

# Always the Bridesmaid

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Published by Harlequin Mills & Boon

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# ALWAYS THE BRIDESMAID

BY  
NINA HARRINGTON



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First published in Great Britain 2009  
Harlequin Mills & Boon Limited,  
Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1SR

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ISBN: 978 0 263 86957 6

Set in Times Roman 12¾ on 14 pt  
02-0709-54534

Printed and bound in Spain  
by Litografía Rosés, S.A., Barcelona

## CHAPTER ONE

AMY EDLER had three problems. All female. And all of them were demanding her attention at that very minute—or there would be tears. Added to that, she had a telephone crammed between her shoulderblade and her ear, a bakery full of customers, and the air-conditioning had chosen the hottest day in June to start playing the maracas.

It had been Trixi's idea to offer two of Amy's problems a chance to ice the chocolate cupcakes—a treat for the other girls at the children's home.

Only this was *real* chocolate icing. And these two problems were eleven-years old.

Big mistake.

Huge.

Amy tried to catch Trixi's eye, but her catering student was too busy chatting to the last of the customers for the day to help her judge the best-iced cupcake contest.

She looked down at the trembling lip of the

taller girl, glanced swiftly at the still liquid icing, which had flooded the paper cases and pooled out over the plate, and decided that her phone call could wait.

‘I think these cakes were too warm from the oven. But look at that shine! They look delicious.’

The little girl gave her a warm, closed-mouthed grin and shrugged her shoulders in delight. But then her friend started sniffing. She had decided to freeze the icing to help it set, and now two thick slabs of brown fudge lay on top of each cake.

Amy quickly scooped up the plate, popped it into the microwave for twenty seconds, then spread the now soft luscious frosting into smooth layers.

Their owner’s mouth formed a perfect ‘Wow’, and then broke into a toothy grin.

Amy bent down to whisper. ‘I won’t tell if you don’t. They’re perfect! And well done for thinking ahead.’ She stood up, head high. ‘I don’t think I can judge this icing competition properly today, because of the heat—but how about next time? Was that a yes? Brilliant. Now, I would be in serious trouble if I let you go home like that, so it’s time to wash your fingers. Go on—I’ll guard your cakes!’

She couldn’t help but grin as the delighted little girls joined their pals in a gaggle of excited chatter, filling the room instantly with laughter.

This was just how she had imagined it would be. Her bakery and her kitchen filled with happy children.

A sigh escaped from somewhere deep inside before she swallowed it down.

One day soon.

She knew she could offer a child a loving home. But first she had to pass the assessment process and prove that she could be a responsible single parent before she could even hope to adopt.

Amy dropped her shoulders and gave herself a mental shake. No time to dwell on that dream. Not at six o'clock on a Friday afternoon, when she still had to deal with problem female number three.

Which, in theory, should not have been a problem at all, since her friend Lucy Shaw had gone out of her way to find the most experienced wedding planner in London to organise her big day.

Pity that this planner was not answering any of her telephones.

Amy counted out the beeps on the answering machine. 'Hello, Clarissa, it's Amy Edler here, at Edlers Bakery. Sorry to hassle you, but you did say that you would get back to me about the orchids for the Shaw-Gerard wedding. Please call me as soon as you can.' Then she added a cheery, 'Thank you!'

Amy exhaled a slow calming breath, before

squeezing her eyes tight shut and pressing the cool telephone to her forehead.

*I have the situation under control. The wedding is not until next Saturday.*

*The cake is going to be perfect. The wedding is going to be perfect.*

*I can make sugar orchids in any colour Lucy likes. Not a problem.*

*And I will be transformed from a humble baker into a lovely bridesmaid.*

This was going to have to be her mantra for the next seven days.

Of course it was entirely her own fault for offering to make Lucy's wedding cake in the first place. The perfect cake, as her personal wedding present for two of the best friends she had in this world.

It had to be chocolate, of course. *No dried fruit, thank you. Shudder.*

And decorated with sugar flowers the same colour as Lucy's bouquet—*no sludgy icing to drip on the designer wedding dress.*

And three tiers, made from different types of chocolate—*all organic, of course.*

Thank you for the sleepless nights, Lucy.

A peal of bright girly laughter broke through her thoughts, and Amy opened her eyes as the last girls from her after-school club waved on their way out, their arms laden with cupcakes and muffins, and

their care worker tried her hardest to persuade them to get back to the home for dinner. It was like herding cattle.

‘Make sure some of those make it back!’ Amy called after them.

‘Not a chance. Sorry we can’t stay to clear up,’ the flustered care worker answered.

Amy grinned as the gigglers swept out of the kitchen and into the shop, taking with them the life and energy she loved, and leaving behind... Oh, dear.

With one shake of the head she was on her feet. Time to get busy.

Jared Shaw weaved his way along a pavement crammed with commuters rushing to get home on a hot Friday evening, before taking advantage of a red traffic light to jog across the road between the cars, messenger bikes and cabs to a row of three small shops.

Not that much had changed over the past eighteen years.

The newsagent where he had bought his first car magazines was still there, but the ironmonger who had mended their leaking tap in exchange for one of his father’s silk ties had been replaced by a swish-looking estate agency.

He couldn’t help but smile at the irony of that.

Friends in the trade had laughed out loud when



Haywood and Shaw had bought properties in this part of London. *'No profit there, mate.'*

Well, he had proved them wrong. Many times over.

But it was the last shop in the row he was interested in. Edlers Bakery shone out from the brick and stone surroundings, with its familiar navy and white awning.

How many times had he pressed his nose against the cold glass, jaw slack, gazing at the cream and chocolate treats which might as well have been objects on a distant planet to a boy without the money in his pocket to buy them?

A giggling little girl on a tricycle trundled towards him on the pavement, followed by a man of about his age. She looked so like the young Lucy he caught his breath. Long straight blonde hair, blue eyes, and a smile that could melt the hardest heart.

Jared pushed back his shoulders, sensing the tension.

Perhaps this was a mistake? Too many ghosts lived on these streets.

There was only one person who could have persuaded him to come back to this part of the city.

'It will only take five minutes to pop in and say hello to my pal Amy Edler,' his sister Lucy had said, in her special pleading voice. 'Just to make sure that she's not running herself ragged trying to

organise my wedding. She has enough to do making my cake, and you are going to be in London anyway!’

Right. *Thank you, sis.* He had just worked a ninety-hour week. The last thing he wanted to do was chat to a frilly bridesmaid about wedding cakes when he was already paying for the most expensive wedding planner in the city.

He earned the money, and Lucy and their mother spent it for him.

But when could he ever refuse his baby sister anything?

She was the only girl who knew exactly how to twist him around her little finger! He had somehow agreed to make a detour on his way back to his penthouse apartment from Heathrow airport and make time to chat to her friend Amy, when all he truly wanted was a good Internet connection to catch up with the New York office before they closed for the weekend.

Time to find out if Lucy had been right to trust Amy Edler...

A bell tinkled over his head as Jared swung open the door onto the terracotta-tiled floor of Edlers Bakery—just in time to hold it open for an elderly couple who were still laughing as they thanked him, their hands curled around the handles of Edlers Bakery bags, before chortling their way down the street.

As he turned back to face the counter, his senses were hit with a solid wall of lively chatter, bright lights and the aroma of baked goods. Spices and vanilla, combined with the unique tang of burnt sugar and buttery pastry and fresh-baked bread.

The overall effect was overpowering, compared to the metallic bitter diesel fumes from the black cabs and London buses on the other side of the glass, and as he inhaled a couple of times to steady his senses he picked up some type of perfume—not from the flowers he was carrying. Roses? Oranges?

He glanced around the room, his property developer's brain taking in the cream and navy paintwork broken up by pale wood shelving.

It was a world away from the dingy brown wallpaper and cracked wooden shelves of the old Edlers Bakery he remembered. Yellowing torn posters for flour and fizzy drinks had been replaced with clean smooth walls in warm colours.

The overall effect was modern, stylish, but welcoming. Interesting. He should mention the idea to his design team.

Someone here clearly had an eye for texture and colour.

The bread was laid out behind the counter, but it was the display of cakes and pastries that had been designed to tantalize. Under pristine curved glass was a collection of amazing individual cakes, tarts

and scones which any French patisserie would have been proud of. Most of the trays were almost empty.

Right on cue, the navy curtain swished open, and Jared looked into the brown eyes of a teenage girl in a smart navy apron over a T-shirt decorated with a strange combination of brown and white splodges. A small white badge declared that he was looking at 'Trixi'.

'Hello, handsome. Those for me?'

Jared was so taken aback that she had to gesture towards the bouquet of exotic blooms in his left hand before he realised what she was referring to. He had heard of casual customer service, but this took it to the next level.

'Sorry. No. I'm looking for Miss Amy Edler. Is she available today?'

Without any further warning, Trixi turned away from Jared and bellowed, 'Yo, boss. There's a hottie out here asking for you. With flowers.'

A disembodied voice shouted in return, 'Leave the poor man alone and send him through, please.'

'Amy's in the kitchen,' Trixi simpered in a sweet voice, holding back the navy curtain. 'And if there is *anything* you need, I'll be right here.'

'Thank you.' He nodded in reply, well aware that Trixi was ogling at the rear end of his fine tailored suit trousers as he squeezed past her.

Into his personal vision of what chaos must look like.

The kitchen was a mess of smeared surfaces, spilled glop in various colours, and plates and cutlery scattered everywhere.

Worse. Jared tasted sugar at the back of his throat.

He hated sugar.

The only baker he had ever met before today had been the cook at his boarding school. That lady had been middle aged, built like a sumo wrestler, and a source of constant amazement to the hormonally challenged older boys because of her expansive bosom and what looked like her triangular legs sticking out from below her sturdy tweed skirt. And, wow, could that woman swing a rolling pin!

The only person in this small, incredibly hot room was a slim, short jumping bean of a girl, in navy and white check trousers and what at one time must have been a navy apron. Tufts of brown hair escaped from the edges of a blue and white bandanna, drawing attention to an oval face with dark eyebrows and a classically curved bow of an upper lip.

Her apron, arms and trousers were splattered with white and brown blobs. Dripping blobs that matched the contents of the bowls and plates she was clearing away, at what looked like lightning speed, and the colour of Trixi's shirt.

What had Lucy got him into?

He sighed out loud. He couldn't help it.

Amy whirled round at the sound, expecting to find Trixi, who thought that any unattached man who entered Edlers was a hottie.

So far she had been wrong every time.

But not today.

She gave Jared a second look, and then a third.

This hottie qualified under the very tall, handsome businessman category.

He had expertly clipped, ultra-short dark blond hair, and the last time a man had worn shiny black shoes and a pinstripe business suit in her kitchen he had been her bank manager—and he certainly hadn't looked like this guy! The top two buttons of his pristine white shirt were undone, highlighting a deep natural tan, but he still had to be stiflingly hot under his buttoned-up cashmere suit jacket...

He definitely didn't look like a social worker or a care assistant.

And yet there was something in the way he was looking at her.

The intensity and power of this man reached out and grabbed her by the shoulders, as though he was daring her to look into his face.

His square jaw was covered in light designer stubble that extended up to thin sideburns and a faint blond moustache, and pale blue eyes focused on her below heavy brows, above a nose that had been broken more than once at its bridge.

There was something vaguely familiar about

him—something she just couldn't put her finger on. Particularly around the eyes, and in the deep crease between his eyebrows.

Interesting. They must have met before somewhere.

Amy swallowed down her surprise at being caught unawares, and gave her unexpected guest a smile.

'Hello, there. Looking for me?' She gestured to one of the hard chairs arranged around her kitchen table. 'I'll be right with you, but in the meantime why don't you take a seat and tell me how I can help? And, since it is a Friday evening, how about some strudel? On the house!'

Amy dropped her icing-covered spatula into a mixing bowl, slid a white china plate towards him through the debris, then drew a long baking tray from the serving hatch.

'I'm sorry—I don't know your name. But welcome to Edlers. I'm Amy.'

She slid the fragrant warm pastry onto the plate with one hand, then lowered the tray to the table and extended her free hand towards him, her eyes locked on his. Her gaze was intense. Focused.

Jared stared at the food, then looked up into a pair of green sparkling eyes and took her hand.

It was warm, small and sticky with long, strong fingers which clamped around his. This was no limp girly handshake. This was the hand of a

woman who cooked her own food, kneaded her own bread and washed her own dishes. Her wrists and forearms were strong and toned.

He was accustomed to shaking hands with men and women from all sides of the building trade every day of the week in his job, but this was different. A frisson of energy, a connection, sparked through that simple contact of skin on skin.

Her fingers gripped his for a second longer than necessary before releasing him, her eyes darting to his. The crease in her forehead told him that he was not the only one to have felt it.

Her eyes were not simply green. They were a kind of forest-green, spring-bud-green—the kind of captivating green which knocked the breath out of his lungs.

It was hot outside, but it had suddenly become a lot hotter in this kitchen.

Must be the heat from the ovens.

He had expected Amy Edler to be the business manager, or the finance director—not the cook! *This* was the girl Lucy had boasted about when they discussed her wedding plans? The bridesmaid who had become a rising star in the banking world before moving back to London? Surely there had to be some mistake?

Then he noticed the time on the wall clock behind her head.

Of course. Her chefs must have gone home for



the evening, leaving her to clean up their mess. And she had her work cut out there.

Her attention was totally focused on him, and her head tilted slightly to one side as she waited patiently for his reply.

‘Jared Shaw, Miss Edler.’ He smiled back, glad to have a chance to squeeze a word in. ‘Lucy’s brother.’

Just for a second her gaze faltered, and a chink appeared in the façade through which he felt a faint glimmer of something unexpected. Suspicion, maybe, but also a fierce intelligence and power. It lasted only an instant. But it sent him reeling before the open-mouthed smile switched back on.

‘Jared. Of *course*! Sorry—I wasn’t expecting to see you until later in the week. Lucy mentioned that you might be back in town before the big day. Welcome to Edlers, just the same. It’s nice to meet you at long last.’

‘Likewise. And these are for you, Miss Edler.’

The pretty girl stopped moving and stared hard at the expensive bouquet of exotic bird of paradise blooms mixed with tropical foliage and sprays of yellow orchids for one second longer than he had expected, before slowly taking them from his left hand.

‘Is there a problem? Don’t you like them?’

Her head shot up. ‘Just the opposite—they are totally gorgeous. It has just...er...been a while.’

Then the sunny smile shone back at him, with a voice to match. ‘That was very thoughtful of you, Jared. Thank you. And please call me Amy. I’ll just put these in some water. Now, talk to me about the wedding while I finish clearing up. Lucy and Mike are going to have a blast.’

Jared straightened his back and ignored the chair, his eyes focused now on the back of her jacket as she dodged from table to sink. Had this girl truly been a banker? The few city girls he had dated were definitely not the types to get their hands or their clothing—*especially* their clothing—anything close to dirty.

‘That’s why I’m here. Lucy tells me that you have been working with her wedding planner to keep things on track.’ He casually raised one hand. ‘I’m going to be in London for a couple of days, and I would like to do whatever I can to help you with the arrangements.’ He opened his arms out wide. ‘It’s obvious that you’re busy. So you see, Miss Edler, I am completely at your disposal. Think of me as your Man Friday.’

Amy lowered the huge bouquet of stunning blossoms onto her draining board, turned slowly on one heel, and stared hard at the man standing in *her* bakery, *her* kitchen, leaning on one of *her* chairs in the home she had worked so very hard to create.

And burst out laughing.

A real belly laugh emerged from somewhere deep inside her, which made it quite impossible for her to do anything but hang onto the sink until the shaking had stopped.

When she had finished sniffing and wiping her eyes, she simply glanced in the direction of the startled blond hunk a few metres away and grinned.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, but that was priceless. Rather like your face right now.’

Jared opened his mouth, pursed his lips, tugged at the double cuff of his right shirtsleeve, then the left, before shaking his head and replying, ‘I’m confused. All I did was offer you some help. What was so funny?’

‘You were.’

Amy dried her hands and strolled over to the table so that she was facing him.

‘Lucy told me what you’d say. I didn’t believe her, of course. Except...well, you’ve just used the precise words she said you would—right down to the “Man Friday” offer. That’s all.’

There was silence for a few seconds. His fingers clenched and unclenched a few times around the back of the kitchen chair before there was an almighty sigh.

‘Did my precious sister also mention that I hate to be predictable?’

Amy nodded sharply. ‘She did. But I under-

stand. You're her big brother and you want her to have the best. Nothing wrong with that. Sorry for laughing—it wasn't at you personally, just at what you said.' And then she slapped her hand over her mouth as another bout of sniggering hit her.

He shrugged. 'Perhaps I should come back tomorrow?'

Amy flapped both hands at him. 'It's been a long hot, busy day. Let's start again, shall we? How about a cold drink? I might have some juice left. Or would you prefer lemonade or water?'

'Thank you, but no. I'm still wondering what precisely you found so funny.'

'Oh, no secret. Do you ever watch those talent shows on TV? You know—the kind where people audition to show what they can do? Sing, dance, juggle monkeys?'

'I don't have time to watch much TV, but, yes, I know what you mean... What has this got to do with Lucy?'

'Last time she was in London we decided that we would both apply to be contestants on *Girls Got Talent*. She would show off her famous artistic skills, while I'd dazzle the judges by cooking up a hot soufflé on live TV. Simple, really.'

Amy strolled around the table and polished a pristine fork on a clean corner of her apron before placing it next to the pastry on Jared's plate.

‘Just because I chose to become a baker, it does not mean that I handed my brain in at the gate with my company credit card.’ She smiled up at him. ‘Relax, Jared. Lucy’s hired a professional wedding planner. All I have to do is keep in touch every week and follow up on any questions they have. So far everything has gone very well.’ Amy nodded towards his plate. ‘So, now that’s cleared up, why don’t you enjoy your strudel? You look as though you need it. Long day?’

He paused before replying. ‘Yes, actually it *has* been a long day. And I’m sure it’s delicious, but I don’t eat cake.’

Amy shrugged her shoulders. ‘Good. Because this is not cake. This is strudel. My strudel. Which I made. Today. In this kitchen. At some silly time of the morning.’

Amy gestured towards the oven and then sat down on the corner of the table, her arms folded.

‘*You* made this?’ There was genuine surprise in his voice.

‘Specialty of the house. And nobody leaves this kitchen without trying my strudel. Including you. Jared Shaw.’

Amy uncrossed her arms and leant forward so that her face was only inches from his. Lucy Shaw was one of the few people Amy had called to her hospital bed when she’d needed a friend. And she had no intention of letting Lucy down when it

came to the simple matter of organising her wedding.

The last thing she needed was a macho brother turning up, questioning her abilities.

Even if that brother did smell of sharp citrus with a hint of leather, and looked as if he had stepped out of a photo shoot for a fashion magazine.

In another time and place she might even have said that he was gorgeous.

He was staring into her eyes now, the corners of his mouth turned up with a flicker of something which could have been amusement, but was more likely frustration that she had not agreed to hand over the wedding plan to his PA. Yet.

The next few days were going to be demanding in so many ways. Although she hated to admit it, if there *was* a problem so close to the wedding it might be helpful to have someone she could call on in an emergency. Just as long as they understood who was in charge, of course.

‘I might be able to use your help on a few things,’ she whispered, in her softest, most seductive tone. ‘And then again, I might not.’

Her eyes ratcheted down to the pastry, then slowly, slowly slid up the front of his pristine suit jacket and back to his face.

‘It all depends on what you do in the next five minutes. So what’s it going to be? Jared?’

The creases at the corners of his eyes deepened, and Amy inhaled a powerful aroma of spicy masculine sweat and body spray, which was sweet even against the perfume of the fruit and nuts of her food.

She couldn't move. There was something electric in the few inches of air between them, as though powerful magnets were pulling them together.

So *this* was the famous Jared Shaw, CEO of Haywood and Shaw.

At this distance she could feel the frisson of energy and strength of the man whose property development signs were outside homes and office blocks in cities all over Britain and the East Coast of America.

And he knew it.

This was the kind of man who was accustomed to walking into a cocktail bar or a restaurant and having head waiters fawning over themselves to find him the best table.

*Well, not this time, handsome!*

She could stick this out longer than he could.

The bell saved him. Amy's private cellphone rang a couple of times before she dragged her eyes away from his, glanced down at the caller ID, twisted her mouth with annoyance, and stood up quickly to take the call.

Within seconds she had turned back to face him, and he instantly recognised a certain look in her eyes which brought his back even straighter.

‘Yes. I can be there in twenty minutes. Thank you.’

Amy exhaled slowly, then marched to the back of the kitchen and shrugged off her long apron, revealing a short-sleeved navy blue T-shirt.

She was still drying her hands when Jared walked up.

‘Do you remember the wedding planner that Lucy hired? The one with all the celebrity clients?’ she asked.

There was a sharp intake of breath from the man standing ramrod-straight next to her, his back braced. He was looking horribly tall, as though he feared the worst and the wedding plan might be about to hit the fan.

It hit the fan.

‘Clarissa has cancelled all her appointments and eloped to Antigua. With the bridegroom who was supposed to be walking down the aisle tomorrow morning. I’m going to her office right now to pick up Lucy’s file. Want to come along?’