ONCE UPON A BRIDE

Helen Lacey

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Once Upon a Bride

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She hoped he wouldn't come closer …

Prayed he wouldn't kiss her. "We need to forget what happened tonight," she said in a rattled voice. "We agreed it'd be crazy to—"

"Nothing really happened," he said, cutting her off.

"Well, what *almost* happened. I've made a vow to myself … and it's a promise I intend to keep. I'm never going to find what I want if I get drawn deeper into this attraction. It won't go anywhere other than your bed, and I'm not prepared to settle for just sex."

Gabe stared at her. So deeply, so intensely, she couldn't breathe. The small porch created extreme intimacy. If she took one step she'd be pressed against him.

"You're right." He moved back. "You shouldn't settle for sex. You should find that middle road you want, Lauren, with someone who can give you the quiet relationship you deserve."

Then he was gone.

Her chest was pounding. Her stomach was churning. Her head was spinning.

And her heart was in serious danger.

Once Upon a Bride

Helen Lacey

www.millsandboon.co.uk

HELEN LACEY grew up reading *Black Beauty, Anne of Green Gables* and *Little House on the Prairie.* These childhood classics inspired her to write her first book when she was seven years old, a story about a girl and her horse. She continued to write, with the dream of one day being a published author, and writing for Mills & Boon® Cherish™ is the realization of that dream. She loves creating stories about strong heroes with a soft heart and heroines who get their happily-ever-after. For more about Helen, visit her website, www.helenlacey.com.

For Robert

Because you get me …

Contents

Cover
Introduction
Title Page
About the Author
Dedication
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Extract
Copyright
Chapter One

"You made a what?"

Lauren Jakowski shrugged her shoulders and bit down on her lower lip, musing whether she should repeat her words. But her two best friends' imploring looks won over.

"I made a vow," she said, and glanced at both Cassie and Mary-Jayne. "Of celibacy."

The other women snorted through the drinks they were sipping, sending liquid flying across the small poolside table. It was her brother's wedding, and once the bride and groom had cut the cake and shared their first dance, her bridesmaid's duties were officially over for the night. So she'd left the hotel ballroom and met her friends by the pool.

"Yeah, sure you did," Cassie said with a laugh, wiping her face.

"I did," Lauren insisted. "When my marriage ended."

"So you, like—" Mary-Jayne mused slowly as her dark hair swayed in the breeze "—made a commitment to never have sex again?"

"Exactly," she replied. "Not until I'm certain he's the right one."

"He being this dull and passionless individual you think you'll find so you can have your mediocre happily ever after?" Cassie asked, watching Lauren over the rim of her glass of soda.

She ignored how absurd it sounded. "Yes."

Cassie's brows came up. "And where are you going to find this Mr. Average?" she asked. "ReliableBores.com?"

"Maybe," Lauren said, and pretended to drink some champagne.

"So no sex?" Mary-Jayne asked again. "Even though you caught the bouquet, look sensational in that dress and there are at least half a dozen single men at this wedding who would happily throw you over their shoulder, carry you off and give you the night of your life?"

"I'm not interested in anything casual," she reiterated.

Mary-Jayne's eyes widened. "Not even with—"

"Not with anyone," she said firmly.

"But he's—"

The original tall, dark and handsome...

"I know what he is. And he's not on my radar."

Which was a great big lie. However, she wasn't about to admit that to her friends. Lauren stared at the flowers sitting in the center of the small table. She had caught the bouquet. But she didn't want some meaningless romp at her brother's wedding.

And she certainly didn't want it with Gabe Vitali.

In the past six months, she'd been within touching distance of the ridiculously good-looking American several times. And avoided him on every single occasion. He was exactly what she didn't want. But since he was her brother's friend—and Crystal Point was a small town—Lauren accepted that she would be forced to see him every now and then.

"I like Gabe," Mary-Jayne said, and grinned. "He's kind of mysterious and...sexy."

Lauren wrinkled her nose. "Trouble."

"But still sexy?" Cassie laughed gently. "Come on, admit it."

Lauren let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay, he's sexy. He's weak-at-the-knees sexy.... He's handsome and hot and every time I see him I wonder what he looks like out of his clothes. I said I was celibate...not comatose."

The two women laughed, and Lauren pushed aside the idea of Gabe Vitali naked.

"Still, you haven't had sex in over two years," Mary-Jayne, the more candid of the two women, reminded her. "That's a long time. Just because you got divorced doesn't mean you can't have sex."

Lauren shrugged. "Isn't there an old saying about not missing what you don't have?"

Mary-Jayne shook her head. "Please tell me you've at least kissed a guy since then?"

"No," she replied. "Nor do I intend to until I know he's exactly what I've been looking for."

"You mean, planning for," Cassie said, ever gentle. "You know, there's no neat order to falling in love."

"Who said anything about love?" Lauren pushed back her blond bangs.

Cassie's calm expression was unwavering. "Is that really what you want? A loveless relationship without passion and heat?"

Lauren shrugged. "Marriage doesn't have to be about sexual attraction. Or love."

She saw her friends' expressions, knew that even though they were both fiercely loyal and supported her unconditionally, they still thought her thinking madness. But she wasn't swayed. How could they really appreciate her feelings? Or understand what she wanted?

They couldn't.

But she knew what she wanted. No lust, no crazy chemistry. No fairy-tale love.

No risk.

"That's just grief talking," Cassie said quietly. "When a marriage breaks down, it's natural to—"

"I'm not mourning my divorce," she insisted. No, definitely not. Because she knew exactly what mourning felt like. "I'm glad it's over. I shouldn't have married a man I hardly knew. I've tried being in love, I've tried being in lust...and neither worked out. Believe it or not, for the first time in a long time, I actually know what I want."

"Which is?" Mary-Jayne prompted, still grinning.

Lauren smiled at her friend. "Which is an honest, uncomplicated relationship with someone I can talk to.... Someone I can laugh with...have children with...grow old with. You know, the usual things. Someone who's a friend. A companion. And not with a man who looks as though he was made to pose for an underwear ad on one of those highway billboards."

"Like Gabe?" Mary-Jayne suggested playfully, and drank some champagne. "Okay, I get it. You want short, chubby and bald...not tall, dark and handsome. But in the meantime, how about we all get back to the ballroom and find some totally complicated man to dance with?"

"Not me," Cassie said, and touched her four-month-pregnant belly. Her boyfriend was a soldier currently on tour in the Middle East. "But I'll happily watch from the sidelines."

Lauren shook her head. "I think I'll stay out here for a while. You two go on ahead."

Her friends took another couple of minutes to leave, and when she was alone, Lauren snatched up the colorful bouquet, stood and walked the ten feet toward the edge of the pool. Solitude crept over her skin, and she sighed. Weddings always made her melancholy. Which was unfortunate, since she owned the most successful bridal store in Bellandale. Weddings were her life. Some days, though, she thought that to be the most absurd irony.

Of course, she was pleased for her brother. Cameron deserved every bit of happiness with his new bride, Grace Preston. And the ceremony had been beautiful and romantic. But she had a hollow spot in her chest that ached with a heavy kind of sadness. Many of the guests now inside the big hotel ballroom had witnessed her union to James Wallace in similar style three years earlier. And most knew how it had ended. Tonight, more than ever before, Lauren's sadness was amplified by her embarrassment at being on the receiving end of countless pitying looks and sympathetic greetings.

She took a deep breath and exhaled with a shudder. Somehow, her dreams for the future had been lost. But two years on, and with so many tears shed, she was stronger. And ready to start again. Only this time, Lauren would do it right. She wouldn't rush into marriage after a three-month

whirlwind romance. And she definitely wouldn't be swept off her feet. This time, her feet were staying firmly on the ground.

Lauren swallowed hard, smoothed the mint-green chiffon gown over her hips and turned on her heels.

And was unexpectedly confronted with Gabe Vitali.

Stretched out on a sun lounger, tie askew and with his black hair ruffled as if he'd been running his hand through it, he looked so gorgeous, she literally gasped for breath. He was extraordinarily handsome, like one of those old-time movie stars. His glittering, blue-eyed gaze swept over her, and a tiny smile creased the corners of his mouth.

And she knew immediately...

He'd heard.

Everything.

Every humiliating word. Heat raced up and smacked her cheeks. Great.

Of course, she had no logical reason to dislike him...other than the fact he was good-looking and sexy and made her insides flip-flop. But it was enough to keep her from allowing her fantasies to take over. She gripped the bouquet tighter and planted her free hand on her hip in a faux impression of control, and spoke. "Whatever you might have thought you heard, I assure you I wasn't—"

"How are the knees?" he asked as he sprang up.

He was tall, around six-two, with broad shoulders and a long-legged frame. And he looked way too good in a suit. Resentment burned through her when she realized he was referring to her earlier confession.

"Fine," she replied, dying of embarrassment inside. "Rock solid."

He came around the lounger, hands thrust into his pockets. "You're sure about that?"

Lauren glared at him. "Positive," she snapped, mortified. She wanted to flee, but quickly realized she'd have to squeeze herself in between him and the sun lounger if she wanted to make a getaway. "I think I'll return to the ballroom now, if you don't mind."

His mouth curled at the edges. "You know, just because someone knows your vulnerabilities, it doesn't necessarily make him your enemy."

Lauren's skin heated. "Vulnerabilities?" She sucked in a sharp breath. "I don't quite know what you mean by that, but if you're insinuating that I'm vulnerable because I haven't... Because I... Well, because it's been a while since I was...you know..." Her words trailed off as mortification clung to every pore. Then she got annoyed as a quick cover-up. "Let's get this straight. I'm not the least bit vulnerable. Not to you or to anyone like you."

He grinned. "Whoa. Are you always so prickly?"

Prickly? She wasn't prickly. She was even tempered and friendly and downright nice.

She glared at him. "Do you always eavesdrop on private conversations?"

"I was simply relaxing on a pool lounger," he replied smoothly, his accent so delicious, it wound up her spine like liquid silk. "And I was here before you, remember? The fact you spoke about your sex life so openly is really no one's fault but your own." One brow rose. "And although it was entertaining, there's no need to take your frustration out on—"

"I am not frustrated," she snapped, figuring he was probably referring to her being sexually starved in some misguided, macho way. Broad shoulders, blue eyes and nice voice aside, he was a jerk. "I just don't want to talk about it anymore. What I'd like is to forget this conversation ever happened."

"I'm sure you would."

Lauren wanted a big hole to open up and suck her in. When one didn't appear, she took a deep breath. "So we have a deal. I'll ignore you, and you can ignore me. That way we never have to speak to each other again."

"Since this is the first time we have actually spoken," he said, his gaze deep enough to get lost in. "I don't think it will be a hardship."

He was right. They'd never spoken. She'd made sure of it. Whenever he was close, she'd always managed to make a quick getaway. Lauren sniffed her dislike, determined to ignore the fact that the most gorgeous man she'd ever met probably thought she was stark raving mad. And she would have done exactly that. Except she turned her heel too quickly, got caught between the tiles, and seconds later, she was tumbling in a cartwheel of arms and legs and landed into the pool, bouquet flying, humiliation complete.

The shock of hitting the water was quickly interrupted when a pair of strong hands grasped one arm, then another. In seconds, she was lifted up and over the edge of the pool and set right on her feet.

He still held her, and had his hands intimately positioned on her shoulders.

She should have been cold through to her bones. But she wasn't. She was hot. All over. Her saturated dress clung to every dip and curve, her once carefully styled hair was now draping down her neck and her blood burned through her veins like a grass fire.

"Steady," he said softly, holding her so close she could see the tiny pulse in his jaw.

Lauren tried to speak, tried to move, tried to do something, anything, other than shake in his arms and stare up into his handsome face. But she failed. Spectacularly. It was he who eventually stepped back. When he finally released her, Lauren's knees wobbled and she sucked in a long breath to regain her composure. Of which she suddenly had none. He looked at her, over her, slowly and provocatively and with just enough male admiration to make her cheeks flame. She glanced down and shuddered. The sheer, wet fabric hugged her body like a second skin and left nothing to the imagination.

She moved her lips. "I should...I think I should..."

"Yes," he said quietly when her words trailed. "You probably should."

Lauren shifted her feet and managed one step backward, then another. Water dripped down her arms and legs, and she glanced around for a towel or something else to cover herself. When she couldn't find anything suitable, she looked back at him and noticed he still watched her. Something passed between them, a kind of heady, intense awareness that rang off warning bells in her head and should have galvanized her wobbly knees into action. But she couldn't move.

Seconds later, he shrugged out of his jacket and quickly draped it around her shoulders. The warmth from the coat and his nearness enveloped her like a protective cloak, and Lauren expelled a long sigh. She didn't want to feel that. Didn't want to think that. She only wanted to escape.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I appreciate—"

"Forget it," he said, cutting her off. "You should get out of those wet clothes before you catch a cold," he said, and then stepped back.

Lauren nodded, turned carefully and rushed from the pool area, water and humiliation snapping at her heels.

* * *

One week later Gabe pulled the for-sale peg from the ground, stuck the sign in the crook of his arm and headed across the front yard. The low-set, open-plan brick-and-tile home was big and required a much-needed renovation. But he'd bought the house for a reasonable price, and it seemed as good a place as any to settle down.

And he was happy in Crystal Point. The oceanfront town was small and friendly, and the beaches and surf reminded him of home. He missed California, but he enjoyed the peacefulness of the small Australian town he now called home instead. He'd rented a place in the nearby city of Bellandale for the past few months, but he liked the seaside town much better. Bellandale, with its sixty thousand residents, was not as populated as Huntington Beach, Orange County, where he'd lived most of his life. But it was busy enough to make him crave the solitude and quiet of Crystal Point. Plus, he was close to the beach and his new job.

He liked the job, too. Managing the Crystal Point Surf Club & Community Center kept him occupied, and on the weekends, he volunteered as a lifeguard. The beach was busy and well

maintained, and so far he'd only had to administer first aid for dehydration and a couple of jellyfish stings. Nothing life threatening. Nothing he couldn't handle. Nothing that made him dwell on all he'd given up.

Gabe fished the keys from his pocket, dropped the sign into the overgrown garden bed and climbed the four steps to the porch. His household items had arrived that morning, and he'd spent most of the day emptying boxes and wishing he'd culled more crap when he'd put the stuff into storage six months ago. His cousin, Scott, had offered to come and give him a hand unpacking, but Gabe wasn't in the mood for a lecture about his career, his personal life or anything else.

All his energy would go into his job and renovating the house, which he figured would keep him busy for six months, at least. After that, he'd tackle the yard, get the place in shape and put the house on the market again. How hard could it be? His brother Aaron did the same thing regularly. True, he wasn't much of a carpenter, and Aaron was a successful builder in Los Angeles, but he'd give it a shot.

He headed inside and flicked on some lights. Some of the walls were painted black, no doubt a legacy from the previous tenants—a group of twenty-something heavy-metal enthusiasts who were evicted for cultivating some suspicious indoor plants—so painting was one of the first things on the agenda. The kitchen was neat and the bathrooms bearable. And although the furniture he'd bought a few months ago looked a little out of place in the shabby rooms, once the walls and floors were done, he was confident it would all look okay.

Gabe tossed the keys in a bowl on the kitchen table and pulled his cell from his pocket. He noticed there were a couple of missed calls. One from Aaron and another from his mother. It would be around midnight in California, and he made a mental note to call them back in the morning. Most days he was glad the time difference let him off the hook when it came to dealing with his family. At least his younger brother, Luca, and baby sister, Bianca, didn't stick their nose into his life or moan about his decision to move to Crystal Point. As the eldest, Aaron always thought he knew best, and his mom was just...Mom. He knew she worried, knew his mom and Aaron were waiting for him to relapse and go running back to California.

He'd come to Crystal Point to start over, and the house and job were a part of that new life. Gabe liked that his family wasn't constantly around to dish out advice. Bad enough he got lectures on tap from Scott. Hell, he understood their motives...he might even have done the same thing had the situation been reversed. But things had changed. He'd changed. And Gabe was determined to live his life, even if it wasn't the one he'd planned on.

The private cul-de-sac in Crystal Point was an ideal place to start. It was peaceful, quiet and uncomplicated. Just what he wanted. A native bird squawked from somewhere overhead and he stared out the kitchen window and across the hedge to the next house along just as his cell rang. He looked at the screen. It was an overseas number and not one he recognized.

Uncomplicated?

Gabe glanced briefly out the window again as he answered the call. It was Cameron Jakowski, and the conversation lasted a couple of minutes. Sure, uncomplicated. Except for his beautiful, blonde, brown-eyed neighbor.

* * *

The thing about being a go-to, agreeable kind of person...sometimes it turned around to bite you on the behind. And this, Lauren thought as she drove up the driveway and then pulled up under the carport, was probably going to turn out to be one of those occasions.

Of course, she could have refused. But that wasn't really her style. She knew her brother wouldn't have called if there was any other option. He'd asked for her help, and she would always rally her resolve when it came to her family.

What she didn't want to do—what she was determined to avoid doing—was start up any kind of conversation with her new next-door neighbor. Bad enough he'd bought the house and moved in

just days after the never-to-be-spoken-about and humiliating event at the wedding. The last thing she wanted to do was knock on his door.

Ever.

Lauren had hoped to never see him again. But it seemed fate had other ideas.

She took a breath, grabbed her bag and jacket and stepped out of the car. She struggled to open the timber gate that she'd been meaning to get repaired for the past three months and winced when the jagged edge caught her palm. Once inside her house, she dumped her handbag and laptop in the hall and took a few well-needed breaths.

I don't want to do this....

But she'd promised Cameron.

And a promise is a promise....

Then she headed next door.

Once she'd rounded the tall hedge, Lauren walked up the gravel path toward the house. There was a brand-new Jeep Cherokee parked in the driveway. The small porch illuminated with a sensor light once she took the three steps. The light flickered and then faded. She tapped on the door and waited. She heard footsteps before the door swung back on its hinges, and she came face-to-face with him.

And then butterflies bombarded her stomach in spectacular fashion.

Faded jeans fitted lean hips, and the white T-shirt he wore accentuated a solid wall of bronzed and very fine-looking muscle. His short black hair, clean-shaven jaw and body to die for added up to a purely lethal combination.

He really is gorgeous.

Memories of what had happened by the pool came rushing back. His hands on her skin, his glittering gaze moving over her, his chest so close she could almost hear his heartbeat. Mesmerized, Lauren sucked in a breath. He knew all about her. He knew things she'd told only her closest friends. He knew she'd thought about him...and imagined things.

But if he dares say anything about my knees being weak, I'll...

She finally found her voice. "I'm here..."

One brow cocked. "So I see."

"Did Cameron—"

"He called," he said, and smiled as he interrupted her.

"Is he..."

"He is." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder and toward the door behind him. "Safe and sound and flaked out in front of the television."

She ignored the smile that tried to make its way to her lips and nodded. "Okay, thank you."

When she didn't move, he looked her over. "Are you coming inside or do you plan on camping on my doorstep all night?"

"All night?" she echoed, mortified that color was creeping up her neck. The idea of doing anything all night with Gabe Vitali took the temperature of her skin, her blood and pretty much every other part of her anatomy up a few notches. "Of course not."

He dropped his arms to his sides and stepped back.

Lauren crossed the threshold and walked into the hall. He was close, and everything about him affected her on a kind of sensory level. As much as she didn't want to admit anything, she was attracted to him. And worse luck, he knew it.

Her vow of celibacy suddenly seemed to be dissolving into thin air.

She walked down the short hallway and into the huge, open-plan living area. The furniture looked new and somehow out of place in the room. And sure enough, on the rug in front of the sofa, was her brother's one hundred and fifty pound French Mastiff, Jed. Fast asleep and snoring loudly.

"Thanks for picking him up from my brother's place," she said as politely as she could. "When Cameron called this morning, he said the house sitter had left quickly."

He nodded. "Her daughter is having a baby. She took a flight out from Bellandale after lunch and said she'd be back in a week."

Lauren bit down on her lip. "A week?"

"That's what she said."

A week of dog-sitting. Great. As much as she liked Jed, he was big, needy, had awful juicy jowls and a reputation for not obeying anyone other than Cameron. Too bad her parents had a cat that ruled the roost, or she would have dropped him off there. She had to admit the dog seemed comfortable draped across Gabe's rug.

She looked around some more. "So...you've moved in?"

"That was the general idea when I bought the house," he replied.

Lauren's teeth ground together. "Of course. I hope you'll be very happy here."

She watched his mouth twist with a grin. "You do? Really?"

"Really," she said, and raised a disinterested brow. "Be happy, or don't be happy. It's nothing to do with me."

His blue eyes looked her up and down with way too much leisure. The mood quickly shifted on a whisper of awareness that fluttered through the air and filled up the space between them. A change that was impossible to ignore, and there was rapidly enough heat in the room to combust a fire.

Warmth spread up her neck. He had a way of doing that to her. A way of heating her skin. "I need to...I need..."

"I think we both know what you need."

Sex...

That was what he was thinking. Suddenly, that was what she was thinking, even though turning up on his doorstep had nothing to do with her lacking love life or her vow to stay celibate. Lauren's cheeks burned, and her knees trembled. "I don't know what—"

"You don't like me much, do you?" he asked, cutting her off with such calm self-assurance, she wanted to slug him.

"I'm not—"

"Or is it because you do like me much?" he asked, cutting her off yet again. "And that's why you're so rattled at being in my living room."

Conceited jerk! Lauren sucked in some air, pushed back her shoulders and called Jed to heel. By the time the dog got up and ambled toward her, she was so worked up she could have screamed. She grasped Jed's collar and painted on a smile. "Thank you for collecting him from Cameron's."

"My pleasure."

Pleasure? Right. Not a word she wanted to hear from him. Not a word she wanted to think about in regard to him. And when she was safely back in her own home, Lauren kept reminding herself of one thing...Mr. Right was not Mr. Right-Next-Door.

Chapter Two

It was the dress.

That was why he'd had Lauren Jakowski on his mind for the past week.

When Gabe pulled her from the pool, the wet fabric had stuck to her curves so erotically, it had taken his breath away. She was as pretty as hell. A couple of years back he wouldn't have hesitated in coming on to her. He would have lingered by the pool, made small talk, flirted a little, asked her out and gotten her between the sheets by the third date. But he wasn't that man anymore.

Not so long ago, there had been no short supply of women in his life and in his bed. He'd mostly managed to keep things casual until he met Mona. She was the daughter of a colleague, and after dating for six months, they'd moved in together. At thirty years of age, he'd convinced himself it was

time he got around to settling down. Gabe had a girlfriend, a career he loved, a nice apartment and good friends. Life was sweet. Until everything had blown up in his face.

Eighteen months later, he was in Crystal Point, working at the surf club and trying to live a normal life. A life that didn't include a woman like Lauren Jakowski.

Because she was too...wholesome.

Too...perfect.

A beautiful blonde with caramel eyes and porcelain skin.

Exactly my type.

But by the pool, she'd made it clear to her friends what she was looking for—stability, reliability, longevity. And since he couldn't offer her any of those things, she was everything he needed to avoid. He didn't want her turning up on his doorstep. He didn't want to inhale the scent of the flowery fragrance that clung to her skin. And he certainly didn't want to remember how it felt to have her lovely curves pressed against him.

The best thing would be to ignore her...just as she'd suggested.

Damned inconvenient, then, that he'd bought the house right next door. If he'd known that before he'd signed on the dotted line, he might have changed his mind. But it was too late to think about that now. All he had to do was get through the renovation and the resale without remembering that she was merely over the hedge.

Lauren was not one-night-stand material...and he couldn't offer anything more.

Gabe dropped into the sofa and flicked channels on the television for half an hour before he thought about eating something. He headed to the kitchen and stopped in his tracks when he spotted the pile of canine accessories by the back door. Damn. He'd forgotten about that. When Cameron had called and asked him to make an emergency stop at his home to collect the dog, the vacating house sitter had thrust the bed, bowls, food and lead into his arms along with a note listing feeding instructions. Things that Lauren would need.

Realizing there was little point in avoiding the inevitable, Gabe shoved his feet into sneakers, swung the bag of dog food over one shoulder, grabbed the rest of the gear and his house keys and headed next door.

Lauren's home and gardens were neat and tidy, and the only thing that seemed out of place was the rickety gate. He pushed it open and headed up the steps. The porch light was on and the front door open, so he tapped on the security screen. From somewhere in the house, he could hear her talking to the dog, and the obvious frustration in her voice made him smile. Maybe she was more a cat person? He tapped again and then waited until he heard her footsteps coming down the hall.

"Oh...hi," she said breathlessly when she reached the door.

Her hair was mussed and her shirt was pulled out from the front of her skirt, and Gabe bit back a grin. She looked as if she'd been crash tackled on the thirty-yard line. "Everything all right?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Fine."

Gabe didn't quite believe her. "I forgot to give you this."

Her mouth set in a serious line. "Just leave it out there and I'll grab it later."

"It's heavy," he said, and jangled the bag of kibble resting on his shoulder. "I should probably set it down inside."

She looked at him for a second and then unlocked the screen. "Okay. Take it to the kitchen, at the end of the hall."

Gabe pushed the screen back and crossed the threshold. When he passed the living room doorway he immediately figured out the reason for her distress. Stretched out with legs in the air and jowls drooping, the dog was rolling around on her flowery chintz sofa.

"Jed looks as though he's made himself comfortable," he said, and kept walking.

"Yes, very comfortable."

When they reached the kitchen, Gabe swiveled on his heels and stared at her. She had her arms folded, her chin up and her lips pressed together, and even though she looked like she'd rather eat arsenic than spend a moment in his company, Gabe couldn't stop thinking about how beautiful she was.

I haven't gotten laid in a while...that's all it is.

He wasn't conceited, but he'd heard enough by the pool that night to know the attraction was mutual. He also knew she clearly thought it was as impossible as he did. Which suited him just fine. He didn't want to be stirred by her. He didn't want to spend restless nights thinking about having her in his bed.

"Where do you want it?" he asked.

"By the door will do."

He placed the gear on the floor and turned around to face her. "Would you like me to remove him from your sofa?"

"How did you know I couldn't...?"

"He's got about thirty pounds on you," Gabe said when her words trailed. "I just figured."

She shrugged. "I tried dragging him off, but he's as heavy as lead."

Gabe smiled and withdrew the note from his pocket. "Feeding instructions," he said, and dropped the paper onto the countertop. "If you want to get his food sorted, I'll get him off the sofa."

"Thank you," she said, then laid her hands on the back of a dining chair and grimaced. "Ouch."

He saw her shake her hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied and shook her hand again. "Just a splinter I got earlier from my gate."

"Let me see."

She curled her hand. "It's nothing."

Gabe moved around the kitchen counter. "It might become infected," he said, suddenly serious. "Do you have a first-aid kit?"

"It's nothing, really."

"It won't take a minute," he insisted. "So your first-aid kit?"

She shook her head. "I don't like needles."

"Don't be a baby."

Her eyes flashed, and she pushed her shoulders back as she marched into the kitchen and opened the pantry. "Here," she said, and tossed something through the air.

Gabe caught it one-handed and placed the kit on the table. "I'll be gentle. Sit," he said, and pulled out a chair.

She glared again, and he marveled that she still managed to look stunning with a scowl on her face. She sat down and waited while he dropped into a chair opposite.

"Hand?"

She pushed her hand into the center of the table and turned it over. "Gentle, remember?"

He smiled, opened the kit and took out an alcohol swab and an individually wrapped needle. When he took hold of her fingertips, his entire body crackled with a kind of heady electricity. Being so close wasn't helping his determination to steer clear of her.

"So what kind of work do you do?" he asked to try to get his mind off her soft skin and flowery perfume.

"I own a bridal shop in Bellandale."

He stretched out her palm. "That sounds interesting."

"Does it?"

Gabe looked up. She really did have the most amazing brown eyes. Warm and deep and intoxicating. She was remarkably beautiful, and he doubted she even knew it.

"Just making conversation," he said.

Her brows shot up. "To what end?"

"Are you always so suspicious?" he asked.

"Of what?"

"People," he replied. "Men."

She tensed, and Gabe held her hand a little firmer. "Not usually," she said quietly.

So it was just him? "I don't have any sinister intentions. So relax," he said as he extracted the splinter without her noticing at first and then gently rolled her fingers into her palm. "I'm not making a pass."

She swallowed hard. "I didn't think—"

"I would," he said quietly. "If you were looking for a no-strings, no-commitment kind of thing. But you're not. You're a commitment kind of girl, right? Abstaining from anything casual and with a clear plan for your future. Isn't that why you made your vow of celibacy?"

It felt right to get it out in the open. Maybe it would help diffuse the heat between them. Maybe it would stop him from thinking about kissing her.

She jerked her hand back and stood. "I... What I said at the wedding... It was private and personal and not up for discussion."

"I'm not mocking you," he said, and rested his elbows on the table. "On the contrary, I think I admire you for knowing what you want. And knowing what you don't."

* * *

Lauren's skin burned. He admired her? He'd pretty much admitted he wanted her, too. The awareness between them intensified, and she wished she could deny it. She wanted to dislike him. She wanted to resent him. She wanted to get away and never speak to him again.

"Thank you for the first aid," she said, and managed a tight smile. "I didn't feel a thing."

"Then we should keep it that way."

There was no mistaking his meaning. He thought it was a bad idea, too. She was happy about that. Very happy.

"So...about the dog?"

He stood up and pushed the chair back. "Get his feed ready and I'll drag him off your sofa."

Once he'd left the kitchen and disappeared down the hall, Lauren got to her feet and quickly sorted the dog's bedding and food in the laundry. A couple of minutes later, Gabe returned with Jed at his side. The dog ambled across the kitchen and into the back room and began eating.

Relieved the hound was no longer taking up her couch, Lauren took a shallow breath. "Thank you...Gabe."

He looked a little amused by her sudden use of his name and the slight tremor in her voice. His mouth twisted fractionally, as if he was trying not to smile. "No problem...Lauren."

"Well...good night."

His glittering gaze was unwavering. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Her eyes widened. "Tomorrow?"

He grinned a little. "I told Cameron I'd take the dog to work tomorrow so he doesn't destroy your yard trying to escape...until you can make other arrangements, of course."

She hadn't spared a thought to how she would care for the dog during the day. "Oh, right," she said vaguely, thinking about how the darn dog had suddenly become a reason why she would be forced to interact with Gabe. She made a mental note to call her friend Mary-Jayne and ask her to help. Lauren knew one thing—she didn't want to turn up on Gabe's doorstep again. "I'll tie him in the back when I leave, and you can collect him from there. You don't start until ten tomorrow, right?"

Gabe frowned. "How do you know that?"

"Cameron left me the roster," she replied. "I said I'd work the Sunday shifts while he's away if I'm needed."

"You're the fill-in lifeguard?"

"Don't look so surprised."

"I'm just curious as to why your brother didn't mention you specifically."

She shrugged a little. "I may have told him that I thought you were an ass."

Gabe laughed. "Oh, really?"

"It was after the wedding, so who could blame me?"

He raised his hands. "Because I innocently overheard your deepest secret?"

"Well, that was before I..." Her words trailed. Before what? Before she realized he wasn't quite the ogre she'd pegged him for. Now wasn't the time to admit anything. "Anyhow...good night."

Once he left, Lauren forced herself to relax. She took a long shower and changed into her silliest short-legged giraffe pajamas and made a toasted cheese sandwich for dinner. She ate in the lounge room, watching television, legs crossed lotus-style, with plans to forget all about her neighbor.

And failed.

Because Gabe Vitali reminded her that she was a flesh-and-blood woman in every sense of the word. The way he looked, the way he walked with that kind of natural sexual confidence, the way his blue eyes glittered... It was all too easy to get swept away thinking about such things.

And too easy to forget why she'd vowed to avoid a man like him at all costs.

She'd made her decision to find someone steady and honest and ordinary. No powerful attraction. No blinding lust. No foolish dreams of romantic love. Just friendship and compatibility. It might sound boring and absurd to her friends, but Lauren knew what she wanted. She wanted something lasting.

Something safe.

Since she spent most of the night staring at the ceiling, Lauren wasn't surprised when she awoke later than usual and had to rush to get ready for work. She fed the dog and then tied him on a generous lead to the post on her back patio and headed to the store. Her mother was there already, changing mannequins and merchandising the stock that had arrived Friday afternoon. Irene Jakowski had first opened The Wedding House twenty-five years earlier. Lauren had grown up around the gowns and the brides, and it had made her fall in love with weddings. During her school years, she'd worked part-time in the store, learning from her mother. When school finished, she'd studied business and accounting for two years at college before returning to the store, taking over from her mother, who now worked part-time.

Lauren dropped her laptop and bag on the desk in the staff room and headed to the sales floor. The rows of wedding gowns, each one immaculately pressed and presented on hangers, filled her with a mix of approval and melancholy.

"How's the dog?" her mother queried when she moved around the sales counter.

Lauren grimaced. "Missing his owner and slobbering all over my furniture. You know, like in that old movie Turner & Hooch?"

Irene laughed. "It's not that bad, surely?"

"Time will tell," she replied, and managed a rueful grin. "I don't know why he can't go into a boarding kennel like other dogs."

"You're brother says he pines when he's away from home," Irene told her. "And it's only until the house sitter returns, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Lauren said, and sighed. "Gabe is taking him to the surf club today, so at least my patio furniture is safe while I'm here."

Her mother's eyes widened. "Gabe is? Really?"

Of course her mother knew Gabe Vitali. She'd mentioned him several times over the past six months. Irene Jakowski was always on the lookout for a new son-in-law, since the old one hadn't worked out. The fact he'd bought the house next door was like gold to a matchmaking parent.

"Matka," Lauren warned, using the Polish word for mother when she saw the familiar gleam in her mother's eyes. "Stop."

"I was only—"

"I know what you're doing," Lauren said, smiling. "Now, let's get the store open."

* * *

By the time Gabe returned home that afternoon, he was short on patience and more than happy to hand Jed over to his neighbor. Damned dog had chewed his car keys, his sneakers and escaped twice through the automatic doors at the clubhouse.

When he pulled into the driveway, he spotted the fencing contractor he'd called earlier that day parked across the lawn. He locked Jed in Lauren's front garden and headed back to his own yard. He was twenty minutes into his meeting with the contractor when she arrived home. Gabe was in the front yard with the tradesman, talking prices and time frames, as the older man began pushing at the low timber fence that separated the two allotments and then wrote in a notepad.

She walked around the hedge and met him by the letterbox, eyeing the contractor's battered truck suspiciously. "What's going on?" she asked, looking all business in her black skirt and white blouse.

"A new fence," Gabe supplied and watched her curiosity quickly turn into a frown.

"I wasn't aware we needed a new one."

"This one's falling down," he said, and introduced her to the contractor before the other man waved his notepad and said he'd get back to him tomorrow.

Once the battered truck was reversing from the yard, she clamped her hands to her hips. "Shouldn't we have discussed it first?"

"It's only an estimate," he told her. "Nothing's decided yet."

She didn't look convinced. "Really?"

"Really," he assured her. "Although the fence does need replacing."

Her eyes flashed. "I know it's my responsibility to pay for half of any fence that's built, but at the moment I'm—"

Gabe shook his head. "I intend to pay for the fence, should it come to that."

She glared at him, then the fence, then back to him. "You don't get to decide that for me," she snapped, still glaring.

He looked at her, bemused by her sudden annoyance. "I don't?"

"It's my fence, too."

"Of course," he replied. "I was only—"

"Taking over? And probably thinking I couldn't possibly afford it and then feeling sorry for me, right?"

He had a whole lot of feelings churning through his blood when it came to Lauren Jakowski...pity definitely wasn't one of them. "Just being neighborly," he said, and figured he shouldn't smile, even though he wanted to. "But hey, if you want to pay for half the fence, go ahead."

"I will," she replied through tight lips. "Just let me know how much and when."

"Of course," he said.

She huffed a little. "Good. And have you been messing around with my gate?"

Ah. So the real reason why she looked like she wanted to slug him. "Yes, I fixed your gate this morning."

"Because?"

"Because it was broken," he replied, watching her temper flare as the seconds ticked by. And broken things should be fixed. He'd spent most of his adult life fixing things. Fixing people. But she didn't know that. And he wasn't about to tell her. "No point risking more splinters."

"I liked my gate how it was," she said, hands still on hips.

Gabe raised a brow. "Really?"

She scowled. "Really."

"You're mad at me because I repaired your gate?"

"I'm mad at you because it wasn't your gate to repair. I don't need anyone to fix things. I don't need a white knight, okay?"

A white knight? Yeah, right. But there was an edge of vulnerability in her voice that stopped him from smiling. Was she broken? Was that part of what drew him to her? Like meets like? He knew she was divorced, and at her brother's wedding she'd admitted her marriage hadn't been a happy one. But Gabe didn't want to speculate. And he didn't want to ask. The less he knew, the better.

"Okay," he said simply.

For a moment, he thought she might argue some more. Instead, she dropped her gaze and asked an obvious question. "What happened to your shoe?"

He glanced down. The back of his left sneaker was torn and the lace was missing. "Jed."

She looked up again, and he saw her mouth curve. "Was that the only damage?"

"Other than chewing my car keys and making a run for it whenever he got the chance."

She moaned softly. "Sorry about that. I'll get Cameron to replace them when he gets back."

Gabe shrugged. "No need. It's only a shoe."

She nodded, turned and walked back around the hedge. Gabe shook his shoulders and made a concerted effort to forget all about her.

And failed.

* * *

I really need to stop reacting like that.

Lauren was still thinking it forty minutes later when she emerged from the shower and pulled on frayed gray sweats. Her reaction, or rather her overreaction, to Gabe's news about the fence was amplified by his interference with her gate.

She didn't want him fixing things.

Lauren didn't want any man fixing things.

It was a road she'd traveled before. She knew what she wanted and white knights need not apply. Her ex-husband had tried to fix things—to fix her—and it had ended in disaster.

James Wallace had ridden into her life in his carpenter's truck, all charm and good looks. He'd arrived at The Wedding House to make repairs to the changing rooms, and she'd been unexpectedly drawn to his blatant flirting. An hour later, she'd accepted his invitation to go out with him that night. They ended up at a local bistro for drinks and then dinner, and by midnight he'd kissed her in the car park, and she was halfway in lust with him.

Three months later, she had a fairy-tale wedding.

Even though it was the wedding she'd planned to have to someone else.

To Tim. Sweet, handsome Tim Mannering. Her first love. Her only love. He had been her college boyfriend and the man she'd intended to marry. They'd made plans for the future. They'd talked about everything from building their dream home, taking an African-safari vacation, to how many kids they would have. They'd loved one another deeply and promised each other the world.

Except Tim had died three weeks before their wedding.

And Lauren walked down the aisle with another man less than two years later.

She swallowed the tightness in her throat. Thinking about Tim still filled her with sadness. And she was sad about James, too. She should never have married him. She hadn't loved him. They'd shared a fleeting attraction that had faded just months into their marriage. They'd had little in common and very different dreams. Within a year, James was gone, tired of what he called her cold, unfeeling heart. And Lauren was alone once more.

But she still hoped to share her life with someone. And she wanted the children she'd planned for since the day she and Tim had become engaged. Only next time, Lauren was determined to go into it with her eyes wide-open and not glazed over by romantic illusions. What she'd had with James wasn't enough. And what she'd had with Tim had left her broken inside. Now all she wanted was the

middle road. Just mutual respect, trust and compatibility. No fireworks. No deep feelings. Lust was unreliable. Love was painful when lost.

There was nothing wrong with settling. Nothing at all. Settling was safe. All she had to do was remember what she wanted and why. And forget all about Gabe Vitali and his glittering blue eyes and broad shoulders. Because he was pure heartbreak material. And her heart wasn't up for grabs.

Not now.

Not ever again.

Chapter Three

Gabe went to his cousin's for dinner Wednesday night and expected the usual lecture about his life. Scott Jones was family and his closest friend, and even though he knew the other man's intentions were born from a sincere interest in his well-being, Gabe generally pulled no punches when it came to telling his cousin to mind his own business.

Scott's wife, Evie, was pure earth mother. She was strikingly attractive and possessed a calm, generous spirit. Gabe knew his cousin was besotted with his wife and baby daughter, and he was genuinely happy for him.

"How's the house coming along?" Scott asked over a beer while Evie was upstairs putting little Rebecca down for the night.

Gabe pushed back in the kitchen chair. "Fine."

"Will you stay there permanently?"

"I doubt it," he replied.

"Still can't see you renovating the place yourself," Scott said, and grinned.

Gabe frowned. "I can fix things."

Like Lauren's gate, which hadn't gone down so well. He should have left it alone. But she'd hurt herself on the thing and he didn't want that happening again. There was no harm in being neighborly.

"Job still working out?"

Gabe shrugged one shoulder. "Sure."

Scott grinned again. "And how's it going with your next-door neighbor?"

He knew his cousin was fishing. He'd told him a little about the incident at the wedding, and Scott knew he'd bought the house next door. Clearly, he'd told him too much. "Fine."

"I like Lauren," Scott said, and smiled.

Gabe didn't respond. He didn't have to. His cousin spoke again.

"You do, too, judging by the look on your face."

Gabe didn't flinch. "You know my plans. They haven't changed."

"Your five-year plan?" Scott's eyes widened. "Still think you can arrange life to order?" He looked to the ceiling, clearly thinking about his family upstairs. "No chance."

"I know what I'm doing."

It sounded good, at least. Pity he didn't quite believe it.

"You know she's divorced?" Scott asked.

"Yes."

Scott nodded. "Evie knows more about it than I do. And, of course, about the other guy."

His head came up. The other guy? "I don't—"

"He died about five years ago," his cousin said, and drank some beer. "They were engaged, that's all I know."

Gabe's insides contracted. So she'd lost someone. And married someone else. The wrong someone else. It explained the haunted, vulnerable look shading her brown eyes. But he didn't want to know any more. Hadn't he already decided the less he knew, the better?

"Not my business."

Scott's eyebrows shot up. "So no interest at all?"

He shrugged again. "No."

Scott chuckled. “You’re a lousy liar.”

I’m a great liar. His whole life was a lie. Gabe stood and scraped the chair back. “Thanks for the beer.”

He left shortly after, and by the time he pulled into his own driveway, it was past ten o’clock. There were lights on next door, and when he spotted a shadowy silhouette pass by the front window, Gabe fought the way his stomach churned thinking about her. He didn’t want to be thinking, imagining or anything else. Lauren Jakowski was a distraction he didn’t need.

And he certainly didn’t expect to find her on his doorstep at seven the next morning.

But there she was. All perfection and professionalism in her silky blue shirt and knee-length black skirt. Once he got that image clear in his head, Gabe noticed she wasn’t alone. Jed sat on his haunches at her side.

“Am I stretching the boundaries of friendship?” she asked, and held out the lead.

He nodded. Were they friends now? No. Definitely not. “Absolutely.”

She chewed at her bottom lip. “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

Gabe shrugged. “What’s the big emergency?”

She exhaled heavily. “He chewed off a piece of my sofa and broke the table in the living room when I left him home on Tuesday. Then he terrorized my parents’ cat when I left him there yesterday. Mary-Jayne said she’d take him tomorrow and Saturday. She’s got a fully enclosed yard and a dog, which will keep him company. But today I’m all out of options. I can’t take him to the store and...and...I don’t know what else to do.”

Her frustration was clear, and Gabe knew he’d give her exactly what she wanted. Because saying no to Lauren was becoming increasingly difficult. “Okay.”

“O-okay?” she echoed hesitantly.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Relief flooded her face. “Thanks. I...I owe you for this.”

Gabe shrugged again. He didn’t want her owing him anything. Owing could lead to collecting...and that was out of the question. “No problem,” he said, and took the lead.

“So dinner?” she asked and took a step back. “Tonight. I’ll cook. My way of saying thanks.”

His back straightened. “You don’t need to—”

“I insist,” she said quickly, and then looked as though she was itching to get away. “Say, seven o’clock?”

She left, and Gabe didn’t go back inside until she disappeared around the hedge.

* * *

Dinner. Great idea. Not.

What were you thinking?

Lauren spent the day chastising herself and making sure she didn’t let on to her mother that she’d somehow invited Gabe into the inner sanctum of her house, her kitchen and her solitary life. But she’d made the offer and it was too late to back out now. Besides, he was doing her a favor looking after the dog. Dinner really was the least she could do in return. He’d helped her out, and it was her way of saying thank-you. It was nothing. Just a simple meal between neighbors.

Only, simple seemed at odds with the way her nerves rattled just thinking about it.

She stopped by the supermarket on the way home, and by the time she pulled into the driveway, it was nearly six. She jumped into the shower, dried off, applied a little makeup and changed into loose-fitting cargo pants and a red knit top. By six-thirty she was in the kitchen marinating steaks and prepping a salad. And ignoring the knot in the pit of her stomach as best she could.

The doorbell rang at exactly seven o’clock.

Jed rushed down the hallway the moment she opened the door, clearly eager to get to his food bowl in the laundry.

“Hi,” she said, and stepped back.

"Hi, yourself," Gabe said as he crossed the threshold.

He closed the door, and she didn't linger. Instead, she pivoted on her heels and headed back to the kitchen. By the time she'd made her way back behind the countertop, he was by the door, watching her. She looked up and met his gaze. He looked so good in his jeans and navy T-shirt, her breath stuck in her throat. She noticed a tattoo braid that encircled one biceps peeking out from the edge of his sleeve. She'd never liked ink much, but it suited him. It was sexy. Everything about Gabe was sexy. His broad shoulders, black hair, dazzling blue eyes... The combination was devastating. And dangerous.

Be immune to sexy.

He moved and rested against the door frame, crossing his arms, and Lauren was instantly absorbed by the image it evoked.

"You know, you really shouldn't look at me like that," he said, and Lauren quickly realized she'd been caught staring. Or ogling. "I might start thinking you aren't serious about that vow of yours."

Her skin warmed. "Don't flatter yourself."

His lips curled at the edges. "I never do."

"I don't believe that for a second."

"Then what do you believe, Lauren?" he asked, and met her gaze.

"I don't know what you mean."

His stare was unwavering. "I think you do."

"You're talking about what you overheard at the wedding?" She shrugged as casually as she could manage. "I thought we'd agreed not to talk about that."

He half smiled. "Did we? You said you wanted a passionless relationship."

Her breath caught. She didn't want to talk about that with him. Not when her pulse was racing so erratically. She remembered how he knew her secrets. He knew what she wanted. "Yes," she replied and hated that it tasted like a lie. "Passion is overrated."

"Do you think?" he asked quietly, his intense gaze locked with hers. "And chemistry?"

"Even more overrated."

"That's a handy line when you're in denial."

She tried but couldn't drag her gaze away. "I'm not in denial," she insisted. "About...anything."

About you. That was what she meant. And he knew it, too.

"Good," he said, almost as though he was trying to convince himself. "Shall I open this?" he asked, and gestured to the wine bottle he carried.

Lauren nodded and grabbed two glasses and a corkscrew from the cupboard, laying them on the counter. "How do you like your steak?"

"Medium rare," he replied. "You?"

She shrugged. "Same. Did Jed behave himself today? No disasters? No sacrificial sneakers?"

He grinned and grabbed the corkscrew. "It was moderately better than the last time."

She laughed softly. "He's usually very civilized when Cameron is around."

"He's pining," Gabe said, and popped the cork. "Missing the people he loves most. It's natural he would."

Lauren nodded. "You're right. And it's only for a few more days. I heard from Cameron's house sitter this morning, and she's flying back into Bellandale on Sunday afternoon."

He passed her a glass of wine, and Lauren's fingers tingled when they briefly touched his. If he noticed, he didn't show it. "How long have you lived here?" he asked.

"Just over a year."

"It's...nice. My sister, Bianca, would love it," he said easily and rested against the countertop. "She's into decorating."

Lauren pulled a couple of plates from the cupboard. "Do you have one of those large Italian-American families?"

"There are four of us. Aaron is thirty five and the eldest. He's divorced and has twin four-year-old boys. And then there's me, three years younger." He grinned a little. "Then Luca, who's thirty and married to his IT job, and Bianca, who is twenty-six and the baby of the family."

She nodded. "And your parents?"

"There's only my mom," he explained, watching her with such blistering intensity, Lauren found it hard to concentrate on preparing their meal. "My dad died fifteen years ago."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry. Were you close?"

"Very."

She nodded again. "What did he—"

"Lung cancer."

The awful words hung in the air between them, and an old pain jabbed between her ribs. She pushed the memory off as quickly as it came.

"I'm sorry," she said gently. "I feel very lucky to still have both my parents."

"And there's only you and Cameron?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "And he's actually my half brother. Our mother married my dad when he was three years old. I would have loved a sister, though. I mean, we're really close, but a big family would be wonderful."

His gaze absorbed hers. "You want children?"

She nodded. "I always thought I'd like to have three kids."

He raised a brow. "With Mr. No-Passion?"

A smile tugged at his mouth, and Lauren couldn't stop her lips from creasing into a tiny grin. "Maybe. Hopefully. One day."

He looked at her oddly, as if he wanted to have an opinion about it but was holding his tongue. When he finally spoke, he surprised her. "You'll make a good mom."

"I... Thank you." The air crackled, and she avoided eye contact by feigning a deep interest in the salad she'd prepared. When he spoke again, she looked up.

"Need any help?" he asked, and took both wineglasses to the table.

"No," she replied and plated the food quickly. "I'm nearly done. Take a seat."

A minute later, she placed the plates on the table and sat down. For one crazy second she thought...no, imagined...that the mood between them felt a little like a date. A first date.

Stupid. They were neighbors. Acquaintances. Nothing more. So what if he was the most attractive man she'd ever met? Attraction hadn't done her any favors in the past. She'd been attracted to James, and that had ended badly for them both. This would be the same. And anything more than attraction was out of the question.

"So did you have a similar job in California?" she asked, determined to steer the conversation away from herself.

"Not really," he replied vaguely and picked up the utensils. "I worked as a lifeguard part-time at Huntington Beach, near where I lived."

"Cameron said the place has never run so smoothly. Do you enjoy the work?" she asked.

"Yeah...sure," he replied casually. "I like the beach," he said, and when she raised a brow indicating she wanted him to elaborate, he continued. "And I get to teach a few classes, lifeguard on the weekends and juggle paperwork during the week." He shrugged. "It's not exactly rocket science."

She was itching to ask him more questions. Cameron had told her he was clearly overqualified for the role at the surf club. She knew he didn't talk about himself much, and that suited her fine. Most of the time. But tonight she was interested. As much as warning bells pealed, she wanted to know more about him. She wanted to know what made him tick. She wanted to know why he'd moved his life from California to Crystal Point.

"Don't you miss your old life? Your friends, your family?"

He looked up. "Of course."

"I could never leave my family like that," she said, and knew it sounded like a judgment. She shrugged and sighed a little. "I mean, I'd miss them too much to be away for too long."

If it was a dig, he ignored it. Because he was so mesmerized by her sheer loveliness, Gabe couldn't look away. He shouldn't have come around. He shouldn't have thought he could spend an evening with Lauren and not get caught up in the desire that thrummed through his blood. She was tempting. And he was...tempted.

"You really are quite beautiful."

The words were out before he could stop them. She fumbled with her cutlery, and the steak portion on the end of her fork fell back onto the plate. He watched as she pressed her fingertips against her mouth and discreetly wiped away a little sauce.

"Um...thank you. I guess."

Gabe rested back in his chair. "You don't sound convinced."

"That I'm beautiful?" She shrugged. "I've never really thought I was. Attractive, perhaps."

"No," he said quietly. "You're beautiful."

She grabbed her drink. "Are you coming on to me?" she asked bluntly.

Gabe chuckled. "No."

She met his gaze. "Because I'm not your type?"

"I'm not coming on to you because you're exactly my type."

Heat filled the space between them, and a sudden surge of blinding attraction clung to the air. But it was best to get it out in the open. He wanted her. And he was pretty sure the feeling was reciprocated.

"Is that because of what I said about you...you know...at the wedding?"

"You mean when you told your friends you've thought about me naked?"

Color quickly flamed her pale cheeks. "Is that what I said?"

"Yes."

She shrugged and smiled a little. "Well, since you were there and heard the whole conversation, there's no point denying it."

Gabe laughed. He liked that about her. She wasn't serious all the time. Even without her natural beauty, she had an energy and humor that fascinated him. For a moment, Gabe wished he could wind the clock forward, to a time in the future when he could guarantee any promises or commitment he might want to make. But he couldn't. And wishes were for fools.

He pushed some words out. "I guess not. Your friends don't seem to approve of your plans, though."

"They don't," she said, and sipped some wine. "But they support me, so that's all that matters. You know how family and friends can get sometimes...as if they know what's best, regardless of how a person might feel about it."

Gabe knew exactly. "You don't like weddings much?"

Her eyes widened. "Sure I do. Weddings are...my life."

"Really?"

She looked at him. "Well, maybe not my life. My job, at least."

He heard hesitation in her voice. "But?"

Her shoulders dropped. "Oh, you know, pretending the fairy tale exists on a day-in-and-day-out basis can be monotonous." She shook herself and picked up the cutlery again. "Sorry, I don't normally complain about it. But you're..." She stopped and looked at him. "Even though a week ago I was convinced you were simply another ridiculously handsome but conceited jerk, you're surprisingly...easy to talk to."

A good bedside manner is essential....

How many times had he heard that?

Gabe shook off the guilt between his shoulder blades. “Oh, I can be just as much of a jerk as the next guy.”

She laughed, and the sound echoed around the room. “Well, thanks for the warning.”

He placed his elbows on the table. “Don’t thank me. I said I wouldn’t make a pass. I didn’t say it would be easy.”

Her cheeks bloomed with color. “Oh, because I’m—”

“Because you’re Commitment 101.”

“And you’re not?” she queried.

“Exactly.”

“Have you ever been tempted? Or close?” she asked and pushed her barely eaten meal aside.

“Once,” he replied and took a drink. “It didn’t work out.”

She stared at him, as if she was trying to figure out why. But she never would. He didn’t talk about it. Ever. She took a second, swallowed hard and then spoke. “Did you love her?”

“It didn’t work out,” he said again, a whole lot quicker than he would have liked. “I guess there’s your answer.”

Her brows arched. “So you didn’t love her? Not even a little bit?”

Gabe’s mouth twisted. “I didn’t realize there was such a thing as being a little bit in love. I cared for her, sure. But like I said, we didn’t work out. There’s no great mystery to it.”

He wasn’t about to tell Lauren that she was right—he hadn’t really loved his ex-girlfriend. He’d done her a favor by letting her go. He was sure of it. And besides, Mona hadn’t put up much resistance. Once she’d known she had an out clause, she’d left their relationship as quickly as she could.

Lauren bit her bottom lip, watching him. “So you got burned?”

He shrugged. “Not exactly.”

“Then what, exactly?” she asked.

“We split up,” he replied. “We went our separate ways. Neither of us was heartbroken.”

“Which leaves you where?” Her eyes were full of questions. “Working at the surf club and having casual relationships and sex with women who are equally uninterested in commitment?”

“Ah...I suppose.”

“Well, that sounds...like fun.”

Not.

That was what she was thinking. Shallow and meaningless and hollow. Gabe thought so, too...even though he’d drilled himself to accept his present and future. But he suddenly lost his appetite.

“It is what it is,” he said, and pushed back in his seat. “I’m not looking for...anything.”

She watched him, her brown eyes darkening. “I’ve always believed that we’re all looking for something...love or sex, belonging, companionship. Or maybe something more complicated, like peace of mind...or even isolation.”

Which one are you looking for?

That was the question in her words. Gabe shrugged a shoulder casually. She was so close to the truth. “Is that why your marriage didn’t work out?” he asked, shifting the focus back to her. “Because you wanted different things?”

She gripped her wineglass. “My marriage failed because my husband and I had nothing between us but fleeting physical attraction. Which isn’t enough,” she added.

It explained why she wanted a passionless relationship...sort of. “And now you’re looking for more?” he asked. “Or maybe less?”

“Sometimes less is more,” she replied. “Which is why I’m determined to think with my head next time...and not my—” she paused, smiling “—libido.”

Gabe tensed. Thinking of her libido didn’t do his any favors. “Or your heart?”

She smiled. “Precisely,” she said.

He remembered what his cousin had said to him the night before. She'd lost someone. She'd lost love and settled for sex. The fact that she now wanted a middle road made perfect sense. "Someone did get it, though?"

Her gaze was unwavering. "You mean my heart? Yes. Someone did."

"Who was he?"

Silence stretched between them. He shouldn't have asked. He shouldn't want to know. The more he knew, the harder it would be to stay away from her.

"My first love. My only love, I guess."

She said the words so quietly and with such raw honesty, his insides contracted. He didn't want to hear any more. "You don't have to—"

"His name was Tim," she said, cutting him off. "We met in college. I was nineteen and studying business. He was across the hall in engineering. We fell in love. A few years later we got engaged. And then..."

Gabe knew what was coming, but he asked anyway. "And then, what?"

She drew in a sharp breath. "And then he died."

"Was it an accident?"

She shook her head. "No. He was sick."

Sick...

Gabe's stomach churned uneasily, and he forced the next words out. "What kind of illness did he have?"

"Primary glioblastoma," she replied. "It's a—"

"I know what it is," he said quickly and pushed his chair back some more.

Brain tumor...

An aggressive, unforgiving kind of cancer that usually left a patient with months to live rather than years. It was all he needed to hear. It was time to go. He needed to finish eating and leave.

"I'm sorry," Gabe said, and spent the following few minutes pretending interest in his food. Even though he felt sick to his stomach. He pushed the meal around on the plate, finished his wine and declined the coffee she offered to make.

"I need to get going," he said as soon as he felt it was polite to do so, and stood.

"Oh...sure." She got to her feet. "Thanks again for looking after Jed."

"No problem. Thanks for dinner."

Once they reached the front door, he lingered for a moment. He liked her. A lot. She was sweet and warm and funny and so damned sexy, he could barely think of anything other than kissing her perfectly bowed mouth. He wanted Lauren in his bed more than he'd wanted anything for a long time.

But he wouldn't pursue it.

She'd lost the man she'd loved to cancer.

And he'd bet his boots it wasn't a road she'd ever want to travel again.

He needed to forget all about Lauren. And fast.

Chapter Four

Spending the evening with Gabe confirmed for Lauren that since her divorce, she'd gone into a kind of lazy hibernation. She'd quit volunteering at the surf club, rarely joined her mother for the tai chi classes she'd always loved and avoided socializing regularly with anyone other than her two closest friends. It hadn't been a deliberate pulling away, more like a reluctance to go out and put on her happy face.

That needed to change.

Lauren knew if she was going to find someone to share her life with, she actually needed to start having a real life.

But that real life didn't include her sexy neighbor.

On Friday night she went to the movies with Cassie and Mary-Jayne, stayed out afterward for coffee and cake and got home by ten.

There was a light on next door. Lauren ignored the fluttering in her stomach and headed inside. As soon as she'd crossed the threshold, she heard Jed's whining. Minutes later she discovered her great plan of leaving him locked in the laundry was not such a great plan. It was, in fact, a disaster. He'd somehow chewed a hole in the back door, and his big head was now stuck between the timbers. Lauren groaned, cursed her brother under her breath for a few seconds and then attempted to pull the dog free. But he was lodged. His neck was wedged around the cracked timber, and she didn't have the strength to pull him free.

Surprisingly, the dopey dog was in good spirits, and she patted him for a moment before she grabbed her phone. She could call her father? Or perhaps Mary-Jayne might be able to help?

Just get some backbone and go and ask Gabe.

She reassured the dog for a little while longer before she walked next door. The porch light flickered and she sucked in a breath and knocked.

Gabe looked surprised to see her on his doorstep.

"Lauren?" He rested against the door frame. "What's up?"

He wore faded jeans that were splattered with paint, and an old gray T-shirt. There was also paint in his hair and on his cheek. She wanted to smile, thinking how gorgeous he looked, but didn't. Instead, she put on a serious face.

"I need help."

He straightened. "What's wrong?"

"It might be better if you just see for yourself."

He was across the threshold in seconds. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Jed, on the other hand..."

"What's he done now?" Gabe asked as they headed down the steps.

"Like I said, you need to see this for yourself."

A minute later they were in her house. They moved to the laundry and were facing Jed's bouncing rear end. And Gabe was laughing loudly. Really loudly. In fact, he was laughing so hard he doubled over and gripped the washing machine.

"It's really not that funny," she said crossly and planted her hands on her hips. "He could be hurt."

"He's not hurt," Gabe said, still chuckling as he moved across the small room and knelt down beside the dog. "The goofy mutt is just stuck."

"Exactly. He's wedged in and I can't pull him free."

He examined the door. "Do you have a hammer?"

"A hammer?"

"I need to knock a bit of this plywood out the way," he explained.

She nodded and grabbed the small toolbox under the sink. "I think there's something in here."

He opened the box, found the small hammer and got to work on the door. Jed whined a little, but Lauren placated him with pats and soothing words while Gabe made the hole large enough for the dog's head to fit back through. It took several minutes, but finally Jed was free and immediately started bounding around the small room, whipping Lauren's legs with his tail.

"Oh, that's good," she said on a relieved sigh. "Thank you."

"He looks okay," Gabe said, smiling. "But your door's not so lucky."

Lauren glanced at the door. The hole was bigger than she'd thought. "I'll need to call someone to fix it on Monday."

He nodded as he rose to his feet. "Sure. I'll board it up for you now so you'll be safe over the weekend."

Lauren's insides contracted. The way he spoke, the way he was so genuinely concerned about her, melted what was left of her resentment toward him.

Admit it...you like him.

A lot.

Too much.

"Ah—thanks," she said quietly and moved Jed out of the small room.

Gabe followed her. "Be back soon," he said as he strode down the hallway and headed out the front door.

He returned five minutes later with a large square piece of plywood, a cordless drill and a box of screws, and quickly repaired the hole. Lauren watched from her spot near the door, absorbed by the way he seemed to do everything with such effortless ease. Nothing fazed him. He was smart and resourceful and sexy and warmed the blood in her veins. Gabe made her think of everything she'd lost. And everything she was determined to avoid.

"Lauren?"

His voice jerked her back to earth. He was close. They were sharing the space in the narrow doorway, and Lauren's gaze got stuck on his chest and the way the paint-splattered T-shirt molded his chest. Her fingertips itched to reach up and touch him, to feel for herself if his body was as strong and solid as it looked. She remembered how he'd pulled her from the pool at the wedding and how his hands had felt upon her skin. It had been a long time since she'd felt a man's touch. Longer still since she'd wanted to.

Memories of Tim swirled around in her head. She'd loved him. Adored him. She'd imagined they would spend their lives together, loving one another, having children, creating memories through a long and happy marriage. But he'd never, not once, made her knees quiver and her skin burn with such blistering, scorching awareness. Even the fleeting desire she'd felt for James seemed lukewarm compared to the way Gabe made her feel. Her sex-starved body had turned traitor, taunting her...and she had to use her head to stay in control.

"I was...I was thinking..."

Her words trailed off when she looked up and met his blistering gaze. There was so much heat between them. Undeniable heat that combusted the air and made her stomach roll.

"Thinking?" he asked softly. "About what?"

Lauren willed some movement into her feet and managed to step back a little. "Your jacket," she muttered and turned on her heels and fled through the kitchen and toward the guest bedroom.

When she returned, Gabe was in the hallway, tools in hand.

"I forgot to return this," she explained and passed him the dinner jacket he'd given her the night of the wedding and which she'd since had dry-cleaned. "Thank you for lending it to me."

"No problem." He took the garment and smiled. "Well, good night."

"Ah—and thanks again for freeing Jed.... Your saving me from disaster is becoming something of a habit."

"No harm in being neighborly," he said casually.

Too casually. She knew he was as aware of her as she was of him. But they were skirting around it. Denying it.

"I guess not. Good night, Gabe."

He left, and Lauren closed the door, pressing her back against it as she let out a heavy sigh. Being around Gabe was wreaking havoc with her usual common sense. He wasn't what she wanted. Sure, she could invite him into her bed for the night. But that was all it would be. He'd called her Commitment 101, and he was right. He'd told her he didn't do serious. He didn't want a relationship. They were too different.

* * *

When she arrived at The Wedding House the following morning, her mother was there before her, as was their part-time worker, Dawn.

"You look terrible," her mother remarked, clearly taking in her paler-than-usual skin and dark smudges beneath her eyes. Lauren wasn't surprised she looked so haggard—she hadn't slept well. Instead, she'd spent the night fighting the bedsheets, dreaming old dreams, feeling an old, familiar pain that left her weary and exhausted.

"Gee—thanks," she said with a grin. "Just a little sleep deprived because of Jed, but I'll tell you about that later."

Irene smiled. "Are you heading to the surf club this afternoon? Or do you want me to go? We have to have the measurements for the stage and runway to the prop people by Monday, remember?"

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