

Bridesmaid Day

Eric stretched on the bed beside his fiancée, waking her. Donna opened her eyes to bright sunlight streaming through the white slatted blinds. *A beautiful fall morning and a wonderful day.* In a few hours, she would help her best friend prepare for her wedding and stand at the front of the church with her. She sighed at the thought.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Eric asked, turning over on his side and reaching up to brush an errant blonde curl from Donna's face. A strand of his long strawberry blonde hair fell in front of his shoulder.

Donna giggled and pulled the strand gently so that he would bring his mouth closer for a good morning peck. "I think you can afford more than a penny."

Eric shook his head so that the sunlight caught his thick hair and beard. He was clean-shaven when they'd first met a year ago, but he had grown it back, and then some. He kept things neat, but his handsome features reminded Donna of a Scottish laird of old. Sometimes she wished he would act more like a laird, more... forceful. She could easily see him in the cast of *Outlander*,

and what she wouldn't give to play the maiden who caught his eye! *You've got a lot more than his eye*, her inner self chided.

"I need another job before that." Eric chuckled, not really worried. A talented stonemason, he'd recently finished one large job on the new city hall downtown, but nothing loomed on the horizon in the foreseeable future. "You'll find my life is one of feast or famine. Here in a bit, I'll have cycled back to famine. At least *you've* got a steady job, babe."

Donna wriggled from his embrace to get dressed, feeling his eyes on her as she walked to the closet for her robe. The bedroom was decorated for her and by her, in pastels and florals, feminine and completely suited to her perky disposition. The couple had consummated their relationship some months earlier in the room on the *other* side of the wall, however—the room where they had enjoyed quite a night of play just hours before. *That* room was decorated quite differently.

As Donna made a quick breakfast, Eric pulled on jeans and winced slightly. Donna's crop had been delightfully firm last night. Feeling the tenderness brought it all back, and he smiled as he readjusted himself in order to zip up the jeans. As much as he'd like to, he knew better than to call to Donna and suggest they return to bed in *either* room. She was on a mission. Bridesmaid Day was circled prominently on the calendar in the kitchen, and she had been counting down for weeks. There would be no time for an encore performance in the red room until late that night.

Pouring a steaming cup of coffee, Eric sat down in one of the dinette chairs and watched Donna move from cabinet to stove, to refrigerator and back. *Jessica's getting married today*, he thought. There had been a time when he had assumed that whenever that day came, *he* would be the one standing at the altar to meet her. They had dated a long time. They had seemed destined for marriage. Eric stared off into the distance, remembering.

The Stonemason and the Lady

Donna cleared her throat loudly. "Ahem. I can afford more than a penny."

Eric smiled and took a sip of his coffee. Just the way he liked it, black, no sweetener. "I was just thinking of the day we met."

Donna smiled as she expertly flipped the cheese omelet. "I was standing in line at the hot dog stand—"

"And you turned around and said hi because you are just naturally friendly, and I told you I'd come downtown to surprise my girlfriend for lunch, and then we—"

"Sat by the fountain and talked and laughed and ate our hot dogs and you told me you'd seen her with another man at a restaurant, so you didn't follow through, but—"

"I knew that something magic had happened when we met, and I broke up with Jessica that very night, over... if memory serves, a damn good pizza."

Donna slid the omelet onto a plate and brought it and two forks to the little table. Donna took a sip of Eric's coffee and wrinkled her nose before jumping back up to pour her own cup, doctoring it with copious amounts of cream and sugar before taking her seat again. "And I didn't know your last name and you didn't know mine, but somehow Jessica figured out that I was the girl you had met and were so delighted by and that you were the man I met and couldn't stop gushing over. She gave you my number, wished us well, said goodbye, and drove off into the sunset. Or to her apartment. One of those."

They clicked their coffee mugs together for a toast. "And I called you as soon as she left my apartment and the rest is history," Eric said. "I've never looked back, Donna. I've told you—there was *always* something missing with Jessica. She knew it; I knew it. We never talked about it, but we were definitely not on the same page."

Donna batted her long eyelashes over her upheld fork. "But we are!" *Well, almost.*

After dating chastely for several months, Eric had found Donna's notes one night for an article for the magazine at which both she and Jessica Daniels worked. *Our City* would profile an underground S&M club, one of those open secrets that no one bothers with unless there's a problem. While researching the article, Donna had been allowed to interview, visit, and photograph—all very discreetly. In the process, she discovered what had been missing in her own sex life, at least theoretically. She'd taken it no further than some planning and a few purchases—that is, until she led Eric into her red room that fateful night.

Months later, the red room was a regular "thing" for them. Last night had been a typical evening of rough play, with Donna as the dominatrix. In fact, after the first time, when Eric had dutifully and enthusiastically taken orders from her as she walked him through tying her up, whipping her with the crop, handcuffing her to the special bed in the red room, and finally making love to her, he seemed to be content with being the sub to her Domme. She enjoyed the fact that she was able to give him what he wanted, but lately, she found herself wishing he would take a more... *active... role. Oh well. No relationship is perfect. We'll sort it out.*

Unbidden, a thought came to mind. She'd kidded Jessica about wanting too much from a man, but deep down she hadn't wanted to settle for less than the very best, either. *Is that what I'm doing? Am I settling? Shouldn't I tell him what I want? How I feel? I am in the communication industry, after all.* She also realized that for most of her life, she had kept her truest, deepest feelings sheltered and protected, far from prying eyes and probing questions.

Eric was frowning. "Are you okay, babe?"

Nothing must spoil Bridesmaid Day. "Of course! More than okay. I think I'm just a little jittery about the ceremony. I want everything to be perfect for Jessica and Worth."

Eric leaned over and kissed her, tasting of cheese and coffee. "It will be, I have no doubt. The only people I've ever seen as

happy together as those two are, are you and me. I'm glad you're going to be her maid of honor. There was a time I was afraid you might lose the friendship because of me, but look at you! Best friends, maid of honor. Think of it as a trial run when you're walking slowly down the aisle. It can be a practice run for our own wedding in a few months. Hopefully."

Donna covered her concerns with a quick smile. They had talked about getting married sometime after the first of the year, but just a week or so ago, she'd told Jessica they might move up the date. Eric was moving in with her soon—which was true—and she'd blurted to Jessica that they were going to be married just a few weeks after that. *Why did I do that? Do I not want her there? For all I know, their honeymoon will last an entire month.* Maybe they should go to the justice of the peace, anyway. No guests at all. But she'd always dreamed of a small ceremony, at least. Nothing fancy, but special.

First things, first. Get Jessica married. Move Eric in. We'll figure it out.

"What do you think?" Jessica Daniels twirled in front of the full-length mirror in the dressing area of the church. She wore a cowl-necked sheath of pure white. Jessica and Donna might be best friends and co-workers, perfectly suited in many ways, but there was not much resemblance in their appearance. Age-wise, yes, but while Jessica had an hourglass figure, generous bust, and flowing brown hair, Donna was more athletically built, slender, with a mass of unruly blonde curls.

Jessica's wedding gown was long sleeved—a good choice with autumn's chill outside. Each sleeve came to a point on the hand that reached all the way to the fingers in what Donna thought was quite striking and sophisticated. The back was low and also draped. There was a modest train. Donna would be worrying

about tripping if it were her, but Jessica exuded nothing but confidence, poise, and joy.

Donna smiled at her friend's reflection in the mirror. "You look absolutely beautiful."

The other attendants were from Jessica's new family, now sisters by marriage: Kari and the increasingly pregnant Layla. Jessica's mother, a widow, had recently married a long-time friend, the city's newly retired fire chief—who was Kari's father and Layla's father-in-law. Chet Henderson would have the privilege of walking Jessica down the aisle. He'd known her since she was a little girl riding on her father's shoulders—a fellow firefighter who had perished in a blaze just two years earlier.

Kari acted as make-up artist and Donna had to admit, even though it was more makeup than she normally wore, each woman looked exquisite. Donna didn't know what half the items in Kari's make-up case were even called, but she had sat patiently and frozen, letting Kari brush here, powder there.

The attendants' differently-styled dresses were all made from the same teal silk by a local seamstress Worth's mother had recommended. As maid of honor, Donna's cowl-necked sheath most closely mirrored the bride's dress, but it fell just below the knees with a layered skirt. Kari's had a waist, puffed sleeves and full skirt, while Layla's empire waist gown accommodated her growing belly.

Layla giggled. "Thank you for not picking some god-awful color or design. I can actually wear this again. I feel like a princess." She did a little twirl herself, knocking over a lamp but catching it before it fell.

"Careful, little mama," Kari sighed. "You'll make my niece or nephew dizzy." She dearly loved her sister-in-law but sometimes she felt she had to mother her a bit.

There was a soft knock on the door before it opened. Carol Henderson entered, radiant in the same ivory lace dress in which

she'd been wed some weeks before. Jessica had assured her that it would be completely appropriate for the day.

"Oh, ladies. You look wonderful!" Carol exclaimed. "I wanted to give my daughter one last hug before I'm seated." She threw her arms lovingly but carefully around Jessica. "I don't want to smudge your makeup, sweetheart—Kari, you should change vocations. You could be a make-up artist to the stars." She turned back to the bride. "I just wanted to hug you one final time as Jessica Daniels. When next we hug, you'll be Mrs. Vincent!" Normally calm and collected, Carol's face twisted into a happy but emotional mess.

"Don't cry, Mom, or you'll get me started too," Jessica said softly.

The other women instinctively backed up a few steps to give mother and daughter a little privacy in the small room, each one lost in thought. Each of them had lost their own mothers—Kari's mother had been Carol's friend for many years before dying of cancer. Layla's mother had died when she was quite young. And Donna's—*no, I won't even think about that today.*

"Your father would be so proud of you," Carol was saying. "He loved to talk about walking you down the aisle one day, but Chet is thrilled you asked him."

"Help me with the veil?" Jessica smiled over to Kari, who was standing the closest. Her stepsister carefully removed the simple veil from its little stand and handed it to Carol, who gently rested it on Jessica's head.

They all oohed and ahhed before Carol squealed as she checked her wristwatch. "Yikes! It's time to start, ladies. I'd better go. Oh, and you will be impressed with the men. I stopped by to hug Worth before I came here, and they *all* look hot!"

They laughed as Carol left, leaving the door ajar so they could hear "their" music when the organist played it. The rehearsal had gone smoothly the night before and no one seemed

particularly nervous, least of all the bride-to-be. Jessica had no second thoughts whatsoever, it appeared.

Watching her friend, Donna thought, *I hope I'll feel that way on my wedding day*. As Kari and Layla picked up their bouquets and took last minute looks in the mirror, Donna smoothed the back of Jessica's veil. Soon they would join Chet in the church's narthex and prepare for their grand entrance. Eric had already taken his seat on the bride's side, she was sure. He'd promised to sit where she could find him easily in the sea of faces. He'd known Jessica for so long, it made sense he'd want to be on her side.

Jessica didn't have a huge family, but all of their magazine co-workers, plus friends from school and former jobs, would be there for the joyous occasion. Worth's side would likely have fewer, but more exotic, guests. After a lifetime of traveling the globe to escape his troubled past, there might be any number of foreigners in the group.

"I'm so happy for you," Donna whispered to her friend. "Thank you for letting me be part of your special day."

Jessica directed a little air kiss to her so as not to muss her lipstick. "You were my first friend at the magazine, and you are my best friend ever, Donna Radford, soon-to-be-Donna-Brown. You've been with me from the beginning of our relationship—who *else* would be my maid of honor?"

"Remember the flowers?" Donna teased. "I thought they were from Eric, although I had no idea who 'Eric' was."

Almost a year ago to the day, Worth had sent a gorgeous vase of flowers to the magazine office where they worked—where he was the brand new editor, unbeknownst to them—along with a note of apology. Worth had crossed the line in a most delightful and passionate way, from what Jessica had finally divulged. Jessica had *thought* he was Eric at the time.

Donna gave a little smirk, remembering Jessica's implication that Eric was not passionate like the man she'd kissed in the dark-

ness last Halloween at a party. "I should've known then that it wasn't Eric," she'd said.

He's passionate with me, though. You would never guess the things we do in our red room. Never in a million years. Maybe one day she'd show Jessica the room—not to brag about their relationship, certainly, but Donna was fiercely loyal. She wanted Jessica to know that Eric had grown, changed, that they were as well-suited for one another as Jessica and Eric had not been. It was obvious that Jessica still thought of Eric as being unemotional, a bit stiff. *Stiff indeed. Especially when I pull out the cuffs.* She laughed out loud.

"What's so—oh, there's your cue," Jessica said as the organist began playing *Clair de Lune*.

The ladies took a spontaneous deep breath in unison and stepped out into the narthex where Chet was waiting. As they approached, he held out his right elbow for Jessica to hold. "Ladies, you look lovely. Now let's get this show started."

First Kari, then Layla, began their journeys down the aisle. Ahead of them stood Worth, his administrative assistant Skip, and Skip's husband Paul, in gray suits with teal silk ties and handkerchiefs. *They really are hot, Donna thought. But not as hot as Eric!* As she walked down the aisle, her eyes darted this way and that, looking for the strawberry blonde head of hair that she loved.

There! As she approached the pew where Eric sat, he smiled at her and gave her a wink. He'd chosen to sit on the groom's side. *Well played, Eric. Well played.* If she'd thought he had any stubborn feelings for his former girlfriend, that settled things nicely.

Donna walked slowly toward the front, smiling at her boss, Worth Vincent. He looked nothing like Eric, with his shaved head and neat goatee and mustache of dark brown. Eric's mop had gotten long enough that sometimes he wore it pulled back into a neat ponytail, as he did today, and his beard had grown back even redder than his hair. *And sometime next year, you'll be the*

groom standing at the front of the church, Donna thought with pounding heart. And I'll be the bride. I do hope Jessica can be there.

Taking her place by Layla, she nodded to the organist, who flawlessly ended a strain of *Clair de Lune*, paused briefly for effect, and began the familiar strains of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*. Donna felt like her heart would burst as Chet and Jessica began to walk down the aisle. In a few months, it would be her turn. A sudden thought interrupted the moment.

Who will walk me down the aisle?