

Here Comes the Bride

Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

If Laurie Wilson could have controlled the weather for her wedding, she would have. She had controlled, planned, organized, and directed every other aspect of her special day. So when it rained for a solid seven days before the ceremony, Laurie exhausted herself with worry.

She could have saved herself the angst because August twenty-sixth arrived with an endlessly azure sky more like September than late summer. And in true silver-lining fashion, the rain had broken the deep August drought leaving the asters, woodbine, and rudbeckia that grew in the meadow beside Laurel Chapel in full, glorious bloom.

The day was as perfect as her dream.

So was her wedding dress.

The full-length mirror in the church's waiting room provided a stunning reflection of the woman who was about to become Mrs. Brandon Kopp. Alençon lace dripped from her gown's bodice while the Swarovski crystals along the sweetheart neckline sent colorful sparks of light

along the walls and ceilings. Laurie pressed her hands down into the yards of netting in the skirt, feeling giddy.

“You look gorgeous, princess,” Dad said from behind her, a tremor in his voice.

For the first time in her life, Dad’s pet name actually fit. The A-line ball gown was princess-worthy, and her thick, unruly tresses had been braided into a crown that now bristled with baby’s breath like a living tiara.

She turned around to find Dad, his hands jammed in the pockets of his dark gray suit, his dahlia boutonniere slightly askew. She stepped up to him and fixed the flower. “There,” she said, with butterflies flitting around in her core.

He captured her hand and gave it a little kiss. “I can’t believe my little princess is getting married,” he said, a sheen in his eyes. “But I heartily approve of your groom.”

“I do too,” she said with a grin. “And I’m happy the planning is finally over. I thought Mom and I would come to blows a few times over the last few months.”

The door opened, and Laurie’s bridesmaids invaded in a swirl of burgundy chiffon and laughter. Madison Atwood, Emma Raynerson, and Jessica Westbrook were dear friends from college, and Brandon’s sister, Roxanne, was the maid of honor.

“We’ve been sent to let you know that Brandon and the groomsmen are about to take their positions. It’s only a few more minutes,” Roxy said. “And I just wanted to tell you before the wedding toasts start that I’m so happy you’re going to be my sister-in-law. Brandon couldn’t have chosen any better.”

A wave of joy percolated through Laurie. “Thank you so much.” She gave Roxy a fierce hug. “Not just for saying that, but for holding my hand the last few months. All of you have

been terrific, really. I know I can get a little OCD about things, and you all have been so supportive, especially when Mom started throwing her weight around.”

A tearful and slightly giggly group hug followed, but it didn't last long because Courtney Wallace, the events coordinator for Eagle Hill Manor, opened the door and said, “It's show time, ladies . . . and gent.” The strains of Bach's *Air* — played on organ and violin — floated in from the sanctuary. A little flutter of excitement gnawed at Laurie's insides as her friends left the room, lined up in the chapel's small vestibule, and, one-by-one, made their way down the aisle.

She took Dad's arm and looked up at him. He smiled and winked. “I love you, princess,” he said.

“I love you too,” she murmured, as the music changed from the Bach to Pachelbel's *Cannon in D*. She'd had a huge argument with Mom about this music choice. Mom wanted the traditional *Bridal Chorus* from Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*. But Laurie was a bit of an opera buff, and in her estimation the wedding in *Lohengrin* wasn't one she wanted to emulate since the bride ends up dead at the end of the opera. So no *Bridal Chorus* for her. She regarded it as bad luck.

Without the opening fanfare of “Here Comes the Bride” to signal her arrival, the wedding guests didn't rise to their feet very quickly. But they did eventually get the message. She gripped Dad's arm and looked ahead to where Brandon waited, dressed in a dark gray suit with his curly, almost-black hair falling over his forehead. He aimed his big blue eyes at her, and her heart beat a little faster.

They'd known each other for ten years, since freshman year at George Washington University. They had hooked up a time or two in college but not seriously until five years ago. Brandon was the love of a lifetime. The only man she'd ever slept with. Her heart swelled in

her chest as she arrived at the altar without tripping on the train of her dress. Thank God. She could check that worry off her list of possible disasters.

She looked up into Brandon's eyes. She'd imagined this moment thousands of times. His eyes would sparkle, maybe with unshed tears of joy. His mouth would curl at the corner and expose his adorable dimple. He'd wink . . .

Wait. She'd never imagined him frowning at her. What? Did he hate her dress? Was it too princessy? She knew it; she should have gone with the mermaid dress even though Mom hated it. Crap. The moment was spoiled forever.

The minister interrupted her inner rant. "*Dearly beloved. We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of—*"

"Wait," Brandon said.

"What?" The minister laid his finger down to mark his place in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Then he looked up at Brandon over the rims of his half-glasses.

The bodice of Laurie's dress chose that moment to become a tourniquet, shutting off her air supply.

"What on earth are you doing?" In the front pew, Brandon's father stood up with a thunderous look on his face.

Brandon ignored his dad. He kept staring at Laurie with panic in his eyes. "Uh, Laurie, um. . ."

"How dare you!" This came from Mom in the pew on the opposite side. Like Brandon, Laurie tried to ignore her mother while simultaneously trying to breathe.

"I can't," Brandon said.

“You can’t or you don’t want to?” Roxy asked. “Because, baby bro, there is a big difference.”

“I . . . Well both of those, actually.”

“What?” Laurie finally managed to push out the word and suck in a gulp of air.

Brandon took her by the hand, and the touch sent ice up her arm. She wanted to pull away from him but she was frozen in place. “Look, Laurie, you’re more or less the only girl I ever dated.”

“So?” someone asked. Laurie wasn’t sure but it sounded like Andrew Lyndon, the best man.

“I just don’t think either of us is ready for this. I mean, we don’t have enough experience.”

“What?” That was definitely Mom’s voice. “You’re twenty-eight years old, for goodness sake. You’re not a couple of teenagers.”

“Is there someone else?” Laurie could only whisper the words as the foundation of her world crumbled beneath her.

Brandon’s eyes widened. “No, never. I swear Laurie, I have never cheated on you. But I think we got on the wedding carousel and . . .” He stabbed a hand through his hair. “Shit,” he said under his breath as he turned away.

“If there’s no one else then—”

“I just want a break, okay? Like six months. You know, like a trial separation.”

“For crap’s sake, how can you have a separation if you’re not even married?” Dad asked in a tense voice.

Laurie glanced at Dad, still standing there waiting to give her away. His face had gone pale and grave. He turned toward Brandon. “What is it you want, son?”

“I just need time. You know, to make sure this isn’t a mistake.” And then he gave Laurie a sweet, sad smile and said, “And you need time too, Laurie. I think it would be good if we saw other people. Really. And then we can decide.”

“Are you crazy? I love you. I don’t want to see other people.”

He shook his head. “I’m really sorry. I know you spent a lot of time and money planning all this.” He turned and strode down the aisle and out of the chapel. His father climbed over a couple of wedding guests and hit the aisle at a dead run. Laurie hoped the old guy didn’t give himself a heart attack chasing after his son.

Roxy must have had the same thought because she dropped her bouquet and tore after Mr. Kopp saying, “Daddy don’t kill yourself.”

Dad glanced at Mom and snarled something obscene while the wedding guests went ominously silent, except for Mom who collapsed in the front pew, openly weeping and maybe even wailing a little.

Someone grabbed Laurie by the hand. “Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

She looked up. Andrew Lyndon, the best man. Funny how he’d stayed and Roxy had gone. He tugged her forward, and she followed him down the aisle like a confused puppy. Behind her, the bridesmaids and the groomsmen followed in a disorderly retreat, and all Laurie could think about was that the musicians were supposed to play Mendelssohn’s *Wedding March* during the recessional.

#####

Andrew marched out of the chapel and down the path to the inn, his little sister Amy running ahead of him clearing the way. Behind him, the remaining bridesmaids and groomsmen, including his brother Edward and cousins Matt and Jason, followed like a formally-clad flash mob.

They hurried across the lawn, into the inn, up the sweeping staircase, and arrived at the Churchill Suite--Eagle Hill Manor's signature guest room on the second floor. Amy, who was also an assistant wedding planner at the inn, opened the door with her passkey.

"C'mon boys, let's go get wine," Amy said, snagging Andrew's brother and cousins. She looked up at Andrew. "We'll be back. In the meantime, you hold down the fort. I can't think of anyone better. You are the most levelheaded member of the Lyndon family." She winked and gave him a sisterly smile.

Wow, Amy had really grown up in the last year. Instead of a spoiled brat without ambition or focus, she had grown up to become a clever and competent woman. She'd married Dusty McNeil earlier in the summer over everyone's objections, including his own. But as it turned out, everyone was wrong. Amy and Dusty were wildly happy, and Dusty had been exactly the medicine Amy had needed to heal the broken places in her once-aimless life.

Amy took charge of Andrew's younger brother and cousins like a mother hen and ushered them down the hall, leaving Andrew to deal with the distraught bride. He guided Laurie into the room, which was cluttered with suitcases packed and ready for a five-day honeymoon in Bermuda.

He came to a stop on the Persian rug just inside the door. Now what?

In his professional life, he'd mediated plenty of disputes, from simple divorce cases to complicated disagreements between litigants. This situation had Humpty-Dumpty written all over it. No one was going to put this back together.

He turned and allowed himself to look Laurie in the face. Her big hazel eyes stared back oddly vacant. She might have been a wax statue, the way she stood stiff and unmoving without real expression. A beautiful wax statue, with her golden hair braided with flowers.

What kind of idiot walks away from a woman like this?

Before he could act, Madison, Emma, and Jessica closed ranks around Laurie and guided her to one of the wing chairs in the sitting room. She sank down into it, her big skirt billowing up around her, making her look like a frothy white cupcake.

"I think we should find Brandon's Camaro and mess it up," Emma said.

"Screw that, I want to kill him, not his car," said Jessica.

"Can I castrate him first?" Madison asked.

"But I love him," Laurie said in a watery voice as the first tear escaped the corner of her right eye.

"Oh baby, don't cry for that SOB," Madison said and then hurried into the bathroom, returning a moment later with a big wad of tissues that she pressed into Laurie's hand. Laurie accepted the tissues but did nothing to staunch the slow drip of tears. That controlled release of emotion wrenched Andrew's heart more than sobs could have. She ought to be disconsolate. She ought to be angry.

Fury boiled down in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't felt rage like this since last spring, when he'd gone after Amy's boyfriend in the mistaken belief that Dusty was taking advantage of his sister. Dusty, who knew how to settle disputes with his fists, had put a serious hurt on him.

So much so that he'd enrolled in a weekly Aikido class, where he'd learned something he'd always known. That the only way to diffuse a fight was not to fight at all, but to find a way to make peace. And yet, despite all the training in the dojo, Andrew still wanted to strangle Brandon. How could his best friend do something so outrageously hurtful? Andrew knew what being dumped felt like. Val had walked out on him two years ago without any kind of warning. He'd almost moved on, but he would never forget that feeling of lost trust.

The door banged opened and in walked Andrew's younger cousins, Matt and Jason, with several bottles of champagne and a big bucket of ice. Amy trailed behind with a tray filled with champagne flutes.

"We nabbed some of the champagne reserved for the wedding toast. We figured since it was already paid for, we —"

"Shut up, Matt," Andrew said, rolling his eyes toward Laurie. "And what happened to Edward?"

"Our dear darling brother decided to find Brandon and talk to him," Amy said, her voice unusually grave.

Damn. That should have been Andrew's job. Not only was he the best man, he and Brandon were almost like brothers. They'd been in nursery school together, and their parents were old and dear friends. Maybe he could diffuse the situation. Although if he were honest with himself, the only things he wanted to say to Brandon at the moment would probably not calm the situation down.

So instead of leaving the bride to talk to the groom, he nabbed a bottle of champagne and started pouring. When everyone had received a glass, Jessica raised hers and said, "Here's to castrating and then murdering Brandon Kopp, but only after we destroy his car."

The bridesmaids chorused “Hear, hear.”

Jason and Matt looked uncomfortable. Laurie just sat there holding her wineglass without drinking.

“Uh, I don’t really feel like killing or castrating Brandon, and if you mess up his Camaro, he’s going to be really pissed,” Matt said, ever the socially insensitive one.

Everyone looked at him as if he’d just farted in church. But Matt held his ground. “Look, you guys, Brandon is a friend. He’s more than a friend, really, since we all grew up with him and Roxy. I’m just saying that he should be praised for walking away if he wasn’t three hundred percent sure about getting married.”

“Get the hell out of here.” Jessica got right up into Matt’s face and almost pushed him out of the room. Good for her. It saved Andrew from doing the same thing.

“I think I’ll go too,” Jason said, leaving his untouched champagne glass on a side table.

“Uh-oh,” Amy said, once Jason was gone. “This is going to get messy, isn’t it? Like a divorce. Edward was pretty blunt with us. He said Laurie had enough support and someone should be thinking about Brandon.”

“Yeah,” Jessica said, “in order to torture him, slowly.”

Amy touched his arm, and Andrew looked down into his sister’s dark eyes. “You really need to do something before everyone gets angry with everyone else,” she said. “I hate it when the family’s in turmoil. And the Kopps are like members of the family.” There were tears in Amy’s eyes.

Why me? Andrew wondered. But he already knew the answer. He often played referee. But this time, keeping the peace might be impossible. Brandon breaking up with Laurie would shatter the dynamic of their tight-knit circle of friends and family.

Negotiating those fissures and cracks would be doubly difficult because Laurie's father, Noah Wilson, was Andrew's boss at Wilson, Kavanaugh, a law firm with a nationally respected mediation practice. For the last five years, Andrew had been busting his butt trying to make partner. This breakup would put him in an awkward position to say the least.

He downed his champagne and stepped across the room, sinking into the ottoman beside Laurie's chair. "Laurie," he said gently.

She looked up at him, her face marred by tear tracks. He wanted to pull her into his arms and tell her to weep and sob and yell, even though he knew from experience that none of those things would change the situation. Still, there was something to be said for the cathartic property of throwing things. He'd broken an entire set of dishes the day Val walked out on him.

No one knew he'd done that, of course. Andrew kept his emotions tightly reined when he was in public. Laurie was like that too. It was something he admired about her.

"What would fix this situation for you?" he asked.

"I love him," she whispered, her voice so tight it sounded brittle.

"So you'd be okay if he changed his mind and we started over? You still want to marry him?"

She nodded, biting her lower lip. "I certainly don't want to kill or maim him." She glanced at Madison. "Or mess up his car."

"Let me go talk to him, okay?" Andrew said gently.

"You can't be serious." Emma downed the last drop of her champagne and glared at him. "That asshole left her at the altar. That's like the worst humiliation a woman can suffer. It's like he —"

"Shut up," Laurie said, her voice surprisingly strong. "I'd take him back," she said.

“Okay, let me see what I can do.” Andrew got up and headed toward the door, but Emma followed him.

“You aren’t seriously thinking about talking Brandon into going forward with the ceremony, are you?”

“Why not?”

She rolled her eyes. “Because he’s a dickwad, and Laurie deserves better.”

“He wasn’t a dickwad two hours ago, was he? Maybe he just had a moment of—”

“Doesn’t matter who he was two hours ago. He walked away from her on her wedding day. And it’s not her place to grovel and ask him to come back.”

“I wouldn’t ask her to grovel, Emma. But if she’s willing to take him back, don’t you think it’s worth trying to see if that’s possible? The object is to find a win-win situation for both of them.”

“You’re unbelievable. Laurie is not capable of judging what she wants right now.”

Emma’s fists landed on her hips.

“And you are?” he asked, suddenly annoyed at Laurie’s best friend.

Emma shook her head. “No. But I think Laurie loves the idea of Brandon. I think she’s been overlooking a lot of problems with the real Brandon.”

Andrew let out a long breath. “Look, she asked me to talk to him, okay? I’m the best man, reasoning with the groom comes with the territory. And besides, I’m a mediator so talking to people in crisis is sort of my thing.”

Emma folded her arms across her chest. “Knock yourself out. But you aren’t going to change Brandon’s mind. My guess is that he’s been cheating on Laurie.” She turned and ducked back into the Churchill Suite.

Was there someone else? Andrew didn't think so. But he'd certainly been surprised that day when he'd come home from work and found Val all packed and ready to run off to her lover.

#####

Laurie looked down at the champagne flute, studying the way the late afternoon sun sparkled on the bubbles and her two-carat, pavé set, Tiffany engagement ring. She remembered the day Brandon had put that ring on her finger. It was at her birthday party, two years ago. She hadn't thought too much about the fact that members of their close group of friends each brought a balloon to the party with a single letter on it. But it all became clear when Brandon suggested a group picture with the balloons, which, when lined up in the right order, spelled out "Laurie, Will You Marry Me?"

Brandon had gotten down on his knee and presented the ring in its beautiful robin's-egg-blue Tiffany box. She'd loved the ring from the first moment she'd laid eyes on it. It was classic and maybe a tiny bit old-fashioned.

And now she would have to give it back.

Something broke inside her heart, and the tears she'd been trying not to shed welled up like a fountain. How could such a romantic man walk away from their wedding?

She slipped the ring from her finger. "Someone needs to give this back," she managed to choke out.

"Aw, honey," Jessica said, "you are not giving that back. You're going to sell it on eBay and pocket the ten grand. You'll need the money to fix up that house Brandon talked you into buying. Now drink your champagne. It'll take the edge off."

She did as she was told, and just as soon as she'd drained the flute, Madison refilled it. "I just don't get it," Laurie said through her tears.

“Neither do we,” Emma said. “But the important thing is that a man who leaves his bride at the altar is a jerk.”

Laurie shook her head. No. Brandon was a great guy. The problem wasn't Brandon. It was her.

She sniffled back her tears and downed another glass of champagne. Yes, definitely. She was the problem. She'd been a fool to think that they had a special relationship that could weather her problems in the bedroom. She needed to accept the fact that she was a dud when it came to sex. She was uptight and OCD and had trouble turning her brain off. Who wanted to be chained to a wife like that?

She downed another glass of champagne.

“So, girls, you know we really can't kill him or castrate him. But the Camaro . . . We could really mess it up,” Emma said in a solemn tone.

“Maybe we could find a bottle of spray paint and write the words, “Left the Bride at the Altar” across his back window,” Madison said.

“You're an amateur,” Jessica said. “I vote that we go to Lowes and buy a pickax and turn the Camaro into Swiss cheese.”

“That would be too obvious,” Emma said. “We should just put sugar in the gas tank.”

The girls continued to discuss ways of destroying Brandon's beloved car while they sipped several more glasses of champagne.

Meanwhile Laurie obsessed over all the things she'd done wrong. It was amazing that Brandon hadn't found someone else. Assuming he'd told her the truth. But it didn't matter because he'd lose interest in her as soon as she started playing the field. She bored him in the bedroom, and that's why he wanted her to date other guys. Maybe he thought she needed the

experience. Like the opposite of slut-shaming or something. But sleeping around would be like cheating on him.

Except it wouldn't be cheating. Not now.

The truth exploded on her like a stinger missile, and suddenly all the champagne she'd been sipping didn't want to stay down. She didn't make it all the way to the bathroom before she hurled it up.

Well, that was it. Her beautiful \$7,000 wedding dress was utterly ruined. Even if Andrew could talk Brandon into marrying her, Laurie now had nothing to wear to the wedding.