

Smitten

Chapter One

When Lizabeth Kane was five years old she wanted to grow up to be a fairy. She wanted skin that was as smooth and white as milkweed silk. And she wanted hair that cascaded halfway down her back in a luxuriant cloud of waves and curls that shone a sunny yellow by day and silver when washed by the light of the moon. She thought she'd wear a buttercup blossom when she needed a hat, and she'd go rafting on curled magnolia leaves.

At five Lizabeth understood that she was a human child and it would take some doing to shrink herself into fairy size, but she had confidence in falling stars and wishbones and birthday candles. She knew that fairies were tiny creatures, no bigger than a man's thumb, but it seemed to her that if a girl could grow up then she could almost as easily grow down. And if she could eventually grow breasts, then probably if she tried very hard she could grow wings instead. Almost all fairies had lovely gossamer wings, and Lizabeth wasn't sure how comfortable that would be when she wanted to sleep on her back or lean against the gnarled trunk of an enchanted tree to daydream. She supposed that would be part of the price she would pay for growing up to be a fairy.

In fact, that was about the only price exacted on an adult fairy, because for the most part, fairies did just as they pleased. They weren't stuffed into panty hose and sent off on a bus to earn a living staring at a computer screen. They weren't polite to incompetent employers for the sake of career advancement. And they weren't expected to prepare gourmet feasts for boring men who had only one thing on their minds... lasagna.

Fairies were indulgent, playful creatures, and even though two decades and several years had gone by since Lizabeth first decided to be a fairy, even though Lizabeth Kane now stood five feet six inches tall in her stocking feet, even though she was now thirty-two years old-she still had aspirations of growing up to be a fairy.

She no longer cared about whittling herself down to the average fairy height of five inches, or having milkweed skin or gobs of fairy hair. Lizabeth Kane wanted the pluck, the joie de vivre, the perfect thighs of Tinkerbell. Think positive, Lizabeth told herself. If she just put her mind to it she could be plucky, she could have joie de vivre-and two out of three wasn't bad.

She folded the morning paper under her arm and looked at the half-finished house looming in front of her. She had to be positive about getting a job, too. She was a single parent now, and if she didn't get a job soon, meeting her mortgage payment was going to be more elusive than obtaining Tinkerbell thighs.

She read the crude HELP WANTED sign stuck into the front yard and took a deep breath. She'd been on fourteen job interviews in the past five days, and no one had even given her a second look. She was overeducated. She was undereducated. She was inexperienced. She was unskilled. She was virtually unemployable. Okay, Lizabeth, she

said to herself, pulling her shoulders back, this is a new day. This is your last shot. And this is the perfect job. Perfect hours, perfect location, decent wages. Go for it! she told herself.

Matt Hallahan had been looking out an upstairs window. He'd watched Lizabeth fold her paper and chew on her lower lip while she stared at the house. Not a buyer, he decided. Buyers came in pairs and usually had a real-estate agent in tow. This woman looked as if she were peddling vacuum cleaners and he was her first customer. She was nervous, she was anxious-she was cute as a bug. Even from this distance he could see she had big blue eyes, a little nose, and lots of curly brown hair that hung almost to her shoulders. She was small-boned and slim. Not skinny. Her pink T-shirt stretched tight over full breasts and was tucked into a pair of formfitting, faded jeans. He didn't know what she was selling, but he admitted to himself that he'd have a hard time not buying it.

Outside, Lizabeth stiffened her spine, pushed her chin forward, and tiptoed through the mud to the front door.

"Yoo-hoo," she called. "Anybody home?" She gasped and took a step backward when Matt appeared at the head of the stairs and ambled down to her. He was big. He seemed to fill the whole stairwell. He was half-undressed, and he was gorgeous.

She felt her heart slam against the back of her rib cage while she made a fast assessment. At least six feet two inches, with broad shoulders and a flat stomach and slim hips. No shirt, cutoff jeans that rode low, a red heart tattooed on his left forearm. He had muscular legs. Great quads. And he was tan-everywhere.

When she finally dragged her eyes up to his face she found he was laughing at her. Smile lines splintered from deep-set blue eyes that were shaded by curly blond eyelashes and a ferocious slash of bushy blond eyebrows. His nose was sunburned and peeling.

"Lord, lady," he said, "last time someone looked at me that close was when I thought I had a hernia and the doctor told me to cough."

Lizabeth felt the flush spread from her ears to her cheeks. Get a grip, she told herself. Thirty-two-year-old mothers do not blush. She'd delivered two children, she'd learned to pump gas, she'd seen Tom Cruise and Cuba Gooding Jr. on screen in their underwear. She could handle anything. She ignored his remark and plastered a smile on her face.

"I'd like to speak to whoever is in charge of this construction project."

"That's me. Matt Hallahan." He held out his hand.

"Lizabeth Kane." He didn't rub his thumb across her wrist. He didn't give her an extra squeeze or prolong the contact. He just shook her hand. She liked him for that. And she liked the way his hand felt. Warm and calloused and firm.

"I'd like to apply for the job you advertised in the paper."

Matt missed a beat before answering. "I advertised for a carpenter."

"Yup."

His grin widened. Life was full of nice surprises. "You have any experience?"

"Actually, I haven't done much carpentering professionally. But I've hammered a lot of nails into things-you know, hanging pictures-and once I built a dollhouse from scratch, all by myself."

The smile tightened at the corners of his mouth. "That's it?"

"I suppose I was hoping it would be an entry-level position."

"Entry level in the construction business would be laborer."

Lizabeth caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "Oh. Well then, I'd like to apply for a job as a laborer."

"Honey, you're too little to be a laborer. Laborers do a lot of carting around." He squeezed her bicep. "Look at this. Hardly any muscle at all. You probably have one of those motor-driven Hoovers."

Lizabeth narrowed her eyes. She didn't like being called a wimp. "I can do a push-up."

"Only one?"

"One is pretty good. Besides, I've just started on my exercise program. Next week I'll be up to two... maybe three."

"Wouldn't you rather be a secretary? You could work in a nice air-conditioned office..."

"No," Lizabeth said firmly. "I would not rather be a secretary. To begin with, I can't type. I break out in hives when I sit in front of a computer screen. I can't do anything! You know why I can't do anything? Because when I went to college I majored in history. My mother told me to major in math, but did I listen to her? Nooooo. I could have been an accountant. I could have been self-employed. And if that isn't bad enough, I've spent the last ten years of my life reading Little Bear books and baking chocolate-chip cookies."

She was pacing, flapping her arms. "Now I need a job, and I can't do anything. If I don't get a job, I can't meet my mortgage payments. My kids will starve. I heard of a woman once who got so desperate she cooked her dog." Lizabeth gave an involuntary shiver.

"You have kids?"

"Two boys. Ten and eight. You see, that's why this job is so perfect for me. I only live about a quarter mile away. I've been watching the new houses going up, and I noticed the carpenters stop work at three-thirty. My kids get out of school at three-thirty. I wouldn't have to put them in day care if I worked here."

He looked at her left hand. No ring. He was doomed. How could he refuse a job to a woman who was about to barbecue Spot to keep her kids from starving?

"I'm much bigger than I look," Lizabeth said. "And besides, that's another thing about the job that's perfect. It would get me into shape. And I would learn things about a house. I need to know about fixing toilets and roofs and getting tiles to stick to floors."

"How soon do you have to know all these things?"

"The sooner the better."

Matt grimaced. "Your roof is leaking? Your toilet has a problem? Your tiles are coming loose?"

"Yes. But it's not as bad as it sounds. I bought this terrific house. It was built at the turn of the century and has gingerbread trim and elaborate cornices and wonderful woodwork, but it's a little run-down..."

"You're not talking about that gray Victorian on the corner of Woodward and Gainsborough, are you?"

Lizabeth nodded. "That's it. That's my house."

"I always thought that house was haunted. In fact, I thought it was condemned."

"It's not haunted. And it was only condemned because the front porch needed fixing." She paused in her pacing and looked at him. "You don't think it's hopeless, do you?"

He wasn't sure if she was talking about her house or his life after this moment. It didn't matter. The answer would be the same to both questions-yes. But he lied. "No. I think the house has . . . possibilities. It has... character."

Lizabeth smiled. She loved her house. It had a few problems, but it was charming and homey and just looking at it made her happy. She'd bought it in January, the day after her divorce had become final. She'd needed to do something positive. Give herself a symbolic fresh start.

"Maybe you could come over sometime and take a look at it. You could give me your professional opinion on it. I'm not sure which project I should start first."

His professional opinion was that the house should be burned to the ground. He wasn't able to tell her that, though, because his heart was painfully stuck in his throat.

It had happened when she'd smiled. She had the most beautiful, the most radiant smile he'd ever seen. And he'd caused it just by saying her house had character.

Lizabeth saw his eyes grow soft and sexy and worried that he'd misinterpreted her invitation. She hadn't meant to be so friendly. She didn't want to imply that she'd do anything to get the job. It was just that it was difficult for her to be less than exuberant when it came to her house. And in all honesty, she might have gaped at his body a tad too long.

"I didn't mean to sound so desperate for the job," she said. "This is my first construction interview, and I think I got carried away. I don't want you to hire me because you feel sorry for me with my leaky roof and two hungry kids. And I don't want you to hire me because... well, you know."

He raised his eyebrows in question.

Lizabeth was disgusted. She was making a fool of herself. She'd approached him about a job and had ended up telling him her life story, and now she was in the awkward position of establishing sexual boundaries. She'd been separated from her husband for a year and a half and divorced for six months, but she still wasn't especially good at being a sophisticated single. It wasn't a matter of time, she admitted. It was a matter of personality. She was an impulsive, let-it-all-hang-out, emotional dunderhead.

"Look," she said flatly, "I'm willing to work hard. I'm smart. I'm dependable. I'm honest."

She pulled a folded piece of lined notebook paper from her pocket and handed it to him. "This is my résumé. It's not much, but it has my name and address and phone number, and if you ever need a laborer, you can get in touch with me."

Matt unfolded the paper and studied it, trying to keep the grin from creeping across his mouth. "This is a spelling list."

Lizabeth snatched it back and winced as she looked at it. "I took the wrong paper. This is my son's homework assignment."

"Don't worry about it. I don't need a résumé. And it so happens I do need a laborer."

"You're not hiring me out of pity, are you?"

"No, of course not." That was an honest answer, he thought. He was hiring her out of lust. He didn't think she wanted to hear that, so he decided not to elaborate. "You can start tomorrow, if you want. Be here at six o'clock."

She did it! She got the job! If Matt Hallahan hadn't been so overwhelmingly virile she would have kissed him, but she instinctively knew kissing Matt Hallahan would be serious stuff. It would start out as a spontaneous act of happiness and gratitude, and it would end up as pure pleasure. A fairy wouldn't have hesitated for a second, but

Lizabeth Kane wasn't a fairy. She was a mother, so she gave herself a mental hug and smiled.

Matt couldn't help smiling back. Her joy was infectious. He stuffed his hands into his pockets, and wondered what the devil he was going to do with a soft, gullible, 125-pound laborer.

Jason Kane looked at his mother with the sort of cynical excitement peculiar to eight-year-old boys. "Man, this is awesome. My mom, a construction worker. You're gonna bust your buns," he said gleefully. "Those construction workers are tough. They have muscles out to here. They chew tobacco, and they have tattoos. Are you gonna get a tattoo, Mom?"

Lizabeth paused with her knife in the peanut butter jar. "Excuse me? 'Bust your buns'?"

"That's construction-worker talk, Mom. You'd better get used to it."

Ten-year-old Billy was less enthusiastic. "You sure you can handle this, Mom? You're pretty puny. And you're old."

"I'm not that old. I'm thirty-two!" She slathered peanut butter on a slice of bread. "I'm going to be fine. I won't be far away, and I'll have a good-paying job. You two can watch television until Aunt Elsie gets here."

Their eyes opened wide. "Aunt Elsie is coming?" they said in unison.

"She's agreed to come stay with us for the summer so you won't be on your own all day."

Jason sprang out of his seat. "Mom, Aunt Elsie is a hundred years old. She talks to pigeons."

"Aunt Elsie isn't a hundred years old," Lizabeth said. She put her peanut butter and jelly sandwich in a plastic bag and dropped it into a brown paper sack, along with a can of root beer and an apple. "Aunt Elsie is seventy-two and she's almost as good as new."

"They keep her locked up in a camp for old people," Billy said.

Lizabeth tossed the rest of her coffee down her throat. "I have to go. I don't want to be late the first day. And it's not a camp. It's a retirement village, and the man at the gate keeps trespassers out. He doesn't keep Aunt Elsie locked in."

Billy and Jason looked at each other as if they didn't believe her.

Lizabeth stood at the front door. "You guys know the rules. Don't open the door to strangers. Call Mrs. Fee next door if there's a problem. My work address and phone number are posted on the bulletin board in the kitchen."

Billy put his arm around his little brother. "Don't worry, Mom. I can handle it."

"Mmmmm." They were great kids, Elizabeth thought, but Jason had his "ice cream for lunch" look. Good thing Elsie said she'd be there by ten. She kissed both boys and locked the door behind her.

The morning air felt cool on her face. Birds sang. Cicadas droned. Harbingers of hot weather, Elizabeth thought, taking a moment to listen to the insects. Bucks County was lovely in the summer. Lush and green, the air fragrant with the smell of flowers, cut grass, and fresh-turned dirt. The land bordering the Delaware River was a flat, rich floodplain, steeped in history, dotted by quaint towns unmarred by shopping centers and suburban sprawl. This was where Elizabeth chose to live. Chase Mills, Pennsylvania. Seven miles from Washington's Crossing and a forty-five-minute drive from downtown Philadelphia.

Elizabeth wore jeans and a yellow T-shirt, and she swung her lunch bag as she walked. The smell of coffee percolating in kitchens carried through the open windows. The newspaper boy cut through front yards, slinging his papers onto porches. Elizabeth could hear him marching up Gainsborough Drive. Thunk, the paper would hit against a front door. A patch of silence and then another thunk.

In new neighborhoods, like the small cul-de-sac Matt was building, there would be the whirl of central air conditioners. Elizabeth's street had no whirring sounds. The houses on Elizabeth's street were old, each one unique, built before the age of the subdivision, and they lacked some of the fancier amenities. The sidewalks were cracked and sometimes tilted from tree roots snaking beneath them. Houses sat back from the street, shaded by mature, thickly leaved maples and hundred-year-old oaks. Bicycles waited on wooden porches that wrapped around clapboard houses. It was a family neighborhood that was gently dealing with midlife crises. A few homes had succumbed to vinyl siding, but as yet no one had installed a hot tub. Dogs ran loose. Lawns were trimmed but were far from manicured. There was too much shade, too many roots, too many tiny feet tramping through yards for perfect lawns. Rosebushes lined driveways and grew along the occasional picket fence.

Elizabeth walked to the end of Gainsborough Drive and turned into the new, blacktopped cul-de-sac that pushed into a small bit of woods. There were three houses under construction. There was room for four more. A plumber's truck was parked in front of the first house, which was a large colonial, almost completed. Two pickups and a jeep were parked farther down the street. A radio blared. Hammers rhythmically slammed into wood, and from inside one of the houses a saw whined.

Elizabeth could barely hear any of it over the pounding of her heart. She wiped sweaty palms on her jeans and tried to move forward, but her feet refused to budge. She had no business being here! She belonged back home, in her kitchen.

Elizabeth, she told herself, you're a liberated woman. There's no reason for you to live your life in a kitchen. Yes there is, she silently wailed, I like my kitchen. I feel comfortable there. I know how to use a food processor. I do not know how to use a caulking gun.

Okay, bottom line. She didn't get paid for working in her kitchen. But why had she chosen this? What had she been thinking yesterday? The answer was obvious. She was thinking of her kids. She took a deep breath.

"Okay. I can do it," she said under her breath. "I'm ready. Come on, feet. Get going."

Matt's office was in a small corner of the colonial's unfinished basement. It consisted of a desk, a file cabinet, and a telephone. He spent the first hour of each morning on the phone tracking down building inspectors, roofers, landscapers, and carpenters.

As Matt finished his first call, Howie White stood at the top of the stairs and yelled down. "Hey, boss, maybe you'd better come take a look at this. There's a lady standing at the end of the street and she's talking to herself. I don't think she's got both oars in the water."

"Is she pretty, about five feet six, with curly brown hair?"

"Yeah."

"Her name's Lizabeth. Go fetch her. Tell her I sent you."

Five minutes later Lizabeth stood in front of the desk. "I was just getting ready to look for you," she said.

"I figured." He cradled the phone to his ear and poured out two cups of coffee. "Howie had other ideas, though. He figured you were waiting to jump in front of a bus."

"I was having trouble with my feet," Lizabeth said. "They were cold."

Matt handed her a cup of coffee. "Here. Maybe this will warm them up. I have to make a few more phone calls and then we can get out of this basement. As you can see, this is a pretty small operation. I have a partner, but he's in the hospital in a body cast."

"How awful. What happened?" Visions of failed building machinery filled her head.

"Fell off his kid's skateboard and broke his hip. Anyway, we own seven building lots on this cul-de-sac. We've got three houses going up. This one's sold. The other two are spec houses."

He saw the question in her eyes. "That means we're building them on speculation. We're using our own money to build and hoping to sell the houses at a good profit when they're done. We subcontract plumbers, carpenters, roofers, drywallers, but we do a lot of the work ourselves."

Lizabeth drank her coffee and watched him. He wore a black T-shirt tucked into a pair of faded jeans, and Lizabeth thought he was the most awesome man she'd ever encountered. He was a genetic masterpiece. He was freshly shaven, his blond hair was parted and combed, and his shirt and jeans still held the crease from being laundered

and folded. Concessions to civilization, Lizabeth thought. She wasn't about to be fooled by the crease in his jeans. Anyone with eyebrows like that and a tattoo on his arm had to be part barbarian

"Okay, I'm done." He pushed the phone away and flipped the switch on the answering machine. "I'm going to have you paint trim today."

It was the easiest job he could come up with on short notice. She wouldn't have to lift anything heavy, and she wouldn't be near power tools. He handed her a can of white latex enamel.

"All you have to do is put a coat of this over the wood that's been primed."

He gave her a narrow brush and led the way up the stairs. "You can put your lunch in the refrigerator in the kitchen, and feel free to use the phone to call home if you want to check on your kids."

"Thanks, but they'll be fine. My Aunt Elsie is coming to babysit for a while."

Matt nodded. He didn't want to leave her. He wanted to stay and talk to her about her kids, her Aunt Elsie, her sorry house. And he wanted to kiss her.

He wasn't sure why he found her so desirable. Lately, it seemed the women he met were far less interesting than the houses he built. Lizabeth Kane was the exception. Lizabeth Kane seemed like she would be fun. She reminded him of a kid, waiting in line for her first ride on a roller coaster. She had that frightened look of breathless expectation. He thought about the kiss and decided it might be considered job harassment. He'd been called a lot of things in his thirty-four years. He didn't want to add "sexist pig" to the list.

"Well," he said, "if you need me, just give a holler." For lack of a better gesture he gave her a light punch in the arm and left her alone with her can of paint.

Two hours later Matt looked in on Lizabeth. She'd made her way up to the second floor, and she was happily singing the theme song from Snow White.

"Hi ho, hi ho . . ." Lizabeth sang as she swiped at the woodwork on her hands and knees.

"Which one are you?" Matt asked. "Dopey? Doc? Sneezy? Sexy?"

Lizabeth stood. "There's no dwarf named Sexy."

Matt searched his mind. "Are you sure?"

"Trust me on this."

She had paint on her arms, her jeans, her shoes. It was in her hair, splattered on the front of her shirt, and she had a smudge running the length of her cheek. Matt couldn't keep a grin from surfacing.

"You're a mess." He reached out and touched a drooping curl. "You have paint in your hair." He'd meant to keep his touch light, his voice casual and teasing, but his hand lingered.

Lizabeth's breath caught in her throat when he stepped closer. She was scared to death he was going to kiss her, and scared to death that he wouldn't. They watched each other for a long moment, assessing the attraction.

Matt had always felt fairly competent at second-guessing women-until this moment. He didn't want to make any mistakes with Lizabeth Kane. He didn't want to come on too strong or too fast and frighten her away. And he didn't want to make working conditions awkward. And besides that, she was a mother. He'd never before been involved with a mother. In his eyes motherhood was in the same category as a Ph.D. in physics. It was outside his sphere of knowledge. It was intimidating. And the thought of bedding someone's mother felt a smidgeon irreverent. Not enough to stop him, he thought ruefully. Just enough to slow him down. He considered asking her out, but the words stuck in his throat.

He'd heard her brief intake of breath at his touch and wondered if it was an indication of desire or distress. Perhaps he'd just caught her by surprise. Probably she thought he was a dunce to be standing here with his heart on his sleeve. He dropped his hand and managed a small smile. "You have some paint on your cheek."

Lizabeth blinked at him. "I thought you were going to kiss me."

Matt grimaced. "I was thinking about it, but I chickened out."

She could identify with that. She'd backed away from a lot of frightening situations in the past ten years. Now she was trying to broaden her horizons, get some courage, assert herself. It wasn't easy.

Well, what the heck, Lizabeth thought, this was a new age for women. There was no reason in the world why she had to wait for yellow belly here to kiss her. There was nothing written in stone that said he had to be the aggressor. She took a deep breath, grabbed him by the shirtfront, pulled him to her, and planted a kiss on his perfect lips.

There was no response. Matt Hallahan stood like a wooden Indian with his arms at his sides, his lips slightly parted-in shock, rather than passion-his eyes open wide.

Lizabeth checked him to make sure he wasn't hyperventilating and kissed him again. The first kiss had been sheer bravado. The second was much more indulgent.

Lizabeth took her time on the second kiss. She slid her hands up the front of his shirt, enjoying the feel of hard muscle, until the tips of her fingers tangled in his blond

hair and her thumbs brushed along the lobes of his ears. She kissed him lightly, tentatively. She parted her lips and kissed him again with more insistence.

Matt's reaction was guarded. There were at least twenty men wandering around on the job site with easy access to the colonial. Howie was downstairs, installing a chair rail in the dining room, and Zito was hanging cabinets in the kitchen. Men's bodies weren't designed to conceal emotion, Matt acknowledged. Any second now he was going to do his Hulk imitation-the part where the Hulk's body swells up so big it rips right out of its clothes. This didn't seem like a good time for that to happen, so he placed his hands on Lizabeth's waist and gently pushed her away. "This is a little embarrassing..."

Lizabeth snapped her eyes open, made a small, strangled sound and smoothed her moist hands on the front of her jeans. Don't panic, she told herself. You just threw yourself at a man who obviously didn't want to catch you. It's not the end of the world. You read the signs wrong. No big deal. In twenty or thirty years, you'll get over it.

"Well, I guess that didn't work out, huh?" she said "It's okay; I mean, I can handle rejection."

"You think I rejected you?"

"I'm sort of new at this. I don't date much. In fact, I don't date at all. And the problem is I want to be a fairy..."

He pulled her to him and kissed her with a lot of feeling and in decent amount of tongue.

He broke away and held her at arm's length, taking a moment to let his pulse rate slow. "Would you like me to spell it out?"

"Nope. Not necessary. I think I've got it put together." She licked lips that felt scorched and swollen. "Maybe it would be a good idea to talk about this later... when my ears stop ringing."

Smitten on sale now!