger bond. So strong, in fact, that they'd all decided to attend the same all-girl college, where they had been the first ones to break even more rules.

Now look at them. Set in their ways and going about their lives, which, some days, seemed pretty mundane. The five women sitting around her table looked at her with a mixture of surprise and barely contained glee. These women were her closest friends and, more importantly, her confidants. If she couldn't tell them what she was thinking, then she couldn't tell anyone. They made a strange group for

sure. So she had a model, a dancer, a high-profiled investigative reporter, an elementary school teacher, a car mechanic, and herself, a baker, to help her with this project. Lainey didn't think she'd find a more diverse group of people if she tried. She knew this had to sound like the craziest idea they'd ever heard, but damn, it would be unforgettable if they managed to pull it off.

"So you want to forgo the whole traditional wedding, including the bachelorette party?" Sadie, the reporter, poured her another glass of wine.

"Yup. And I figure since my mother probably has her heart set on throwing a huge wedding, we should keep this quiet," Lainey explained, noticing how none of them had said no yet.

Her mother had always told her as she was growing up that since she was only going to get to throw one wedding, she was going to make sure it was absolutely perfect. In Lainey's mind, perfection equaled an uptight and stuffy ceremony and reception with her in a dress she'd be afraid to move in. It was a scenario she wasn't about to let happen.

"And you want to do this quick because you're afraid your mother and aunts would put up a huge fight if they found out. We all know what would happen then. A few tears and a lot of ranting and you'd wind up giving in." Jillian, the dancer, and the teaser of their little group, sounded way too serious for Lainey's liking because she was dead on.

"Yeah. And because this trip he has to take would be the perfect opportunity. Besides, I won't be telling my family. If I told any of them what I was going to do, they'd probably faint." After that, they'd lock her in her room and call one of the nuns from down the road to come and try to talk some sense into her.

"True. But there's another issue to think of. If you do this, your cousins probably won't talk to you for months." Amy, who happened to be top notch mechanic, would bring up the sleazy vultures.

Though her four cousins, all girls, were close to her age, she'd never bonded with them in any way. Thankfully, her mother hadn't pushed her to hang around with them. They'd all been quite boring growing up, held under their mothers' thumbs. Now that they had control over their own lives, the only thing they were interested in was men, and lots of them. It wasn't that she didn't like her cousins—well, to be totally honest, she didn't—but in this case Lainey just didn't want to subject any of the guys Jace would ask to be groomsmen to their voracious appetites. They couldn't be in a room with a man without hitting on him, married or not.

"I think that's just more of a reason to do it," Dianne, the model, said around bites of the green pepper and onion pizza she was devouring.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?" asked Karen, the teacher. Lainey hated asking just in case word got out about what they were going to do.

"Yes." She nodded so hard her drink splashed over the sides of her glass.

"Then I'm in, if you tell me why." Karen's quick agreement had her friend's gazes turning from Lainey to her. "What, you think teachers don't experiment except for in the classroom?"

Everyone laughed, and when Lainey caught her breath she said, "I have been dating Jace for two years. We've been engaged for the past eighteen months. I can't keep putting him off, or he may change his mind." She was joking, but somewhere deep inside she was afraid it might be true.

"That would be a big mistake on his part." Amy rolled the pizza cutter back and forth with a big grin.

"Seriously. Jace is a fun and passionate lover. I want to make our wedding an event he'll never forget. In a good way. Who knows, maybe every year on our anniversary, I'll work something up something special for him." Lainey waggled her eyebrows, and they all laughed.

“Okay, so how do you want to do this?” Amy reached over, grabbed a couple napkins, and handed them to Sadie.

“This pizza is a delicious disaster.” Sadie wiped her mouth before adding, “Amy’s right, we need a plan.”

“How far do you want him to be in on it? Somewhat informed or a kablammy surprise?” Dianne brought up a good question that had them all going quiet for a few seconds.

“I think he should be surprised. I mean, men suck at keeping secrets, unless it’s something that will get them in trouble. If you tell him, he’ll want to help plan it, then you could really end up with things slipping out.” Since Amy had four brothers, she knew what she was talking about.

“True. See, this is why I called you guys. I knew you’d help me. So we surprise him, too. This is good because if my mother found out he knew, then she would never forgive him. Now where do we start?” Lainey was starting to feel buzzed, and it wasn’t from the wine.

“Well, his trip to Vegas is in, what, three weeks?” Lainey nodded and Sadie went on. “That doesn’t give us much time, but if we each take a part, we can definitely pull this off.”

“We’ll need a copy of his itinerary, and someone is going to have to work with Gage. I figure Jace would have asked him to be his best man. They’ll need to gather up the rest of the groomsmen.” Amy turned to Dianne, who instantly blushed.

“No way!” She put her drink down and shot to her feet. “That guy is beyond manageable.”

“But honey, he *likes* you,” Karen teased.

Lainey laughed as Sadie pulled out one of the notebooks she never left home without. They were in for it now. She wasn’t going to let them leave until each one of them knew exactly what their jobs were and what it entailed. Then she’d hound them until she had everything they needed to pull this off.

“You guys know I love you, right?” Lainey wiped at the lone tear that had escaped.

Karen gave her a hug then grabbed another piece of pizza. “We love you, too. Now let’s get to work.”

* * * *

Jace sat at his desk going over all the details of this new design. The course was gorgeous, and if his clients approved the plans as is, it would be the biggest and most unusual golf course he’d ever built. The only downside of the whole thing was he had to fly to a casino in Las Vegas for the pitch. With the strange way Lainey had been acting lately, he really didn’t want to leave her. He’d already asked her about ten times to come with him, but she kept turning him down. Her anxiety could have something to do with the fact he’d been pressuring her to set a date for their wedding.

He was beginning to wonder if she had changed her mind about getting married. Lainey still loved him, that much he was sure of, but he knew marriage wasn’t for everyone. Jace knew Lainey was far from conventional. She may put on that front for people, but underneath, she had a wildness that drove him insane. He wanted to stay here and work things out. If she didn’t want to get married, it may sting his pride a bit, but he figured he could deal with it as long she was in his bed every night. He wished they were there right now, but she was out with her friends.

Jace knew the six of them tried to get together every Tuesday morning to hit the gym because it was the one morning Lainey went in late. He knew more often than not their “workout” turned into meeting for coffee and a chat at the place between Sadie’s office and the gym. Not that any of them needed to workout in his opinion. They were an outstanding pack of women. Strong and sexy, and he was a lucky enough bastard to have snagged one of them.

He’d often thought it was fluke that the rest of them were still single, but then he’d really gotten to know them. Just like Lainey had her slightly overbearing mother to contend with, her friends all had

something of their own that kept them from finding their Mister Right.

Amy had four “big” brothers and an overprotective father, so the guy who won her needed to be strong enough to deal with them. Karen’s smarts went way beyond the classroom. If Jace had to guess, he’d say she needed a man that would engage her mind and her body. Dianne, now she was different. There was something about her he couldn’t put his finger on. Gage had seen it the first time he’d met her and hadn’t been the same since. Jillian had a witty yet funky sense of humor that most people didn’t get. If a guy didn’t know her, he might not know she was joking, and that may scare some guys away. And Sadie, she had a way of reading people which was probably why she excelled at her job as a reporter. It gave her an edge at seeing through the crap most guys tossed her way and made her ignore them.

Sooner or later, each one of them was going to come face-to-face with a guy who would fit the bill, even if he had to shove a few in front of them himself. Not that they didn’t have plenty of chances to meet men. At least once a month, usually the same night he went out with Gage and the guys, Lainey and the girls went out and found some type of mischief to get into. Not too long ago, they’d driven a few towns over to check out a new store. After taking one look at their smiling faces, he should’ve known their little trip hadn’t been as innocent as they’d made it sound. Nothing ever was when it came to dealing with the six of them.

Lainey had come home with a cardboard box that had a big red ribbon tied around it. Nobody, not even him, could have imagined his shock at what he’d found inside. The silk ties and fancy feathers had sparked his curiosity, among other things, but there had been more. Massage lotions and a set of suggestive dice completed the gift. It had taken them two weeks, long nights and a few inspired days, to accomplish all the combinations of the dice. Then they had come up with a few ideas of their own.

Jace found himself smiling, something that happened a lot when he thought about Lainey. Something about her spunky personality cheered him up. If he had to choose three words to describe her, they would be fun, adventurous, and creative. To say he found her sexy as hell would be a major understatement. She had curves he loved to run his hands over, but it was way more than that. He loved the way she carried herself. She walked into a room proud and confident, even if she was wearing an apron that had smears of multi-colored frosting on it. And when she smiled, it lit up the room. He had trouble focusing on anything but her.

His buddy, Gage, had once teased him, claiming he was walking a fine line between love and obsession. He wouldn't deny it, but he hoped he'd never cross the line unless she asked him to. Lainey seemed to like having him devoted to her, but maybe he was wrong and that was why she didn't want to set a date. There were too many variables, which kept him second-guessing his actions. He shut off his lamp and headed for the bedroom. Dwelling on what might be wasn't going to help him figure out what to do next.

As he entered the room, he caught the faint scent of the vanilla spray she loved to use. He made a mental note to pick her up some more before he left for his business trip. Jace loved seeing the way her eyes sparkled when he did little things like that. The little flicker of excitement always went to his head, well, both of them. He'd missed it over the past few weeks, but he was going to do his damndest to bring it back. He stepped into the bathroom and glanced at her stuff spread out on the vanity.

He reached into the shower, turned on the spray, and adjusted the temperature. Jace stripped out of his clothes and stepped into the shower. The steam surrounded him as the hot water sluiced down his back. Jace pressed his hands on the wall and let his head drop forward. He closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind, and let the water ease his tight muscles. Imagining Lainey there with him helped. It would be great if she would just open the door and join him. He'd

give anything to feel her hands smooth up his back and squeeze his shoulders, working the tension out. It would feel so fucking great.

As if conjured by his imagination, the glass door opened and she was standing there. And, to his ultimate pleasure, she was completely naked. Her bare curves made his heart race and his cock, which was already hard from just thinking about her, bob to attention. Her smile confirmed the fact that she had noticed.

“Can I join you?” She didn’t have to ask him twice.

Jace stepped back, making room for her. She stepped in directly under the spray. Lainey raised her hands as she tipped her head back. She ran her hand and the water through her hair, slicking it back. Whether she realized it or not, it was one of the sexiest sights he’d ever seen. She turned around and took her purple, squishy bath puff thing from the shelf. He watched her load it with body wash and squeeze it until a thick lather appeared. She slowly spun back to face him as she ran the lucky sponge over her breasts then stomach. He fought the urge to reach out and wipe the suds from her nipples, which had formed hard little peaks. Snowcapped mountains were what came to mind.

Lainey cleared her throat and held out the puff thingy to him. “Would you mind getting my back?”

“Not at all.” In all honesty, he couldn’t wait to get his hands on her.

The shower was wide enough that she could’ve gotten past him without touching him whatsoever. Instead, Lainey moved in close, pressing her body to his, and they turned together so the spray was no longer hitting his back. She turned and placed her hands on the wall the same way he had. He ran the sponge across the top of her shoulders, sending bubbles cascading down her back.

“Did you have fun with your friends?” He hoped having a normal conversation would distract him from what he really wanted to do.

Jace used both hands to rub and caress her upper back. The harder he pressed, the louder her moans got. Her head dropped back, and her

ass seemed to stick out a little more. He moved closer, reaching around her to get the front of her shoulders. The move brought his cock in line with the crack of her ass. Though he did his best to hold himself still, Lainey wiggled back against him. His groan filled the shower.

“Not as much fun as I’m having with you.” Her breathlessness had his blood surging.

“Babe, you’re being a naughty girl.” His reprimand was totally spoiled when she gave her hips a slight rock, stroking his cock, which made him mumble a curse. “Fuck.”

“Mmm...” She pushed herself up onto her toes, and his erection slid deeper between her legs.

All he needed was to shift a little bit, and it would be so easy to slip inside her. “You’re asking for it.”

“Begging,” she corrected, pushing back harder against him.

That was the last straw. He dropped the spongy thing and grabbed her hips. Jace held her still up on her toes, and he slid his dick along the crevice of her ass going forward until he reached her sensitive tissues. She moaned, and her head fell forward. Jace felt her body tremble and knew she wanted this just as much as he did. He brought his cock to her opening, and, with very precise movements, he slid inside her hot wet pussy. As he slid in, Lainey let out a gasp of pleasure. He kept his strokes slow and easy until she started pushing back when he lunged forward. Something broke loose in him, and suddenly his thrusts had her feet practically coming off the floor.

Lainey’s moans got louder and so did his. Jace wasn’t going to last much longer, and he knew it. He was going to make sure Lainey found her satisfaction first. He slid one of his hands from her hip to the tiny patch of curls between her thighs. His fingers dipped inside the slit and found her little swollen nub. He pressed and rubbed, but he didn’t lessen his strokes. Lainey shouted his name and slapped the wall. Jace surged harder within her, and she shuddered in his arms. He

held her tight against him and rocked them both until he found his release several minutes later.

“Now we really need a shower.” Lainey laughed, untangling herself from his embrace, and stepped under the now lukewarm spray.

Pretty damn sure they were done for the night, Jace reached for her sponge and said, “Let’s make it quick.”

Chapter Two

Lainey looked over at the seven-tier wedding cake and sighed. The intricate detailing was accentuated by the deep red rose petals that looked haphazardly tossed about, but they had really been painstakingly arranged. This was the only part of having a real wedding she was going to miss. Seriously, the big wedding, stuffy white dress, and her family bickering around her weren't things she'd ever looked forward to. She knew most girls dreamed of their big day and planned it down to the last detail. All she'd ever wanted was her friends standing by her side in a small ceremony.

Her mother would never allow something so simple. She wanted a huge gala-type affair. Lainey knew she wouldn't be able to sit there in front of all her mother's friends and her family while her mother ran roughshod over everyone. And without her father there to walk her down the aisle, it just wasn't worth it. In fact, just thinking about it made her want to throw up. She didn't have any other choice but to follow through with her plan.

She hung her apron on the hook by the door and shut off the lights. The short drive to the house she shared with Jace only took a few minutes, but it was long enough for her to get nervous. She knew there was no changing her mind now. Her friends wouldn't let her chicken out. She pulled up in front of the house at the same time Amy did. They both climbed from their cars and headed for the door.

"Did you make a list of everything we need to find?" Amy asked as Lainey tried to unlock the door.

Lainey shook her head. "I didn't have to. Sadie emailed me a very long and detailed list last night."

“That woman’s organizational skills scare me sometimes,” Amy said.

“I’m sure your dad and brothers feel the same way. You can be just as bad sometimes,” Lainey pointed out as she wiggled the key again with no success.

“That’s different. If I don’t keep track of everything, shit goes crazy. You know how it is running a business.” Amy had a point there.

“Yeah, but your brothers call you The Sergeant behind your back.” Lainey pulled her key out, made sure it was the right one, and shoved it back in the slot.

“Give me the keys.” Amy held out her hand, and Lainey obediently handed them over. “Why are you so jittery? It’s not like we’re breaking in. You live here.”

“I know.” Lainey followed her into the house, pulled both copies of the list out of her pocket, and held one out to Amy. “And it’s not like we’ve never snooped before.”

“We used to be the best.” Amy took her copy and headed upstairs. “We always knew what everyone was getting for Christmas even before they did.”

Amy stopped so short, Lainey walked right into her, knocking them both down. Lainey laughed, but Amy didn’t. The way she just sat there and stared at her didn’t help her quaky nerves any.

“What’s wrong?” Lainey finally asked, even though she wasn’t sure she really wanted to know.

“You’re not afraid of what we might find, are you?” Amy bit her lip waiting for her to answer.

“No way.” She knew Jace was true to her, and up until now, they didn’t have any secrets from each other. “It’s just been a really long time since I’ve had to be sneaky. And this isn’t a minor thing like reading someone’s diary.”

Amy laughed and helped her to her feet. “That was years ago, and you said you forgave me.”

“I did.” Lainey followed her upstairs and into Jace’s home office.

They chatted as they searched, making sure to check off each item they found. Soon Lainey’s nerves were calm, but she was bubbling with excitement. They were both very careful and put everything right back where they got it. Amy seemed to be relishing the job. Poor Jace had no idea just how intimately Amy was going to know him after today. She’d already made a few comments about the way he drew little doodles of puppies and how maybe she’d get him one for his birthday. Lainey giggled because she had been thinking pretty much the same thing. Amy laughed but agreed when Lainey told her it would be good to practice before they decided to have kids. It took them a few hours, but they managed to find everything they needed.

Lainey glanced at the clock and decided it wouldn’t be worth going back to work. “I’m starving. Let’s go see what we can rustle up for dinner.”

“Sounds good. I’ll grab your laptop, and I’ll get this all typed up and sent out while you cook.” Amy’s cooking skills were pretty dismal, so Lainey had had no problem agreeing with her.

* * * *

Jace slowed to a stop and stared at the cars parked in the driveway. Lainey’s van was in her normal spot, but Amy’s Jeep was parked right behind it. He tipped his wrist and glanced at his watch. Usually Lainey never made it home before five-thirty. Amy had a more flexible schedule since she worked for her father, managing his garage. Every once in a while, she could sneak away. He pulled into his spot, wondering why they were there.

For a few minutes he actually entertained the idea they were inside talking about the wedding. Decisions needed to be made about flowers, food, dresses, and where they wanted to have the ceremony. He knew Lainey would want her friends’ input on those types of things. Of course, it’d be easier to make the choices if they had a date

in mind. Then a part of his imagination veered off into dangerous territory. Were they in there discussing a way for her to get out of it altogether? The only way he was going to find out was by going inside. Jace got out of the car and headed for the house. The second he opened the door, the smell of something intoxicating hit him, and his stomach growled.

He dropped his bag by the door and headed for the kitchen. Amy was sitting at the table, holding a glass of red wine. Lainey was stirring something on the stove. They were laughing so hard they hadn't even noticed him. He took a minute to just observe them. Their differences on the outside were as plain as night and day. Lainey had her blonde hair cut in a short spiky style, green eyes, and curvaceous body, and Amy was more like a little sprite with her long black hair and startling blue eyes. It had been a huge surprise when he found out they had such similar personalities.

"Hi, ladies." Their heads turned in his direction.

Lainey walked over and pressed her lips to his. "Hi, handsome."

"Hey, Jace. Hope we didn't keep Lainey out too late last night." Amy gave him a friendly smile he easily returned.

"I kind of like it when she goes out with you ladies. She comes home all frisky." Lainey's cheeks blushed a nice shade of pink, and she playfully swatted at him as she returned to the stove. "So what have you two been up to today?"

"I needed to order the birthday cake for my dad's surprise party, and since he's been watching me like a hawk, Lainey was nice enough to meet me here to do it." Amy's answer came so quick Jace wondered what else they had been talking about, but he figured he may be better off not asking in case it was girly stuff.

"Are you doing a billiards theme party again?" Jace walked over and peeked into the pan Lainey was stirring.

He sniffed, and his stomach growled again. Some type of creamy noodle concoction was bubbling away. A pan with broccoli was

sitting on the next burner. He decided the divine smell must have been coming from the oven.

“Nope, the boys didn’t take too kindly to getting whipped by a bunch of girls.” Amy’s brag had Lainey smiling, too, since she had been one of the girls that had beaten them. “So this year we’re going with a Texas Hold’em theme.”

He knew this might be a huge mistake, but he had to take the chance. “Maybe you could help Lainey choose a funky theme for the wedding.”

Lainey’s barely audible groan reached him. Pretending he hadn’t heard it wasn’t easy, but he managed. He walked over to the sink and washed his hands before grabbing himself a beer from the fridge. Jace noticed the look Lainey was giving Amy when he turned back to them. Amy shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

“I think with everything that’s going on, Amy’s really too busy right now.” Lainey held out a pair of potholders. “Can you take the meat out of the oven?”

He waited a few seconds, hoping Amy would answer, but she kept quiet. Jace opened the oven and saw three big, juicy steaks covered with a greenish stuff on the pan. Jace laid it on the stove and let Lainey nudge him out of the way. She grabbed a bowl with a cheese crumble mixture and sprinkled some on top. He leaned forward to get a better look. Lainey shooed him in the direction of the table. He walked over and took a seat next to Amy, who was watching them intently.

“Are you going to come to the party this year, Jace? It wouldn’t be right for Lainey’s other half not to be there.” He wondered if Amy really meant that or if she was just trying to play mediator.

“He’ll be there.” Lainey’s assertive tone was somewhat reassuring, since it was accompanied by a huge smile.

Lainey served them while Amy filled him in on everything that was happening at the garage. Lainey took the seat opposite him and smiled. He went along with the conversation, letting the matter of

their wedding drop for now. Jace hoped he'd find a way to get back to it at some point. Amy and Lainey chatted away, but Lainey kept flashing looks at him from under her lashes. The way she'd bite into her lip and smile at him did things to him he would never understand. If she wasn't careful, she was going to find herself lying on the table next to his steak. That would really give Amy—the little chatter box, he meant it in the nicest way—something to talk about.

Lainey got up and carried her plate to the sink. "I brought home a chocolate strawberry cake for dessert."

"None for me." Amy got to her feet and brought her plate to Lainey. "I've got to go babysit for my brother." He joined them by the counter just as Lainey lifted the cake out of the box. It had chocolate frosting with swirls of whipped cream around the edge that had a slice of strawberry on them. He thought it looked fabulous and knew it would taste amazing. The thick chocolate frosting clung to the blade as it sliced through the cake. She lifted the piece of cake and laid it on a small white plate. There was a layer of chocolate cake on the top and bottom with a strawberry layer in the middle. She handed the plate and a fork to him.

Lainey pulled a storage bowl from the cabinet and put a huge chunk of the cake in it. "Here, you can take some to the kids."

"Thanks." Amy took the bowl and gave her a hug then leaned in, kissed Jace's cheek, and whispered, "Thank you for loving her so much."

"Wouldn't have it any other way." He knew her friends loved her, and he was touched they accepted him so easily.

The women left him in the kitchen while Lainey walked Amy to the door. Their laughter traveled down the hall to him. For a minute or two, he considered letting Lainey off the hook, but he figured if she was going to tease him then she should know what was going to be in store for her. He stood there enjoying his cake and waiting for her. The huge smile on her face when she entered the room had him smiling, too.

“That was fun.” Lainey walked over to the sink, turned the faucet on, and started washing the dishes.

“It was,” he agreed, unable to tear his gaze off her hips and the way they swayed from side to side.

He moved up behind her and reached around to put his plate in the water. Jace placed his other hand on her hip and held her still. With a little nudge, Lainey tipped her head to the side. She leaned back into him, and he nibbled on her earlobe, making her giggle. But as he kissed his way down her neck to her shoulder, those giggles turned into moans. He gave the string that held her sweatpants up a tug. They didn’t fall down, but the waistband loosened enough for him to slip his hand inside. It wasn’t hard getting in her panties, either.

He cupped her mound of curls with his fingers. She wiggled and moaned, asking for more. Jace used his fingers to part the patch of curls and ran his fingers along the slick passage. He felt her begin to shake a little in his arms, but he didn’t lessen his assault. Jace continued to wiggle his fingers, playing with her while he feasted on her neck. Little biting kisses and masterfully applied suction every now and then had her rocking against his hand. Lainey wasn’t the type that was afraid to go after what she wanted, and normally he was willing to give it to her. This time was different, and he had to remind himself he was doling out a punishment, not rewarding her.

Jace wasn’t going to deny her completely. He was just going to put her on edge until he thought she’d suffered long enough. Then he’d give so much gratification, she wouldn’t be able to stand it.

“Jace.” Hearing the need in her voice, he almost put aside his silly plot and gave her the release he knew she needed.

“Yeah.” His cock was pressed so hard against his zipper, it was bordering on the edge of pain.

If she kept wiggling against him, he might not escape this little exploit unscathed. He needed to either end it or give them what they both wanted.

“Stop teasing me.” Her plea gave him the opening he needed.

“Okay.” He quickly removed his hand from her pants, doing his best not to outwardly react to her gasp, though he wanted to smile. “I have a few phone calls to make. I’ll be down in little bit.”

Jace gave himself a few seconds to take in and enjoy the shocked expression on her face. Her jaw and eyes were opened wide as he pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. He left the room, walking as fast as he could without running. Even though he could hear her grumbling and slamming things behind him, he kept going. She deserved what she was getting, and she’d deserve what he was going to give her later, too.

Chapter Three

Lainey twirled the cake slowly, looking for any signs of imperfection. The lion, with his thick chocolate mane, smiled up at her. Character cakes were one of her specialties. Animals, clowns, comic strip and cartoon characters, she did them all. When Sadie's niece was into ballet dancing, she'd done a mouse wearing a pink tutu and ballet slippers. It had been a huge hit with all the little girls. She'd probably made a cake for every kid she knew over the past eight years since she opened the shop. At the time, most people thought a twenty-year-old didn't know how to run a business, but she'd proved them all wrong. She knew it had a lot to do with talent. Still, having the best quality items and hiring good help were important, too.

Sherri, her assistant and counter girl, had been hired right out of culinary school, and she trusted her enough to leave her in control of the bakery while she was away. Lainey wasn't sure why Sherri had been giving her strange looks all week, but today she wouldn't look her in the eyes and was giving her a lot of space. It looked like they needed to have a talk. Lainey put the spatula down and picked up her digital camera off its docking station. After clicking a couple of shots, she put it back and hit the print button. She would store the cake in the cooler until Mrs. Murphy came to pick it up this afternoon.

Lainey made sure there was no one in the front. "Sherri, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Umm, yeah, okay." Her reply was as far from enthusiastic as it could get.

Lainey leaned back against the counter and waited. After a few minutes, Sherri walked through the swinging doors. Lainey waited for

her to get comfortable before saying anything. She hated that Sherri stared at the floor instead of looking at her. Her bubbly attitude and friendly smile had been one of the reasons Lainey had hired her, and she missed them. If she had done anything to make Sherri angry or feel unwelcome, it had been totally unintentional.

“Want to tell me what’s going on with you?” Though it came out in question form, there was no doubt it hadn’t been meant as one.

Sherri’s head snapped up. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth hung open wide enough that Lainey could have stuffed a whole cupcake in. For a second Lainey felt bad, but pussyfooting around wasn’t her style. Whatever the issue was, Lainey wanted it fixed now, before it got any worse.

“Look, I can tell something is bothering you, so why don’t we just get it out in the open?” That was about as gentle as she was going to get.

“I didn’t mean to.” Sherri’s cheeks turned beet red, but at least she was still looking at her. “But I read the email from Ms. Rithgow.”

“You didn’t mean to read it?” Lainey held back a smile and wondered if that was all this was about.

“No, I clicked it by mistake.” Sherri quickly reassured her it was an accident.

“So that’s why you’ve been so glum. You’re not mad at me? I didn’t do something to hurt your feelings?” Lainey didn’t think so, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“No way. You may be blunt sometimes, but never mean.” Sherri giggled. “Most of the time, you just make me laugh. I’m really sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. It was an innocent mistake.” Lainey waved her hand in the air.

Sherri tilted her head and gave her a curious look. “It was really strange because you don’t usually get personal emails in that account.”

“I know, but I have a secret. I wasn’t going to tell you until every detail was all ironed out, but since I need your help, I may as well tell

you now. Have a seat.” Lainey motioned to the stool beside the decorating table.

Sherri sat down, and Lainey filled her in on what she and the girls had been up to. Within minutes, they were both laughing like old times. She didn’t even have to ask Sherri to take over the shop next week, because she volunteered. Now all she needed to do was cross her fingers and hope everything fell into place. The rest of her day flew by. They took orders, careful not to book any more than Sherri could handle on her own, but if it got really busy, Sherri assured Lainey she could call her niece in to help with the counter. Lainey cleaned up the kitchen while Sherri wiped down the counter and locked up the front. When they were done, the two of them headed home.

Singing along with the radio almost helped keep her mind off what was waiting for her at home. After playing dirty last night, she deserved what he’d done. Now she knew better than to tease and torment him when he couldn’t fight back. It was just wrong, but oh-so-fun. She had a feeling Amy wasn’t going to get off scot-free, either. Granted, his revenge on her was going to be much less personal, but he had to know Amy had stalled leaving just to let her get him so worked up that talking would be the last thing on his mind.

Lainey knew her punishment wasn’t over, either. It was most likely going to be very drawn out. The teasing games he’d decided to play with her last night, even though they’d turned out to be pretty fun, were just the beginning. She just hoped whatever he planned next wouldn’t include much talking, which could lead to arguing because she wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold things in. All she needed was another week and their wedding wouldn’t be an issue anymore. Then she and Jace could go back to the way things were. Well, until the next crisis came up. And with her family, something was bound to.

She got out of the car and headed for the house. As she reached the door, it opened, and Jace stood in front of her. He didn’t waste any

time. Before she could even say hello, he pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth with his. Lainey found herself pinned between the door frame and his hot, hard body. As she wrapped her arms around his neck, she wondered if he'd given up and realized talking was overrated. Man, she hoped so.

He eased away, allowing her to take in some much-needed air. "I ordered Chinese food and picked up some new movies."

"Sounds great." She let him tug her into the house.

The coffee table was covered with plates of food. She spotted a bottle of her favorite wine and a big goblet. There were also a couple of beers for him. They each sat on the cushions he'd set up on the floor in front of the couch. As they ate and watched a Bruce Willis action flick, Lainey kept wondering what he had in store for her. He might be trying to lull her into thinking everything was hunky dory before he launched his plan. She realized she could spend the night dwelling on what might happen, or she could just relax and go with the flow. Not wanting to cause any more strife, she blocked everything else out and focused on enjoying the night with the love of her life.

When they finished eating, they cleaned up the mess together with Lainey laughing as Jace stole kisses on their trips back and forth to the kitchen. Lainey loved spending time with Jace. The most boring chores, things like grocery shopping and cleaning the yard, were more pleasant when he was around. With her being so tense lately, just sitting around watching movies with him was heaven. She settled herself on the couch while he switched the movie. Jace joined her on the couch, remote in hand, just as the phone rang.

"It's probably your mother again." Jace wouldn't have sounded so put out if he knew the reason she'd been calling so much was to harass her about setting a date for the wedding.

"I should answer," Lainey grudgingly admitted, "otherwise, she'll just keep calling."

Jace reached over to the corner table, snatched up the phone, and held it out to her. "You know, there's a way to get her to stop calling twice a day."

Lainey didn't say anything as she wrapped her hand around the phone. She tugged it, but he didn't let go. He pulled her forward and leaned in at the same time. She expected him to push the issue and make her admit setting a date would get her mother to back off for now. When they were nose-to-nose she noticed the twinkle in his eye that hadn't been there a second ago.

A sexy grin curved his lips and he said, "Make it quick, really quick."

Lainey settled back against the cushion and hit the answer button. "Hello."

"Hi." Amy's cheery tone was unmistakable. "Are you alone?"

"No, Jace is here. We're just about to watch a movie. What's up?" She looked over and mouthed "Amy" at Jace.

"Tell him I said hi." Amy yelled as if he could hear her.

Lainey dutifully relayed the message. "Amy said hi."

"Hello, Amelia," he replied loudly but with a smile. Hearing him use Amy's real name was a hint he was already getting impatient.

Amy must have realized it, too. "I'll just give you a brief rundown so you can get back to him."

"That sounds like a good idea." Lainey hoped it wouldn't take more than a few minutes.

"Dianne managed to get Gage to agree to help us. She said Gage even came up with a way to get all the groomsmen there, too." Amy sounded surprised by that.

"That's terrific." Jace turned and looked at her due to her excited little outburst.

"Not necessarily. She sounded pretty annoyed. Have you noticed she's always irritated when he's around? Anyway, Sadie used some of her connections and was able to get all our tickets squared away." Amy paused and took a breath. "Our flight leaves three hours after

Jace's. Dianne, Gage, and the groomsmen are on a different flight leaving half an hour earlier."

"That's not much time." She hadn't really put much thought into logistics when she'd originally come up with the plan.

"I know, but it was the best she could do on such short notice. Jillian is handling the ground transportation for when we get there. Karen called her uncle, who has a friend who's a judge down there and was able to find out all about the marriage license. It's all set. My job is to keep you from losing your mind or breaking down and telling Jace what's going on."

"Good luck." Lainey knew she had her work cut out for her.

"This is going to work. We've got everything under control. So sit back and enjoy your movie and your man." Amy's laughter was cut short when she disconnected the call.

"What was that all about?" Jace asked, taking the phone from her hand and tossing it toward the end of the couch.

She wasn't going to lie to him, but she couldn't tell him, either. Her mother had taught her a way to get around her father when she had a secret, but she never thought she'd have to use it on Jace. Lainey just needed to keep him in the dark for a little bit longer, then he'd know it all. If he got mad, she'd apologize, but doing things her way she would give both of them, what they wanted.

"Girly stuff." She shrugged her shoulders just like Mommy showed her, trying to make it sound uninteresting.

"You sounded pretty torqued up over girly stuff." He fiddled with the remote but didn't start the movie.

"She just took me by surprise, that's all." That was the truth because even though there was a time crunch, Lainey hadn't expected her friends to get everything accomplished so quickly. "Ready to watch the movie?"

"Sure." He let out a sigh, pointed the remote at the DVD player, and stabbed the button with his thumb.

Lainey's heart tugged at her conscience. She couldn't stand seeing him like this. Having a wall built up between them really sucked. Her impulses kicked in, and she ripped the remote out of his hand and paused the movie. The lion froze on the screen mid-growl. She reached over and laid her hand on his cheek. The slight, rough stubble she could barely see poked at her palm. She turned his face toward hers.

"Jace," she waited until he met her gaze, "if you really want to know, I'll tell you."

"Lainey, not to be mean, but I'm not sure I want to know what you girls are up to." He covered her hand with his, turned his head, and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

She tried to pull her hand away. He didn't fight fair and used his free hand to tickle her. The more she squirmed to get away, the closer she got. After a brief struggle, she found herself straddling his lap. She braced her hands against his chest and pushed back. The movement made her hips slide forward on his thighs. She felt the thick ridge his cock made in his jeans. His hands tightened on her waist. She looked down into his brown eyes and was relieved to see he wasn't mad anymore, but there was something else there. The tightness of the way he was holding himself told her he was really close to the edge of his control. It was a mistake he didn't make very often because once she knew it he was close to reaching his limit, something inside her drove her to push him over it.

Lainey wiggled her hips, making him groan. "What makes you think we're up to anything?"

"Honey, you girls are always up to something." He laughed, which for some reason pissed her off a little.

She knew she should be relieved he wasn't pushing her to tell him. Maybe part of her, a deeply sadistic part, was angry he wasn't.

She leaned forward, putting her mouth right next to his ear, and said, "Babe, trust me, if I was up to something and didn't want you to know, you wouldn't."

His hands slid up her to her shoulders. Lainey nibbled on his earlobe, loving the way his breaths came faster and got rougher. He curled his fingers over her shoulders and pulled her body down harder on his dick. Lainey rocked her hips a little, and his rose in response.

“You’re a good tease, but you always give in,” he took a breath, “in the end. So,” he paused, pressing a wet kiss to her neck, “eventually you’ll break down,” she shivered against him, “and tell me.”

Wasn’t he going to be surprised? Hopefully it was going to be happily, but still the shock would have him eating his words and forever wondering just what she was up to. It would never be anything malicious where he was concerned, but still, a little subterfuge every now and then could be a good thing. Her mother had kept her father guessing right up until his final days. He’d always said he had no idea what she was thinking half the time, but it didn’t stop him from loving her. She wanted that with Jace. Actually, she already had it. She just needed to take the next step to keep it.

“Someday we may just find out about that. For right now, I have other more important things to do.” She wiggled her hands down between them.

It took a few tugs and yanks accompanied with grunts and groans from both of them, but she managed to get the button and fly on his jeans undone. Of course, she almost landed on the floor, twice. Somehow during all her fumbling, he’d undone her pants and tugged them low on her hips. He slid his hands inside the back of her waistband and cupped her ass.

She wrapped her fingers around his erection. Squeezing tightly, she slid them from the base to the tip, letting her thumb rub over the head. Jace groaned, and his hips lifted enough to jostle her. She loved the power she had over him. Sometimes playing with him like this was better than the actual sex. Okay, not often, but once in a while. He didn’t mind letting her handle every hard inch of him, either. Her strokes got faster, and so did his breathing.

He grabbed onto her hips and tried to move her lower on his legs. “Fuck, Lainey, you should stop.”

She didn’t heed his warning. In fact she did the total opposite tightening her grip she increased the speed of her strokes. She felt his legs tense under her, and his fingers dug into her hips. He groaned, well, more like shouted, something unintelligible as he came. The spurts of semen shot out, reminding her of a volcano, and landed on his black T-shirt. She didn’t stop pumping him right away. Not until he laughed and reached down and grabbed her wrist. Since he was already a mess, she wiped the white gooiness on her hand onto his T-shirt.

She leaned forward, careful not to get too close, and kissed his cheek before saying, “Looks like you need to clean up a bit.”

“It’s your fault. I think you should clean me up.” He stripped his shirt off and wadded it into a ball.

“It would be my pleasure.” She got to her feet and held out her hand. Jace took it, letting her pull him to his feet and lead him upstairs.

* * * *

Hours later, Jace was laying there wide awake while Lainey slept. He was flat on his back with her at his side, and as usual, she had her arm and leg draped over him. Jace wished he could read her mind. *Would it give me some brilliant insight to what her problem is?* He was going to have to come up with a way to get her to talk about their getting married without sounding demanding. Hopefully his buddy, Gage, would have a couple of ideas. He’d always been the ladies man, so he should have a golden nugget or two he learned from at least one of them.

If not, Jace was going to be forced to resort to counter intelligence. Amy’s brothers may be able to help him there. If he could sway them into helping, they could dig around a little. If they

could get Amy to slip up and give them even a hint about why setting a date was such a big problem, then he might be able to find a solution. Otherwise, he was shooting bullets at a moving target just hoping to hit a bull's eye. Fuck, at this point he'd settle for hitting an outer ring.

He knew going to her friends wouldn't get him anywhere. They were such a tight-knit little unit they'd never break her confidence. Jace didn't even want to put them in the position where they felt like they needed to. The one person who had the answers he wanted so badly wasn't willing to give them to him. So far, every time he asked Lainey, she either stomped away or brushed him off.

Lainey murmured in her sleep and curled closer against his side. Jace looked over at her smiling face and it hit him that he might be thinking about this all wrong. Maybe her reluctance in setting a date had nothing to do with him or their relationship. There could be other factors he was missing. If so, why didn't she just tell him what it was so they could talk about it and figure out what to do together? Sooner or later, it was going to come to a head, and they were going to have one hell of a discussion. For now, though, there wasn't much he could do but wait.

Chapter Four

Jace couldn't get past the feeling he was making a huge mistake. Even though things had been better between them for the past two weeks, almost normal in fact, it just felt wrong to leave right now. He was sure it had a lot to do with the fact neither of them brought up the wedding at all in the past few days, but that wasn't all of it. The talk he'd had with Gage had helped a lot. Gage had pointed out to him going on this business trip would give them both some space and time to think.

Of course, that was after he'd suggested he get her drunk and into a church before she sobered up. That he'd given the idea more than a few minutes of consideration told him he was closer to the edge than he thought. Gage's sense of humor could have gotten him into serious trouble if Jace's conscience hadn't kicked in. Instead, all it did was reinforce Gage's logical assumption that a little space would do them both some good. In the long run, Jace had decided he was going to wait until he got back from this trip to try and pin her down on a date.

He'd let everything go, and they had easily slipped back into that comfortable, crazy groove they had been in since the first time she'd kissed him. They slept together at night, wrapped in each other's arms. They had dinner together every night after work, took turns cooking, and kept their Thursday Scrabble date with her mother. He could live like this forever. They could grow old and gray, and as long as they were together, he would die a happy man. She seemed content with the way they were living, too.

Maybe that was what scared him. Shouldn't she want more? Wasn't marrying him supposed to give her some sense of security?

They needed to talk about everything and get down to the bottom of whatever it was that was keeping her from setting a date. He didn't want to force her and take a chance on ending up getting left at the altar, either. If she just told him what the problem was, maybe they could find a way around it together. Leaving with the invisible elephant dancing around them just didn't feel right.

"Damn it, we're going to set a date before I leave." He really wasn't talking to anyone, just thinking out loud.

Across the room, Gage's feet fell to the floor with a loud thud. "Dude, I thought you were going to back off."

"I was. Neither of us has even brought it up. The other day when her mother asked if we had a date in mind, I kept my mouth shut and let Lainey change the subject." He looked up at the ceiling. "She's getting really fucking good at that."

"Maybe I'm missing something, but I don't see the mad rush to set a date." Gage laughed. "Don't make that face at me. Shit, she's wearing your ring and sleeping in your bed. How much more committed is a piece of paper going to make you two?"

"I know most guys would be happy to just go with the flow. It's the fact she won't tell me why she won't set a date that's driving me nuts." There, he finally said it out loud, and it sounded like a really stupid reason to push her into picking a date.

"Hey, it could be that she likes living up to the stupid nickname they have. *Sin Sisters*. After all, she's the only one of them actually living in sin." Gage wiggled his eyebrows at him.

"You're an ass," Jace said with a smile.

Gage walked over and laid his hand on Jace's shoulder. "Look, you're leaving for a week. Why don't you just go home and spend the night locked away with your gorgeous fiancée? Stop worrying, and let things work themselves out."

"You're right." Jace knew Gage was only telling him to be reasonable.

“Of course I am. That’s why we’re in business together. I’m the brains, and you’re the creativity.” Gage laughed and headed back to his desk.

* * * *

Lainey rushed around the house, making sure everything was ready. Jace should be walking through the door any minute. Every time he went on a trip, no matter how short, she always tried to do something special the night before. Even though she was following him this time, she wasn’t taking any chances on jinxing her plans by not keeping her normal customs. Besides, he might wonder if something was up if she didn’t devote herself to him the way she usually did. With her not setting a date yet, he might read way too much into it. So she was going to give him a sendoff that was supposed to hold him over for a week until he got home.

Tonight she may have gone a little overboard. It was going to be a night of nibbling and not just the food. Dinner and dessert were all finger foods and sauces to dip them in. Dinner was a simple fare. Shrimp sautéed in garlic, mini-quiches, scallops wrapped with bacon, and fresh veggies and creamy dip. For dessert she had cut up pieces of fruit, angel food cake, and brownies to dip in fresh whipped cream, chocolate, and colored sprinkles.

She set the CD player to low, and a light, romantic tune filled the air. The candles she lit were more for the scent they gave off than the light. The room smelled like sugar cookies, Jace’s favorite. One last quick peek in the oven assured her everything was almost done. She glanced at the clock, wondering where he was. Normally Lainey wasn’t worried if he was a few minutes late, but tonight she wanted him there now.

Jace would call if he was going to be really late so she wouldn’t worry. She heard a car pull up and ran to the door. The door opened before she could get there, and he came in. Lainey slid to a stop

inches from him. She watched Jace drop his bag by the door and tug off his jacket.

“Hi, honey.”

“Hi, babe.” His reply sounded flat, and he didn’t even look at her. Maybe he’d had a rough day.

“Is everything okay?”

“I guess.” He pressed a quick kiss to her cheek then headed into the kitchen.

This wasn’t a good way to start the special evening she had planned. “Jace, are you all right?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “I guess I’m just tired.”

She wanted to ask of what, but she was pretty sure she knew what he was talking about. Lainey followed him, trying to think of something to say that would get him talking. Because whatever his issue was, she couldn’t let it spoil their night. Maybe she should scrap their cozy private dinner and suggest they go out. If he really was tired, it would be a stupid idea. Jace opened the fridge and leaned in to look for something.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes,” she offered, hoping he’d ask what they were having just so they could have a conversation.

“Okay.” His voice sounded funky coming out of the fridge.

She decided it was time for a little surprise. “Jace, I’ve been thinking.”

What she’d been thinking about would hopefully throw him for a loop long enough for her to get through. That seemed to get his attention. He closed the door and turned to face her. The expectant look on his face confirmed her previous concerns. His dejected mood was because of her.

“Really? About what?” The corners of his lips tipped up into an almost smile.

“This may come as a surprise, but I want you to know I’ve been tossing this around for a few weeks.” She knew it was pure evil to lead him on like this, but it was the only thing she could think of.

“Okay, whatever it is isn’t a rash decision, I get it.” His eyes had a glimmer in them.

“A few weeks ago when I was out with the girls, the subject of kids came up. I realized we’ve joked about having them someday, but we’ve never really had a serious talk about whether or not we wanted them.” She barely held back a laugh at the way his jaw dropped and his eyes went so wide his eyebrows raised almost to the middle of his forehead.

“You want to talk about babies?” There was a slight quake in his voice.

Lainey knew Jace liked kids, but babies had the tendency to freak him out a little. Probably because he hadn’t been around them much growing up. Once they could walk and talk, he’d get right down on the floor and play with them, but he always found a way to neatly avoid holding any babies.

She walked over and laid her hand on his chest. “Don’t you think it would be a good idea? After all, we’ve perfected the way they’re conceived.”

“You’re thinking about having *my* baby?” His look of fear slowly morphed into a huge smile.

“It’s crossed my mind.” The oven timer dinged, and Lainey dashed over to the stove.

She pulled the pans out and laid them on the towels on the counter. Now that he had that morsel to chew on, she decided to give him some time to let it sink in. She grabbed the spatula and transferred the food from the pans onto the serving platters. With a little nudging, she moved him out of the way and opened the fridge. She grabbed the tray with the sauces and veggies and handed it to him. Then she grabbed the bottle of soda and carried it to the table. Jace followed and took the seat beside her.

“So what do you think?” She held a scallop to his lips.

“I’m a little surprised you want to talk about it now,” he said before letting her put in his mouth.

She could see his point. After all, she'd been avoiding talking about anything that might lead to talk about the wedding, but she knew sometimes it was worth it to take a calculated risk.

"I warned you that you would be." She picked up a shrimp, dipped it into the sauce, and popped it in her mouth.

Lainey slid the plate toward him, and he picked up a quiche and bit into it. His eyes closed, and he let out a little moan. She liked knowing he enjoyed her cooking, among other things she did for him. As they talked, they fed each other. Lainey nipped his fingertips and licked the sauce off. Bit by bit, he moved his chair closer and closer. She guessed he wasn't satisfied with that, though, because he pulled her into his lap. Once the plates were empty, she squirmed out of his embrace and carried them to the sink. Instantly, he was there behind her.

His hands grasped onto her hips, holding her ass firmly against him. "I think we should practice some more."

Lainey wiggled her backside and felt the proof of his desire prodding her. "You can never get too good at some things."

"I wouldn't say that." His fingers dug in, and his tone went really low. "You are way too good at turning me on."

"Compliments will only get you so far." She leaned back, resting her head on his shoulder.

"What's gonna get me the rest of the way?" The want in his voice made her body tremble.

Lainey wasn't going to drag this out all night, but she knew it wouldn't hurt to make him wait a little longer. She turned in his arms and slid her arms around his neck. Not able to move much, she barely swayed her hips. Jace caught on quickly, though, and began to move their bodies to the rhythm of the music. Their bodies fit perfectly together. Her breasts pressed to his firm chest, and their hips lined up so that with every movement, his cock rubbed against her. Being this close and not ravaging him was torture. She hoped the feeling was mutual for him.

“So how many kids were you thinking about having?” His whisper was a warm caress on her cheek.

“I don’t know. One to start with, and if that goes well, maybe we could try again.” She figured he’d get over his fears pretty quickly with a baby around.

“I’d settle for two little girls that looked just like their mother.” He twirled her around a few times.

Lainey held on tight and tried not to laugh. “That’s sweet, but how is that fair to me? I want to look into my baby’s eyes and see a little bit of his daddy in there. Maybe we should go for four,” she teased. Jace went stiff as he pulled back and looked down at her with a look she couldn’t read so she said, “Two boys and two girls would be nice.”

“I think you’re right. We should start with one and see how it goes.” She nodded in agreement and he seemed to relax again.

“So when this subject came up, what did your friends say?” She knew sooner or later he’d ask that.

“Amy, Dianne, and Karen all thought we’d make good parents. Jillian and Sadie said I should wait so we can all have kids at the same time.”

“Kind of a next generation thing, huh?” he guessed and she nodded.

“Yeah. Then there was a suggestion we babysit for Dianne’s sister.” Lainey expected the thought of four boys between the ages of two and six would scare him at least a little.

Jace’s nod surprised her. “I think that’s a good idea.”

She didn’t realize she’d stopped moving until he walked her back to the table and eased her into the chair. “Jace, she has four boys.”

“I know. They were at Dianne’s cookout last summer. Remember, the oldest one stripped naked, and his father was chasing him around the yard.” His laughter made her smile, but she still was offering to watch those little demons.

“Let’s have dessert then we can go watch that movie we never got to the other night.” Now that he was totally relaxed, she was going to make sure they enjoyed the rest of the night without even thinking about getting married.

She got up and went to the fridge. It took her a few trips between the fridge and table to get everything ready. Jace offered to help, but she shooed him back into his seat. Before she even sat down, he’d already eaten two brownie bites dipped in whipped cream. Before she could reach for something, he was holding a piece of angel food cake dipped in chocolate and sprinkles to her mouth. She let him slide it past her lips then closed them around his fingertips. With a swirl of her tongue, she applied a little suction as he withdrew.

It didn’t take them long to polish off the treats she’d made. Feeding them to each other had added an erotic haze to the atmosphere. The way he licked or sucked the chocolate cream off her fingers and lips when he missed her mouth raised the heat for her. Jace missed on purpose, and she knew it, but she didn’t mind. In fact, there had been a few times when she had moved at the last second so he would miss. Lainey liked to tease him. She’d bring the brownie or cake right to his lips then pull away when he went to bite it. All the touching and teasing had driven them both to the point where neither one was going to turn back. Lainey got to her feet and reached for the plates, but Jace covered her hands with his.

“They can wait. I can’t.” As he stood, he pulled her into his arms and lifted her off the floor.

Lainey squealed as she was tossed over his shoulder. “This isn’t very romantic.”

“Romance and finesse are overrated. Right now, I’m going for speed, and once I get you upstairs, total satisfaction.”

His confidence was well earned, but she wasn’t about to let him know it. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

He hit the top step and hustled down the hall into their bedroom. He bent down to lower her to the floor. Lainey grabbed the hem of his

shirt and tugged, pulling it off as she stood up. Instead of rising up, Jace dropped to his knees and pushed her back onto the bed. She landed on her back with a little bounce. Within a few minutes, he had her stripped from the waist down, and with a leg on each side of her hips, he hovered over her. She laughed as he struggled with the tiny buttons on her shirt. Lainey reached up to help him, but Jace growled and slapped her hands away.

She couldn't help but laugh harder. His single-minded focus was only delaying things, but Lainey wasn't going to stop and try to explain that to him right now. Finally, with a firm tug on the sides of her shirt, he undid the buttons, sending them flying around the room.

"I'll buy you a new one." He tugged on her sleeves one at a time until she was free then tossed the shirt away.

"It's okay. I really didn't like it anyway." She laughed, helping him with the button on his jeans.

He rolled off her and shoved them down along with his briefs. They were still around his ankles when he rolled back on top of her. Lainey pulled her knees up, giving him access to get deeper within her thighs. Jace grabbed her hands and held them above her head. She was so wet and ready for him, he slid his cock inside her easily. After a few hard thrusts, he let go of her hands and scrambled up on his knees. He grasped onto her hips, lifting them off the mattress. The angle sent him deeper, and it felt so fucking good.

"Jace, oh shit, that feels so good." She managed to get out through her labored breaths.

Jace groaned in response but increased his speed. Lainey fisted her hands in the comforter and begged him to keep going. He kept pumping his hips harder and faster. She could barely breathe, and her thighs were trembling. Jace plunged as deep as he could get, pressing his pelvis against hers, and rocked them both. Lainey shattered, and her body shook with the most powerful spasms she'd ever felt. Jace's sweaty body collapsed on top of her. He lay there for a second before flopping onto his back.

“Shower?” he asked, and she nodded in agreement.

He climbed off the bed and headed for the bathroom. Lainey closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath. The next thing she knew, Jace scooped her limp body off the bed and carried her into the bathroom.

Chapter Five

Lainey stood on the cement steps in front of their house, watching as Jace loaded his bags into the car his office had hired to take him to the airport. She sat down on the top step, tugging her pink fuzzy robe a little tighter, even though she had shorts and a tiny t-shirt on underneath. Lainey knew what a sight she must be, all sleep-rumpled and wearing fluffy slippers and all, but she didn't really care what her neighbors thought. Getting dressed wasn't high on her list of priorities right now. She could barely believe this was really happening. The second his car drove away, she needed to spring into action. Her nerves were stretched so tight she thought she might throw up.

Jace turned to her with a predatory look in his eyes, and her whole body hummed in response. That sexy smile of his wasn't doing anything to help her to calm down. This morning, before he'd had a chance to climb out of their bed, she had practically attacked him. She had hoped to ease some of the edginess she felt, but now it was even worse. Okay, so he'd totally welcomed the wild little romp. It wasn't completely unusual for one of them to initiate a little morning nookie to carry them through the day. With each step he took toward her, the urge to tell him everything bubbled up from somewhere deep inside her.

"I'm going to miss you." He pulled her up against him, wrapping her in his arms.

"Me too. Are we going to finish our discussion when you get back?" Lainey didn't care if the driver was watching them.

“You bet. I’d ask you to be a good girl, but I kind of like it when you’re bad.” The way he made her laugh was one of the millions of things she loved about him.

“That’s good because you bring the bad girl in me out with a vengeance.” She winked, and he laughed.

He glanced up and down the street. “You better get inside, or some of our neighbors might get the wrong idea.”

“And what would that be?”

“Something along the lines of, ‘The sexy babe in number twenty-seven is too damn hot for that guy she lives with.’” His teasing smile had her heart racing.

If he wanted to talk about the neighbors, she may as well let him in on a well-known secret around here. “Honey, half the women in the neighborhood stand in their windows every time you mow the lawn, so it would only be fair.”

“Go inside anyway.” She shook her head, and he said, “It kills me to see you standing there watching me go.”

“I like watching you go.” She gave his ass a pat, and he laughed with her.

“Fine. Watch me go, or better yet, come with me,” he asked again, and she hated telling him no, but she had to.

“I can’t, I have too much work to do.” He nodded, taking her at her word.

He pressed a kiss to her lips and pulled away, leaving her wanting more. She let him slip out of her arms and watched silently as he walked to the car. He gave her a wave and disappeared when the driver closed the door. The black car with its tinted windows pulled out of the driveway, and Lainey watched until it made the turn off their road and out of her sight. She sat down on the steps and stared off into the distance.

Seeing him off took a lot out of her. It was hard to pretend she wasn’t going to miss the hell out of him, but she didn’t want him to feel horrible about taking these infrequent business trips when they

were part of his job. This time it was a little easier, but the look in his eyes dug into her soul. She knew he wanted to say more than he had. She wiped a stray tear off her cheek and sighed. The past few weeks had been a test of her emotions, and right now they seemed to be getting the better of her. A familiar shiny red Dodge Intrepid turned onto her dead-end road and drove straight to her driveway. She got to her feet as her friends climbed out.

“No time for moping.” Sadie brushed right past her into the house.

“She’s already had three cups of coffee this morning,” Karen said, and Amy and Jillian laughed.

“Are you packed yet?” Sadie yelled from inside.

“No!” Lainey yelled back as the four of them headed inside.

“Shit. She’s not going to like that.” Amy was right on the money with that assumption.

The second she stepped inside, Sadie practically dragged her upstairs. With the five of them digging through her drawers and closet, they had her bag packed in under an hour. Half of that time had been spent arguing over what she should wear for the ceremony. They’d finally all agreed on a light blue and silver dress with silver pumps. Amy took her bag out to the car while Karen shoved her toward the bathroom to shower and dress.

Lainey made it quick since she didn’t want too much time alone to think. She needed the chatter her friends would provide to keep her thoughts off of what could go wrong, and on how their plan was going to off without a hitch. Maybe the more she heard it, the more she would believe it.

* * * *

Jace only had a few minutes before his flight boarded. He wanted to talk to Lainey one more time. She was probably back in bed, and all he wanted was to be there with her. He dialed his cell phone and waited.

“Cannon-Miles residence, Amy speaking, how can I help you?” Amy’s perky tone made him smile.

“Hey there, Amy. Where’s my fiancée?” He shouldn’t have been surprised that at least one of her friends had stopped by this morning.

“In the shower. Us girls are going to take her out for brunch and some shopping.” He was always amazed at how fast she talked and how the six of them rallied around one another.

“That’s good, I guess.” He was glad someone was there for her.

“Yeah, we hate it when she sits around moping because you’re gone.” That Amy wasn’t pulling any punches this morning made him wonder if she wasn’t a morning person, or if she was just screwing with him.

“I hate that she misses me.” But at the same time it felt good to know she loved him so much.

“I’m so sure.” Amy’s sarcastic tone had him smiling.

“Hey, I love her. Every little thing about her turns me on, and what hurts her, hurts me.” He had a feeling he’d just shared a little too much.

Amy laughed out loud then said, “I’ll make sure to tell her that, preferably in front of my brothers.”

“Why in front of your brothers?” It wasn’t as if they’d care about how much he loved Lainey.

“Oh, they just love to hear all that gushy love stuff coming from a guy.” Amy sounded like she was trying not to laugh.

She had to be joking because her brothers didn’t come off as the sensitive types. “Really?”

“Yeah, they’ll never let you live it down.” Her laughter came through loud and clear.

“You are a brat.” An announcement came over the loud speaker. His flight was ready for boarding. “My flight is about to board. Do me a favor and tell Lainey I’ll call tonight around eight-thirty, okay?”

“You got it,” Amy said and disconnected the call.

Jace turned off his phone and joined the others waiting in line to board the plane. This was going to be a long trip. Well, not really. A week wasn't that long. He knew Lainey would be on his mind the whole time he was gone. They'd talk daily, but he guessed it would only make the misery of her not being with him grow stronger.

His only consolation came from knowing Lainey would be missing him, too. Hopefully Gage's theory about them needing some space so she could get over whatever held her back was right. When he got back he'd take her out to dinner and ask her to set a date. If she said no, he had no idea what he'd do. *Am I ready to walk away if she isn't ready?* No fucking way. He asked her to marry him and that meant he was in it for the long haul, "Til Death Do Us Part," and all that. Damn it, he hoped like hell she'd be ready when he came home, otherwise he may lose his mind while he waited for her.

Chapter Six

Sadie drove the rental car into the parking garage way faster than any normal personal would. Lainey wasn't the only one holding on for dear life, either. She may have some explaining to do later about the marks Amy was no doubt leaving on her thigh where she was digging her fingers in. The car whipped around the corner, tossing them all to one side. Karen fell against her, and the momentum pushed her into Amy, who got squished between them and the door. Lainey glanced at Jillian, who had wisely chosen to ride in the front. Her eyes were squeezed shut, and her hands were braced on the dashboard. Lucky for them, Sadie spotted a vacant spot and pulled into it. Unfazed by her own driving, Sadie shut the car off and climbed out. The rest of them weren't so quick to move.

Karen readjusted her glasses and let out a loud breath. "I'm driving us back to the airport."

"No arguments here," Amy said as she opened her door and got out.

"Her driving has only gotten wilder since she did the article on NASCAR racers." Jillian wasn't complaining, more just stating an obvious fact.

"Maybe we should take away her keys." Lainey climbed out of the car and rolled her shoulders as she walked to the back of the car.

"Or find her a man to burn up the sheets with so she'll redirect her energy," Amy said, and they all smothered their laughter.

Amy may have been kidding, but Lainey thought the idea wasn't so crazy. Sadie had been single for a while. Hell, they'd all been single until Jace had entered the picture. Since then, her friends had

dated on and off, but none of the guys seemed to have Jace's staying power. It made Lainey a little sad, because she wanted her friends happy.

"Can you all stop whining about my driving and grab your bags?" Sadie stood beside the open trunk glaring at them.

"Instead of getting mad, you could just attempt not to drive so fast." Amy grabbed her hot pink duffle bag and stepped aside.

"Girls," Karen said in her strictest teacher voice as she grabbed her bag and headed toward the hotel, "now isn't the time to start arguing. We have a wedding to get underway."

"Oh my god!" Lainey's squeal had them all coming to a stop. "Has anyone heard from Dianne since we landed?"

"I checked on her flight when we were at the airport. They hadn't landed yet." Jillian's laughter sounded loud and harsh bouncing off the concrete walls. "I can't believe Gage actually forced her to fly with him."

"What?" Amy had said he had come up with a plan, but she hadn't mentioned forcing Dianne to go along with it.

"Honey, she didn't mean it like that." Karen shot Jillian a look before turning back to Lainey. "Gage's plan was perfect, and Dianne knew it, so she went along willingly."

Sadie sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't see the problem with her spending some time with a bunch of hot guys."

"I think it's one guy in particular that Dianne's not happy spending time with, but I agree it might do her some good."

"Honey, relax." Karen smiled as she patted Lainey on the shoulder. "We all would have been willing to take that bullet for you, but Gage wanted Dianne, and we weren't in any position to bargain."

"Whatever. Next time we do something like this, I call dibs on the hot guys," Jillian said, and they all laughed.

Lainey joined them, but she knew she owed them all for helping her with this. Now it sounded like she was going to owe Dianne really big. Lainey felt guilty just for asking her to spend time with Gage.

Anyone else could see the two of them had some kind of connection, but they were fighting it. Okay, Dianne was fighting it, and Gage seemed like he wanted her give up. Lainey hoped one day she would, even if only for a few hours, so Dianne could see what she was denying herself by keeping him at arm's length. Dianne swore there was nothing between them. Maybe if she just spent one night with him and still thought she should walk away, Lainey and everyone else would believe it.

The five of them crammed into the elevator with their bags. The chances they'd run into Jace in the lobby were pretty slim. According to his itinerary, he was supposed to be taking a tour of the proposed site for the golf course. Still, they weren't taking any chances. Sadie left the four of them huddled by the elevator while she checked them into the suite they'd all be sharing. Lainey watched her make her way through the crowd milling about and to the check-in counter.

Amy nudged her in the side with her elbow. "What's the chance they're here for the same reason?"

The group of women she pointed to were all tall, skinny, and wearing skimpy little shorts and tight T-shirts with high-heeled sandals. Getting married was probably the last thing on their minds right now. They struck her as women on the prowl. She shook her head and turned her attention back to Sadie.

A few years ago, that could have been the six of them. They hadn't had a wild weekend in long time. Would her marriage prevent it from ever happening again? She didn't think Jace would mind her and her friends blowing off some steam. After all, he'd gone off with his buddies a few weeks ago to play in some golf tournament and she hadn't complained. Hell, she'd even bought him a new driver.

Now, though, Lainey couldn't help but wonder if women like that came on to Jace when he was at places like this. Lainey trusted Jace, so she wasn't worried about him taking any of them up on whatever they might offer. Still, he was a good-looking guy and it wasn't like

there was a ring on his finger yet, but if everything went as planned, she'd be rectifying that in just a few short hours.

A group of guys in khaki shorts and polo shirts standing beside Sadie at the desk broke out into riotous laughter. Sadie and the woman she was talking to both shook their heads. The guys just kept laughing. They were talking to a young guy with a smile that never left his lips even when he was talking. Lainey thought it was a bit creepy. As if feeling them all staring at her, Sadie turned and smiled at them.

A few minutes later, Sadie returned, and the five of them dashed across the lobby to the bank of elevators that would take them past the casino floors and up to their room. The second the doors slid closed, Lainey felt a sense of relief wash over her. Step one of their plan was almost complete. Once Dianne and Gage showed up with the groomsmen, they could move on to step two. That's where things were going to get a bit trickier. Her friends understood the need for secrecy, which meant they would stay in their room until tonight. Hopefully, somehow Gage was going to be able to find a way to keep the guys from striking out into the casino for a little action. It would totally suck for Jace to run into one of them and have the whole thing blow up in their faces.

Jillian softly stroked her arm. "Lain, you okay?"

"Yeah." She gave her what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Actually, I'm feeling pretty good right now."

"Then now's probably not the best time to tell you that you forgot your suitcase downstairs," Jillian said.

"Shit." She reached for the buttons to stop the elevator and send them back downstairs.

Amy grabbed her arm and pulled it back. "It'll be faster to go upstairs and call down to the front desk. I'm sure they can have someone bring it up."

“You kept all your important stuff in your purse, right?” She knew Karen was just making sure she wasn’t going to be totally fucked if the bag disappeared.

“Of course, but all my clothes are in there.” It had taken her hours to pick out the perfect outfit for tonight.

“Honey, it’ll be fine.” She could read Amy better than anyone, and she didn’t believe what she was saying.

The bell dinged, and the elevator doors opened. Lainey dashed into the hall, a little irked her friends weren’t moving faster. She looked back and saw them all fussing with their bags and almost laughed. With a loud grunt, Sadie exited the elevator and led them down the hall. Once inside, Lainey ran to the phone. Her bag, as she feared, was not where she had left it. The concierge was going to have someone look for it and contact her shortly.

“It’s gone.” She heard the tremble in her voice, but somehow she managed to ward off any tears.

“Okay. I will not have this wedding ruined by a lost suitcase.” Sadie tossed her bag onto the bed and opened the folder the concierge had given her. “The spa is one floor up. Amy, get her up there and pampered.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Amy knew it would be useless to disagree when Sadie was in delegation mode.

“I have a few last minute details to take care of. I’ll go see what I can do about your bag. You guys know what to do.” She handed Jillian and Karen each an envelope.

“Spa?” Lainey didn’t mind taking the time to go get her hair done, but that was really as far as she went.

She kept her nails clean and short, but she preferred to keep them unpolished. In her line of work, there was always a chance of ending up with colorful spots from the frosting, which meant scrubbing, so nail polish just didn’t last. Lainey didn’t wear much makeup, either, unless she was going out somewhere special. Jace had once told her she looked younger without it. At twenty-eight years old, she was

nearing the dreaded thirty year mark, so it had been a real jolt to her self-esteem.

“You’re going to get the works, including a massage. It’s our gift to you and Jace.” Jillian’s smile was big enough to make her nervous.

Though she was usually smiling, this kind of smile meant she was up to something. Lainey had seen it before, and most of the time she was right there with her. Being on the receiving end didn’t feel very good. There could be a number of things Jillian might have planned, and with the others on her side, Lainey was probably screwed.

Once they got upstairs, she would have to find out exactly what “the works” meant. Her friends had obviously made some adjustments to their plans and not told her about them, but she figured since they’d done so much, she should let them have some fun. Hopefully, Jace would like whatever they had in store for her. Or them, as the case might be.

Chapter Seven

Lainey and Amy had spent the past two hours getting pampered, which, in some ways, had felt like being tortured. She'd scrubbed from head to toe and waxed in private areas. When Amy read her the list of amenities the spa had, they both had burst out laughing at the section dedicated to getting your Betty ready. They offered the standard waxing as well, but they had specialties like trimming and shaping, not to mention dying. Lainey had laughed at some of the suggestions Amy had made, but she'd chosen a heart design she hoped Jace would find cute.

Jillian and Karen had disappeared for a little while, but eventually they had joined them. Sadie, however, was still off on some secret mission. She had called to let them know Dianne had arrived and everything was going fine. Her parting command was for them not to worry about anything, and Lainey had taken her orders to heart. So now here she was, feeling shiny and tranquil. Thankfully, the elevator that had taken them from the spa to their floor had been empty. Lainey would have felt awkward enough wandering the halls wearing her underwear and a robe, but she wasn't even wearing her underwear. Sadie hadn't been able to find her bag, so she'd had some sexy lingerie delivered to the spa for her.

The soft, silky, gold-tinted material with lots of scalloped-edged lace was far from the serviceable cotton bra and panties she normally wore. So much so that Lainey almost balked at putting it on. A part of her, the wild woman inside that yearned to be set free, overrode any apprehensions and scooped up the chance to try something new. The silk and lace felt so good against her skin Lainey promised herself

she'd be buying more. And strangely, she found herself standing a little taller.

Still, she didn't like traipsing down the hall practically undressed. It helped that Karen, Jillian, and Amy were in the same state of undress. They had all decided putting the outfits they had worn to the spa back on to walk to their room just to change into their wedding clothes would be a waste of time. Luckily, they didn't have far to go.

Jillian dropped onto the couch with a huge moan. "I feel like a limp noodle."

Karen chose to collapse in the chair. "Tell me about it. The guy who did me must have sucked out every ounce of energy with those masterful hands of his."

"You had a guy?" She nodded and Amy groaned. "Lucky witch. I had a lady that was smaller than me, but she was stronger than an ox."

Lainey walked into the bedroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her blonde hair had been tamed into a funky style that framed her face. Normally at work she wore a baseball hat, so there was no reason to do anything other than brush it back. When she went out she usually spiked it up. This wasn't just different, it gave her an elegance she hadn't really thought she had. A loud knock came from the other room. Lainey ran to the doorway and found her friends standing there staring at the door.

"One of you should answer that." Karen and Jillian nodded at her and gave Amy a shove forward.

"Real mature," Amy chided as she walked toward the door.

Amy opened the door and a deep voice said, "Delivery for Ms. Miles."

"I'll take it." Amy signed a clipboard the guy handed her and gave it back.

He handed her a garment bag. Amy lifted the piece of paper pinned to its front. She smiled and held the bag out to Karen. She took it, read the paper, and then passed the bag onto Jillian. Jillian lifted the sheet and laughed. Lainey's curiosity got the better of her. She

crossed the room and took the bag from Jillian's hands. Lainey took a deep breath and reached for the form. Jillian hadn't launched whatever she had planned yet. This could be it. She ignored the way her fingers quivered slightly as she lifted the piece of paper. Thankfully, Dianne's familiar script was slashed across the page.

Lainey,

I called in some favors.

It's your size. It might not be your style, but it should be. And it's a perfect fit for your body. You are wearing it.

Love, Dianne

With the people Dianne knew, anything could be inside this bag. Lainey rushed into the bedroom and hung the bag on the hook on the bathroom door. Excitement rushed through her as she unzipped the bag. The gold fabric caught the light and shimmered. Gently, she pulled the sides apart. Her breath got stuck in her throat. She ran her fingers over the silky material, surprised at how soft it was.

"You're going to look beautiful in that." Amy's voice was barely above a whisper.

"I can't believe she did this." Happy tears filled Lainey's eyes, threatening to ruin the barely-there makeup treatment she'd gotten.

"Hey, we don't have time for any of that." Karen handed her a tissue and pulled her back into the bedroom.

"Yeah, we're on a schedule." Jillian's hands were waving in the air as she talked. "I'm not going to be the one to let you guys piss Sadie off."

"Wow." Amy pulled a pair of shiny gold strappy shoes out of the bottom of the bag.

Good lord, the heels had to be at least three inches high. With one wrong step, she was going to break her neck, but she'd look fucking hot doing it.

Karen took back the bottle of water she'd given her. "Okay, let's get you dressed."

"But you guys need to get ready, too." Lainey's comment fell on deaf ears as they proceeded to use her as a dress-up doll.

* * * *

Jace's head had just hit the pillow when the phone rang. He rolled over and scooped the receiver up, hoping it would be Lainey. "Hello."

"Mr. Cannon?" a feminine voice, not Lainey's, asked.

"Yes." The single word came out a sigh as he dropped back onto the pillows.

"A message was left for you at the front desk, sir. Shall I send it up?" she asked.

His interest was caught now. "Can you read it to me?"

"Sure." Jace heard the paper ruffle. "Mr. Cannon, your presence is requested for an evening of dining and dancing. A representative will meet you in lobby at eight sharp."

The invitation didn't sound like a request at all. Sometimes the firm's clients wanted to get to know them on a personal level. Usually he had no problem playing along, but tonight he was looking forward to calling Lainey. He'd been hoping he could entice her into burning up the phone lines with him. A little phone sex would keep him going until he got his hands on her again.

He glanced at the clock and barely held back a groan. "Well, that doesn't give me much time, does it?"

It was a rhetorical question, but the girl laughed and said, "No, sir."

"Thank you." What else could he say? It wasn't like it was her fault his plans were shot.

"You're welcome," she said and hung up, leaving him listening to the dial tone.

Jace hung up and dialed the house, needing to at least hear Lainey's voice for a few minutes. "You've reached Lainey and Jace. Neither of us is here, so leave a message."

He left a quick "I love you," then dialed her cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. Shit. He wasn't supposed to call until eight-thirty. He didn't expect her to be sitting around waiting for him to call, though tonight he would have given anything for that to be the case. She probably went out with her friends or was at the store. He left her another "I love you," and disconnected the call. He wasn't happy about going to schmooze the clients and whoever they'd brought with them, but it was part of the beast, so he got up to go get ready.

After a quick shower, he opened the bag Lainey had bought him a few months ago for his suits. His heart stuttered for a few seconds before minute before it took off on a swift pace. Pinned to the lapel of his black jacket was a white envelope the size greeting cards came in. Standing there in the black boxer briefs she had picked out, he reached for it. Jace unpinned it, careful not to rip it. He lifted the unsealed flap and slid the paper out. Two photos fell to the floor.

Jace looked down and all he could do was stare. There were two snapshots of Lainey. One with her lying on their bed, propped against the pillows, barely covered by a sheet. In the other she was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wearing one of his white T-shirts and a come-hither smile. Jace bent over and picked up the pictures. He ran his thumbs along the edge and groaned. His body reacted the way it always did when she teased him. Jace sat on the edge of the bed and opened the piece of paper.

*Hey Hon,
Just wanted to say I love you.
Love Always, Lainey*

God, the woman was miles away and she'd still managed to give him a raging hard-on. How the hell was he supposed to go wine and dine clients with these pictures rolling around in his head? He dropped onto his back with a loud groan.

Chapter Eight

The small room, which was probably some kind of meeting room, had no furniture and was perfect for their small group. There was a red carpet runner that started at the door and went straight down the center of the room. It ended between where Lainey stood beside her friends, her heart racing in her chest, and where Jace's friends stood across from them. Dianne and Gage were standing right where she and Jace would soon be.

The plan was for her to stay at the back of their line until Jace came in. She would be out of his line of sight, which would hopefully ramp up his suspense at not knowing what the hell was going on. Then she would move into her place in front of the lady that looked just like a young Ann Margret, who would be performing the ceremony for them. Nothing was happening until Jace got there, and hopefully Sadie would get there first. *Where the hell is she?* Lainey leaned forward and peeked around Amy, Karen, and Jillian at Dianne, hoping to catch her eye. She was smiling, but it was far from the smile that graced thousands of glossy magazine pages. The dead giveaway was the tiny little lines at the corners of her mouth. Gage stared at Dianne and she was doing her best to avoid looking at him.

Gage, like the other guys, was dressed in a black suit and dress shirt. His shirt was the same color maroon as Dianne's dress. The other guys all wore white shirts. The light pink rosebud boutonnieres pinned to their lapels matched the ones mixed in with the other flowers in the women's bouquets. The guys all looked great, and the no-tie theme they all had fit the mood Lainey wanted. She wanted everyone relaxed and ready to have some fun.

Troy leaned forward and whispered something to Gage and slapped him on the shoulder. The look Gage turned on Dianne was filled with lust. It was so blatant even a monk could have read it. Dianne, however, chose to ignore it. Or maybe she was so determined to believe there was nothing between them she just didn't see it?

Lainey didn't know how much more of this waiting she could take. She leaned back and glanced around the room for a clock, not that she held high hopes of finding one. No one else seemed worried about the slight delay, but then again, they'd all been told they were waiting for Jace. She wasn't exactly sure what they were told, but that was the gist of it. Lainey tapped Jillian on the shoulder.

"Where the hell is Sadie?" Her whisper came out a bit louder and harsher than she'd meant for it to.

Jillian shrugged and leaned toward Karen. Her whisper was so soft Lainey couldn't hear it. Karen glanced at her then turned to Amy. Amy looked toward the door then over at her. She whispered something to Karen, who smiled. Karen leaned into Jillian and whispered something that made her laugh. Lainey never liked playing telephone in school, and she hated it even more now.

"Amy said stop frowning, it's your wedding day." Jillian's amused whisper matched her smile.

Lainey didn't have to force the smile that curved her lips. "Better?"

"Much." Jillian covered her shaking hands with hers. "Sadie is—"

Just at that second a woman's voice filled the air. "Jace Cannon, report to guest services in the main lobby. Your party is waiting."

Lainey turned her hand over and clasped Jillian's, squeezing tightly. This was it. Hopefully in a minute or two, Jace was going to walk through that door and get the surprise of his life. Lainey heard a noise behind her and spun around. Sadie appeared from behind a partitioned wall. Lainey's smile grew so big her cheeks hurt.

"Where were you?" she asked as Sadie enveloped her in a quick hug.

“Securing the groom.” Sadie leaned back and looked her over. “Wow! You look fabulous.”

“Thanks. So do you.” Lainey was always amazed by the way Sadie could go from looking like the girl next door in her jeans and T-shirt to looking like she could be a movie star.

“Ready?” Sadie gave her a serious look.

Lainey nodded. “I’ve been ready for months.”

“Good, ’cause there he is.” Lainey turned so quick she bobbed on her heels. Luckily, Sadie steadied her.

Jace was standing there holding the door open. Everyone had turned to look at him. Though Lainey was doing her best to hide behind her friends, she could see him perfectly. With his black suit and white shirt, he matched the other groomsmen. He looked from Gage to Dianne a few times before he started to stride forward. His lips kind of curved into a smile, but his raised eyebrows told her he was confused. Gage met him about halfway down the aisle and pinned a yellow rosebud to his lapel. Lainey held her breath, expecting him to ask what was going on, but before she could see what happened, Sadie yanked her backward, not stopping until they were behind the wall she’d popped out of earlier.

“What are you doing?” Lainey tried to pull out of her grasp, but Sadie was stronger than she looked.

“Change in plans.” Sadie kept tugging her toward a door. “There’s no way you’re not getting to walk down the aisle.

“What?” Lainey gave up fighting and let her drag her out of the room.

They exited into a dark hall, which Sadie quickly hauled her down. It opened up into the main hall, and Sadie led her to the door of the room they’d just left. The cute guy standing there smiled at Sadie and she nodded, and Lainey heard a light romantic tune from inside the room. The guy opened the doors, and Sadie hooked her arm through hers, and together they stepped inside.

Everyone was facing the door, watching them come in. Lainey's gaze went straight to Jace. He still looked a little shocked, but happily. Sadie escorted her down the aisle, keeping her from running the way she wanted to. She took a quick glance at her smiling friends and gave them a not-so-subtle thumbs up. Jace laughed, and she winked at him. Sadie deposited her at his side and moved to stand with her friends.

The ministress, or whatever she was called, launched into the "Dearly Beloved" speech. It was the only traditional part of the ceremony. When she got to the part about who gives this woman to this man, her friends shouted, "We do" in unison. Everyone laughed, including the Ann Margret lookalike. The rest of the ceremony went by in a blur. When she told Jace to kiss his bride, he did.

He swept her into his arms and kissed the breath out of her. Lainey was so stunned the hoots and hollers from their friends barely made it through. Suddenly they were swept up in hugs and high fives. Jace's hand never left hers. Lainey wondered if he thought she was going to run away.

"The guys and I made reservations for all of us in one of the highest-rated restaurants here for a little celebration." Gage slapped Jace on the back and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"Then you two can escape to enjoy yourselves in private while we roam the casino and party until the sun comes up," Dianne added, and as swept up in the moment as Lainey was, she didn't miss the way Dianne avoided the heated glare Gage sent her way.

Over the next three hours, Lainey and Jace ate and danced with their friends. She noticed Dianne danced with all the groomsmen except Gage, who wasn't looking very happy. Jillian and Karen were doing their best to keep him occupied, but Lainey had a feeling Dianne wasn't getting away that easily.

Once their waitress found out they had just been married, a small cake appeared. If that wasn't enough, the DJ announced them as Mr. and Mrs. Cannon for the first time and asked them to grace the dance

floor for a special dance. Amy and Slade were the first couple to join them. They made an odd pair, but when she pointed it out to Jace he laughed and told her not to judge a book by its cover. Then he kissed her, wiping thoughts of anyone but him from her mind. Finally, Jace suggested they escape and let their friends carry on the celebration for them. Lainey agreed, but there was one thing she needed to do first. She managed to get all of her friends together and a round of drinks delivered.

"I just wanted to make a quick toast." She lifted her glass high, and her friends all joined her. "To the best friends a girl could ever have."

"Well, it wasn't like we could let you live in *sin* forever." Jillian flashed her a teasing smile.

"You asked for it." They all looked at her with curious expressions she wanted to laugh at. "I was going to wait to do this, but since you delivered that little jibe, I've decided there's no time like the present."

"For what?" Amy asked, taking a sip of her drink.

"A dare." They all laughed, except for her. "I dare you all to choose a man and let yourself enjoy him."

"What?" Sadie's voice was a mere squeak.

"Come on. You guys aren't going to be a bunch of cowards, are you?" Their eyes narrowed on her, and she knew she had them. "Just pick a guy you want. Doesn't matter who he is, just go for it. It doesn't have to be forever."

"You're serious?" Karen's tone was full of amusement.

"I am." She nodded. "Now, who is woman enough to take me up on it?"

"I'm in," Amy said.

It was followed by a chorus of, "Me too."

"Good. You have six months," Lainey said as they clinked their glasses to seal the deal, "and the one who comes in last, or chickens out, will be the first one I ask to puppy-sit."

Their loud laughter had heads turning in their direction. Jace still had a lot of surprises coming his way. Lainey and her friends hugged again. When they finally let her go, she joined Jace where he was waiting, and they headed for the door. Someday soon, probably sometime later tonight, she was going to have to explain her reason for getting married like this to Jace. She knew he'd understand, but it was important to make sure he knew it had nothing to do with him. After all, it wasn't like she didn't want everyone to know they were married. In fact, as soon as they got home, she planned on putting the biggest announcement she could buy in the local newspaper. This was the best thing she'd done in her life so far, and she wanted everyone to know it. After that, she would go see her mother and break the news. To say she was going to be pissed would be an understatement, but hopefully, in time, she'd get over it.

"Happy?" she asked, curling into his side as the elevator doors slid shut.

"Do you really need to ask?" The twinkle in his eyes was enough for her, but, she wanted him to say it out loud, so she nodded. "I'm amazed, thrilled, and so touched that our friends pulled this all together. Mostly I'm just glad you didn't change your mind about wanting to marry me."

"Never crossed my mind." She pressed a teasing little kiss to his lips, pulling away before he could take it any further. "I just needed to do it my way, not the way everyone else would have wanted."

"By everyone else you mean your mother and aunts." Lainey nodded, glad he got the point without her having to tell him.

His laughter surprised her enough that she started to pull from his embrace. He didn't let go. Instead, he pulled her closer and spun her so she was between him and the wall, unable to go anywhere, which made her want to laugh since there wasn't anywhere for her to run to.

"I wish you had just told me," he said in his low sexy tone as he leaned in and pressed soft kisses across her cheek to her neck.

She could barely think, but she managed to get one word out on her sigh. “Why?”

“Because I’ve been trying to figure out how to wield the suggestions I’ve been getting from my mother.” He chuckled and his warm breath on her neck had her melting against him.

Lainey ran her hands up his chest, looping them over his shoulders. “Well, now that we’ve taken the leap, shouldn’t we get to work on that other little project we discussed? You know they’re bound to start asking for grandchildren. We may as well beat them to the punch.”

“Now?” The squeak in his voice was so cute.

“Yes, right now.” She ran one of her hands down his chest, over his belt and lower, cupping him in her hand to show him exactly how serious she was.

“Okay!” Lainey laughed as he yanked her out of the elevator and down the hall to his room.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When it comes to writing Rita has always made up stories to entertain her kids. As they grew up she began writing romances to entertain herself. Luckily she has a wonderful supportive family, and friends that are willing to sit there and listen to her ramble on about what her characters have done, or are about to do.

When she's not totally caught up in getting her characters and scenes fleshed out she can usually be found with her nose stuck in a book, or snuggled up on the couch with her hubby or one of her kids watching a movie. She enjoys spending time with her big noisy family, because they provide her with lots of ideas for her stories. Rita is a proud member of Romance Divas and enjoys visiting the Romantic Times forum.

Also by Rita Sawyer

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