Laura L. Walker

A novel from the author of *Pierced by Love*

This was the third time she'd called today. Gage Logan avoided verbal communication with his ex-wife whenever possible, but he knew he couldn't dodge her any longer. Impatiently, he answered his phone and barked, "Yeah, April?"

"Gage." April's voice came through sounding thin and reedy. "I need you to take Zachary this weekend."

Gage closed his eyes and cursed under his breath. He had to work this weekend. She knew that. "Why?"

The question hung in the air for a charged moment. Gage tugged at his tie and kept typing on his laptop while he waited for April's response. Her first two calls had come when he was meeting with potential clients. He really wasn't in the mood for this.

When would April get it through her head that he was no longer the naïve kid she'd married? For the thousandth time, Gage regretted ever having met April Westbrook. But then he wouldn't have his son, Zach. Still, even though he loved the little guy, Gage hated having to

deal with his ex-wife. Gage had been mesmerized by her porcelain-like face and smooth-as-honey voice. Only now, it was cold and shrill.

"My friend and I are going to Las Vegas."

Vegas. After everything that had happened between them, she was throwing *that* in his face? It stood to reason they'd be gambling on more than just the machines. At the very least, they were planning on getting smashed. She probably wasn't sober even now. His voice turned to ice. "This 'friend' doesn't happen to be your latest fling, does it? Ryker Payne, I believe?"

"Zachary told you about him?"

"Yeah," he said, scorn lacing his voice. "Hmm. April Payne. The name fits you."

"Don't be ridiculous!" April sniffed. "We're not going there to elope. I never want to try that again."

"No kidding."

"I didn't call you to rehash everything, Gage." *Everything,* meaning their brief and painful marriage. "I need a babysitter for Zachary. I know last weekend was your turn with him, but could you take him again this weekend, *pleeeze?*"

Gage sighed, recalling with a pang the trip he'd made last weekend from Mesa, Arizona, to Tucson to visit Zach. The little guy hadn't been his normally exuberant self. The sadness in Zach's eyes prompted Gage to ask him what was wrong. Zach had cried, "Mommy's boyfriend doesn't like me."

Perplexed at how a kid who'd just turned four could sense something like that, Gage had asked, "Ian doesn't like you?"

But Zach had shaken his head. "Ian doesn't come anymore. Ryker does." Further inquiry on Gage's part had revealed that the slimeball was calling Zach a brat and telling April that she would need to choose between him and Zach soon. A feeling of unease had been gnawing at him ever since.

Gage groaned. As much as he worried over Zach, he really didn't need any more complications in his life at this point. "Have your parents watch him," he said shortly.

"They won't!" she yelled back. "They gave me an ultimatum. Either I clean up my life or they'll file for grandparents' custody of Zachary." Her voice broke on the last syllable.

Gage hardened his heart against the onslaught. April's emotional breakdown seemed convincing, but he knew it was only a dramatic act. "They should. We both know that neither of us are in a position to take care of him."

Gage worked for the Arizona Diamondbacks organization as an account executive for premium sales, which meant that he was in charge of suite rentals, including the organization's swimming pool, the first of its kind at a professional ballpark. Gage loved working with a great team and meeting so many interesting clients on a daily basis. But his job, while lucrative, didn't leave much room for a personal life.

In truth, though, Gage knew that was only part of the problem. The thought of becoming a full-time father made him break out in a cold sweat.

"Please, Gage. I don't want my parents to take him. I'm tired of dealing with them. All they do is lecture me. I'm a complete failure to them."

Did April realize how pathetic she sounded? She'd never learned to take responsibility for herself. How had his life become such a mess?

His mind went back to that day three and a half years earlier when April had told Gage about their six-month-old son. Zach had been a honeymoon baby. Gage and April had divorced six months before he was born. Gage had been shocked, of course. He'd even taken a paternity test since April couldn't seem to stay with one guy for very long. The test had confirmed that Zach was indeed his child. Gage had felt completely out of his element, so when April declared that all she wanted was Gage's money, he'd gladly settled out of court, making arrangements for child support payments and monthly visitations. Then, three months ago, his guilty conscience—and a fair amount of manipulation on April's part—had finally convinced Gage to visit Zach every other week.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to involve his parents in his predicament, however. While they'd worried over his marriage to April and the fact that he continued to shun the Church, Gage had never told them about his son, partly because he couldn't handle his mother's censure and partly because everyone else's lives were neatly

falling into place while his was falling apart. Shame became the driving force behind his withdrawal from his family members.

Gage softened his voice. "Your parents will come around. They always do."

It was true. April's parents always gave in to her, either by paying her bills or being Zach's surrogate parents, all in the name of love. They had doted on April throughout her entire life, aiding her in the divorce that had saved Gage's sanity but cost him his self-respect.

Or what little he'd had left of it.

"This time they're threatening to take everything away. My car, my rent money. I'll be forced to live with them again and look for a new job. Or worse. Go back to school."

Gage couldn't stifle a sardonic laugh at that. As far as he was concerned, April was a brat. Maybe April needed some time away—not just a weekend—from Zach to figure out what she wanted to do with her life.

Could I *do it?* Gage wondered, not liking the direction his thoughts were taking. Could he really become more than a weekend parent? When Gage had looked in the mirror this morning, he'd noticed that he was starting to look more like his own father now. Though he had Jared Logan's nose, he'd always favored his mother. But his face had filled out and his jawline and cheekbones were less prominent. When once he'd had long black hair, now the shorter strands made these changes stand out even more.

Looking like his dad wasn't something to be proud of. Jared Logan had been a successful businessman almost from the time Gage had been born. But he'd neglected his family and created emotional wounds that were still hard for Gage to talk about to this day.

Knowing that he was not only starting to look more like his father but he had, quite literally, *become* his father left a sour taste in Gage's mouth. It was hard to break the cycle.

But his little boy needed a more stable life than what his ex-wife was giving him.

"I'll take him," Gage found himself saying, surprised by the feeling of rightness that settled over him. "And, April, just so you know, I agree with your parents. You need to get your life together. I'm going to file for custody of Zach. I think I stand a good chance at winning."

Her quick intake of breath followed by an expletive let him know he'd infuriated her. "You wouldn't!" she hissed.

"Watch me!"

"Fine!" she snapped. "You know what? Never mind about this weekend! I'll grovel back to my parents before I hand my son over to you."

Something in his gut told Gage not to back down. But he needed to calm her down so she would be reasonable. Working to keep his voice even, he said, "Look, April. Go to Vegas with Ryker. Zach can hang out here. He'll be fine."

Funny how her voice became sweet as honey in the blink of an eye. "Are you sure?"

"I'll meet you at noon tomorrow. Have him ready to go. We can talk about the other stuff later."

"I will. Thanks, Gage. See you then."

"Yeah. See you."

He brought up his brother's number on his phone. It was time. Time to end this charade and face whatever consequences his stupid choices had landed him in. He needed to tell his family the truth.

Pierce's deep voice came through the connection sounding cool and confident. Gage envied that. "Hey, bro. What's up?"

"Pierce, I need to ask you a favor . . ."

Valerie Levington Hall kicked the door of the dryer closed in frustration. When would she learn to check pockets for crayons before starting a load of laundry? Now Whitney's shorts and shirts and even a dress that she liked to wear to church had purple and green streaks all over them.

Yanking the door open once again, she pulled out the marked clothing to assess the damage. Some of the articles were turned inside out, affording Valerie the first glimmer of hope since realizing her mistake. Yes, they were salvageable. Others would need to be thrown away. Hot tears formed on her eyelids. This was just a minor setback. *Keep telling yourself that.*

"Whitney!" she called. "Come here, please."

Rapid footsteps sounded in the distance before her six-year-old daughter appeared. "Yes, Mom?"

Valerie held the evidence up. "How many times have I told you not to leave crayons in your pockets?"

"I didn't!" A look of panic came over Whitney's features. "Justin did."

Cocking her brow, Valerie eyed her daughter skeptically. The evidence clearly pointed to Whitney, considering that all of the clothing in this load of laundry belonged to her. However, Valerie couldn't discount her daughter's claim on the active five-year-old.

"Are you telling the truth?" She didn't mean to sound so harsh, but Whitney had been telling white lies lately. And since it was easy to blame Justin for everything because most of the time he really was the one responsible for the mess, Valerie was doing her best to teach her daughter accountability. Throwing ruined clothing away really hurt Valerie's budget when she could barely afford to feed and clothe her two children as it was.

Whitney's face scrunched up before her gaze turned downward. "Well . . . I think that maybe I forgot to take them out of my pocket. I'm sorry, Mommy." Whitney looked like she was about to cry. "I'll remember next time."

Valerie hugged her daughter, knowing that it hadn't been easy for her to come clean. "Did you find the invitation to Abrielle's party?"

"No, not yet." Whitney had been invited to a friend's birthday party, which was a big deal because Whitney was rarely invited to spend time with her friends outside of school and church. Valerie always appreciated others' consideration for her children, especially since she was so used to being misunderstood with Justin's learning

disorder. He'd been diagnosed with a mild form of autism. High-functioning, but autism nonetheless.

"Go look in your room." Whitney scampered off at Valerie's request.

It had been a trying day. She'd arrived late to work this morning due to the tantrum that Justin had thrown when she dropped him off at school. Yesterday's tantrum had been over the milk spilling from his bowl of cereal onto his shoes. Today's had been about not finding his favorite toy car to put into his backpack. Trying to adhere to the school's policy that no toys be brought from home, Valerie had hidden it. Thankfully, his classroom aide, Miss Jamie, had stood at the doorstep to greet him and take him for a short walk to help him calm down.

Of course, Justin had a difficult time following rules and helping others. He didn't understand the need to clean messes after he'd made them, although Valerie was working with him on that. He didn't understand about not having his favorite shirt available to wear when it was in the laundry hamper. Justin was smart—he knew his alphabet and numbers and could spell his own name—but he couldn't write it. His motor skills, both gross and fine, were something he and his occupational therapist worked on extensively at school.

With a pang, Valerie recalled sitting numbly in the developmental pediatrician's office after receiving the news of his diagnosis. While it explained why he'd been a colicky baby and such a handful as a toddler—he had not spoken a word until three and a half years of age

and was potty-trained just six months ago—it explained nothing at all.

What was autism? Valerie had known nothing about it. She didn't know anyone personally with this diagnosis.

She sure knew enough about it now. More than she wanted to.

Autistic behaviors ranged on a broad spectrum from children who didn't speak at all to children who were developmentally delayed, socially challenged, or required special devices to help them cope with their environment. Earphones for the loud noises they heard, weighted jackets to help calm their nerves when they became too agitated, and music or other soothing noises to help them block outside interferences were just a few of the methods of calming these children. Valerie had learned about them as a classroom observer at the preschool Justin attended, which was designed specifically for children with special needs.

Because Justin rated in the high-functioning range, Valerie was leaning toward the idea of placing him into a regular kindergarten classroom in the next school year where he would benefit from interacting with all kinds of children. Another advantage of this choice would be that Justin would attend the same school as Whitney, who was going into second grade, therefore eliminating the need to drive from one end of Mesa to the other each morning.

However, Justin's preschool teacher, along with the school psychologist, were advising Valerie that a better option might be to wait and give Justin the extra time he needed to mature.

Valerie was brought out of her reverie as Whitney's voice carried down the hall. "Mom, I looked everywhere for the invitation. It's not in my room."

"Go look in Justin's room. He may have gotten a hold of it." Come to think of it, Justin had been quiet for a long time. That was never a good thing.

At times like these, she lamented the fact that her marriage had come to an unhappy end, that it had never been what she'd envisioned it would be. She'd married Nick Hall in the temple, naively believing in happily-ever-afters. Since that day, however, Valerie had experienced more heartache and discord than she cared to remember. So often, she'd read about God's justice and mercy in the scriptures. But she had yet to figure out why her reward for doing the right things—getting married in the temple, honoring the priesthood holder in her home, and bearing his children—included divorce and subsequent single parenthood. Where was God's mercy in that?

Turning away from the laundry room, she walked down the hall toward Justin's room. She hated the fact that she'd become so jaded.

As an idealistic freshman in college, how was she supposed to know that Nick Hall wasn't the well-brought-up man he seemed to be? It wasn't until after they were married that his dictatorial side came to light. "Honey, that dress is too old-fashioned. Why don't you buy yourself something new?" The first time Nick had thrown her that line, along with his credit card, Valerie could hardly believe her good fortune. As a middle child growing up in a large family, she was

used to wearing hand-me-downs. But Nick provided well for her as a manager at his father's golf resort. She'd felt beautiful and special in the new dress Nick had helped her pick out.

But when Valerie came home with a pair of jeans from her favorite department store, Nick insisted she take them back. "What's wrong with them?" Valerie had asked in confusion.

He snorted. "Come on, Val. As my wife, you'll go with me to work-related functions and will need to dress appropriately. Even while you're out running errands, you'll need to represent our family well."

Swallowing back a rejoinder, Valerie did as he asked, cringing at the price tag on the pair of designer jeans she purchased from the mall instead. They wouldn't be able to keep spending like this if they wanted to eat. She was careful to wash her clothing very gently to make it last as long as possible.

She soon found out that she couldn't avoid Nick's outbursts completely, however. Valerie recalled another occasion when she'd been fixing dinner and realized that Nick had used all of the cheese she needed. Turning the burner off, she quickly drove to the corner grocery store, hoping she'd make it back home before Nick arrived from work.

No such luck. His Mercedes Benz—the one they were paying a second mortgage for—was already parked in the driveway when she pulled in. Valerie hopped out and greeted him with a smile and a kiss

in an effort to squelch the sense of foreboding that Nick's puckered brow had created. "Where were you?"

She held up the package of cheese. "I needed to make a quick run to the grocery store."

His eyes narrowed. "And you went without wearing any makeup? I thought we talked about this."

They had. That is, Valerie amended silently, Nick had talked and Valerie had listened. Nick had made his feelings quite clear on the subject. "As my wife, you need to—"

"Look the part," Valerie finished automatically. She knew that Nick was hoping for a promotion soon and Valerie couldn't risk it from being seen out in public with a hair or eyelash out of place.

His face softened as he pulled her into his arms. Stroking her hair, he crooned, "You're beautiful, Valerie. I want everyone else to see it too." Meaning she wasn't beautiful the way she was? She kept quiet, but underneath, conflicting feelings warred with each other, resurrecting old insecurities that Valerie had thought she'd buried.

Which were compounded when Nick suggested she highlight her hair like other women were doing. And when he gave her a mani-pedi gift package at a fancy salon for her birthday, she'd delighted in it —until she realized that he expected her to keep up with the routine. Valerie sighed. Really, she was a dirt-under-her-fingernails-kind-of-gal who had learned from her grandmother about edible flowers and the best potting soil. After they were married, though, Nick put a stop to her gardening fetish. "There's no reason to mar that beautiful

face by exposing it to harsh sunlight, honey. We can afford to buy vegetables. And if you want flowers on our table, put an order in for them. Who in their right mind wants to slave away in the hot sun and dirt, anyway?"

All of this should have warned Valerie that Nick's values differed from hers. Why hadn't she paid closer attention? Valerie berated herself as she picked up a few stray school papers and toys from the floor. Because she was living her dream of being married to a handsome returned missionary. Then, when Whitney came along, Valerie dropped out of school at Nick's urging. What he was saying was true, she acknowledged. "Our daughter needs you more than you need your education. I earn enough money for my family. You don't need the stress of trying to keep up with assignments while changing diapers and waking up for 2:00 a.m. feedings."

But if she thought life with a new baby was hard, Valerie was completely unprepared for the onslaught she faced with the birth of Justin a short year later. Their feelings of joy at having a son were soon replaced with worry over his inconsolable bouts of colic. "What are you doing to him?" Nick grumbled late one night after he'd gone to bed, yanking his T-shirt down and running a hand through his disheveled hair. Justin's howling hadn't stopped since Valerie's dinner had grown cold on the table.

"Nothing!" Valerie growled, hunger and a mounting lack of sleep compounding her frustration level.

"Well, you must be doing something wrong. Otherwise, he wouldn't cry like this. Did you eat something that didn't agree with him?"

With utmost effort, Valerie held her tongue. Whitney had taken to nursing from her easily, but even two months after birth, Justin still hadn't adjusted. His little body must be hurting for all his crying. But what to do about it?

"I'm doing the best I can." Valerie hated raising her voice to be heard over the baby's wails, but it couldn't be helped. She was beyond all coherence with stress and fatigue.

"Well, make him stop! I have an early meeting tomorrow morning. I need to get some sleep." Not knowing what else to try, she strapped Justin in the car seat and took him for a long drive.

The next three months were much the same. Valerie struggled to put one foot in front of the other as she rocked Justin, fed him, and burped him. She walked up and down the hallway with him. She rocked and fed and burped him some more. She walked up and down the hallway with him again. All day. Every day. Nothing soothed him. Nap times were a blessed reprieve. However, they didn't last very long.

Through it all, Nick seemed oblivious to her plight. Valerie remembered trying to hand the baby to him when he first walked in the door from work. "Not right now," he said on more than one occasion. "I've had a long day."

And she hadn't? "Please, Nick. I just need five minutes to myself." That included three for using the bathroom. With a drawn-out sigh, Nick grudgingly took the baby.

When Nick glanced down at her, his eyes widened in incredulity. "You haven't even showered or changed your clothes." With a lethal sweep of his eyes, he took in the dining table with the breakfast dishes still sitting on it along with the sticky floor where the lid from Whitney's sippy cup had come loose. "*What* have you been doing all day?"

"Taking care of our babies," she snapped, not bothering to tell him that Justin had just spit up on him. He'd find out soon enough.

Pulling Justin's little body away from himself, Nick stared down at his son as if he was a foreign object. "Surely you could find five minutes to grab a paper towel and wipe up this mess." Shoving the baby back at her, he did just that, his jerky movements punctuating his anger.

"I-I guess I could. But then Justin would cry."

"He cries anyway, so what's the difference? That's no excuse to leave the house looking like a huge garbage can."

Valerie strove harder to keep the balance between a semi-clean home, happy kids, and a happy husband. More often than not, the scales were tipped in Justin's favor.

"You're always coddling that kid and ignoring our daughter," Nick said just after Justin's second birthday. "You shouldn't give in to his

tantrums. And you need to quit allowing him to make so many messes."

"I'm trying, Nick. It's not like I want Justin to be this way. Something must be wrong, but I don't know what."

"Take him to the doctor."

"I just took him in for his checkup. Aside from a speech delay, the doctor said everything looked fine."

"Well, he obviously isn't fine. He doesn't talk, doesn't respond to me, and is totally focused on getting into stuff, even when we put it away."

"He does seem to have a one-track mind at times."

"No kidding. I'm sick of him disrupting our lives. We can't even have a peaceful dinner anymore. And we never get to spend time together." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her with a fervor that she knew meant one thing. Nick wanted her undivided attention.

As much as it hurt to hear Nick disparage their own offspring, she had to admit that what he was saying was true. But it wouldn't always be this way, would it? A frisson of fear crept in. What if Justin didn't get better?

Nick's voice softened as he caressed her cheek. "Let's get away, Val. Your passport is still current, right? My parents could watch the kids while we take a trip."

Mmm. Valerie closed her eyes and rested her head against Nick's chest, hearing the sound of gentle ocean waves lapping in the distance. "Sounds good."

Their plane to Tahiti took off a week later. Valerie and Nick enjoyed a much-needed break away from their kids. By day, they waded in the ocean and watched surfers battling waves in the distance. By night, they walked along Teavora Beach, holding hands and stealing kisses in the moonlight. There, away from the day-today stresses and worries of their lives, Valerie believed she and Nick were still in love.

But reality came crashing in on them much the way the waves had in Tahiti when they landed back on American soil. Back at her in-laws' home, Valerie had almost left the guest bedroom after gathering her children's bags when she heard Nick's voice coming from the monitor. "He'll be fine, Mom. You did the right thing."

"I did exactly what you asked me to. I'm not sure it worked, though. Nick, there's got to be something we can do to straighten him out. He can't continue to climb on everything and break stuff. Nor can he be allowed to throw his tantrums."

Nick sighed. "I know. I've tried talking to Valerie but it's no use. She won't listen to reason."

"She's teaching Justin bad behavior. We didn't let him get away with it here. He spent a good deal of time in time-out with your father. At times, he had to physically hold Justin down because the boy was so distraught."

Valerie bit her lip. Talk about being distraught! A feeling of disgust and ire built in the pit of her stomach as she learned that Nick's parents had pitted their will against Justin's and undermined Valerie's

parenting methods, all under Nick's sneaky direction. Spanking him for pulling down their curtains and keeping him in his bedroom until he stopped crying. Practically forcing him to potty-train when he clearly wasn't ready—and punishing him when he had accidents. What good did these methods do when the child couldn't respond in an appropriate way? How did they know that Justin understood the reason behind what they were doing?

Was it any wonder that Justin would hardly let Valerie out of his sight for the next two weeks? "That's it, Nick Hall!" Valerie shouted with Justin still clinging to her every time she tried to walk out the door just to go to the post office or grocery store, all while crying at the top of his lungs. "I will never go anywhere with you again."

Nick stalked up to her, his jaw clenched. He looked so angry that for a split second, Valerie wondered if he was going to strike her. "Oh, don't you worry your pretty little head about that, Valerie, because we're through. I've had enough of this brat. My mom tried to shape him up in the short time she had him, but you're too much of a pushover to let any real progress be made."

Shaking, Valerie asked, "What do you mean, 'we're through'?"

"Just what I said. I'll be in contact through my attorney." With that, he packed a bag and left, slamming the door behind him. Numb, all Valerie could do was stare in shock even with Whitney and Justin wailing—albeit for different reasons.

Valerie and Nick divorced soon afterward and she moved in with her parents. She worried about the possibility of a custody battle, but

Nick had wanted nothing to do with "that kid," instead only opting for visitation rights for Whitney. Valerie had sought help through Arizona's Early Intervention Program to get Justin the assistance he needed, which included American Sign Language or ASL, followed by speech therapy using picture cards or PECS, occupational therapy, and even potty training in a non-threatening manner when they all agreed that he was ready. A heady sense of relief enveloped her as the tremendous burden for Justin's day-to-day care was shared with others who actually cared for his well-being.

Living with her parents wasn't an ideal situation, however. Justin repeatedly ransacked her mom's pantry and her dad's tools, scattering them every which way. They'd had to put everything under lock and key just to keep him safe. Finally, in a state of exhaustion, Valerie's mom told her, "Honey, I love my grandson, but I can't take this constant chaos any longer. Your dad and I have a solution for you. When Grandma and Grandpa Skylar leave on their mission in two months, we would like for you to move into their house. You can take care of their lawn and garden while they're gone."

The arrangement had worked out terrifically for the past sixteen months. They would need to repaint the walls to cover Justin's scribbles before Valerie's grandparents returned from Des Moines, Iowa, but Valerie was feeling pretty good about the fact that she had kept her grandparents' place in northeast Mesa in one piece. Of course, they would need to find another place to live soon, but she again pushed that to the back of her mind.

“Mommy! Mommy! Hurry!” Whitney’s panicked voice carried from the hallway. “Justin got into your makeup!”

When she sprinted into the room, she came face to face with a happy little boy proudly wearing lipstick. Mascara streaked his face. Valerie almost laughed until she saw her liquid makeup smeared into the bed and carpet.

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