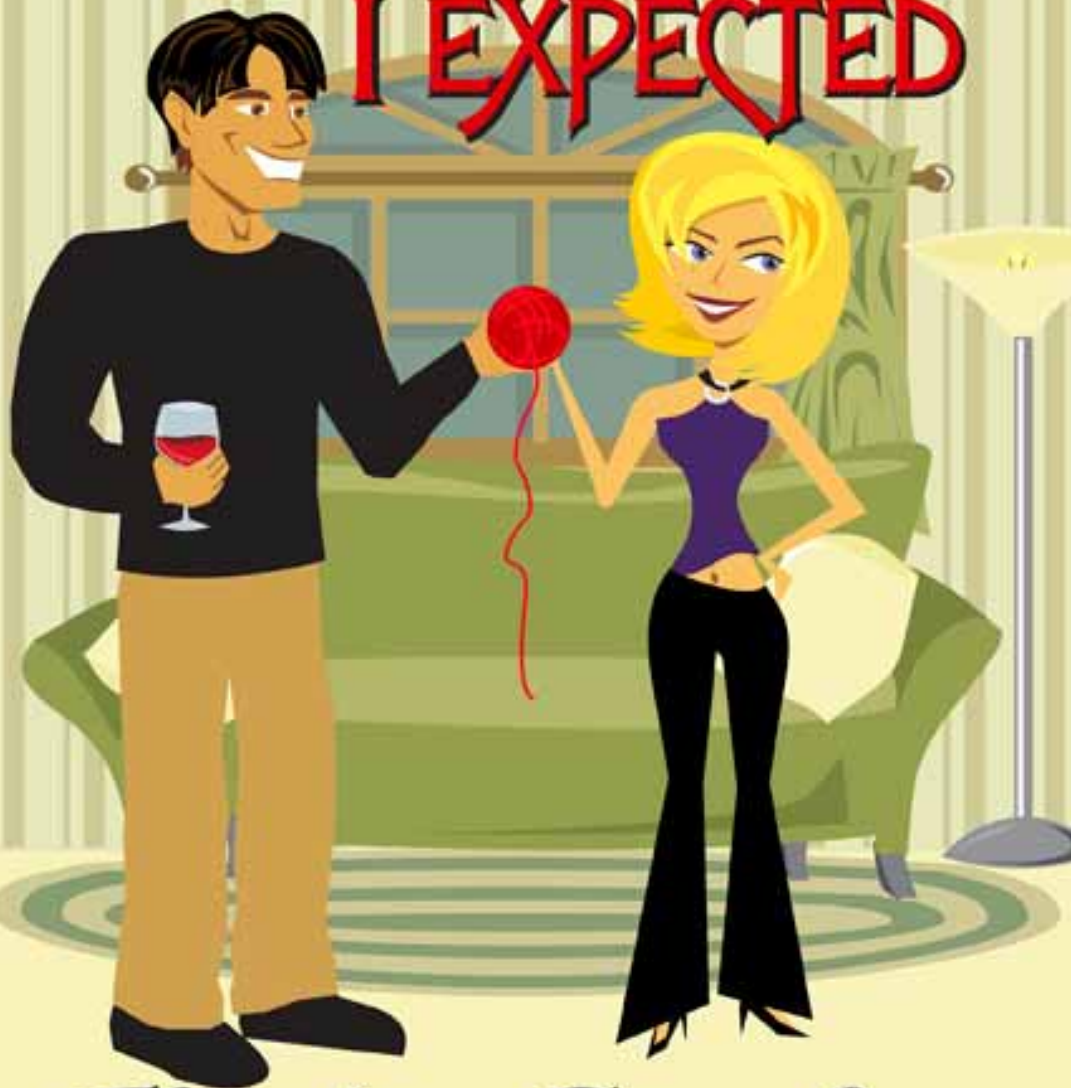


THE LAST THING I EXPECTED



Heather Rae Scott

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The Last Thing I Expected

Heather Rae Scott

Dedication

To my family for their never-ending support and patience. To Mark and my three amazing children, this is proof you should never give up your dreams. To the NYC posse—Kolette, Dee, Ann and Tanya for telling me I should write this story. To Crissy for taking a chance on me and Angela for making my words leap off the page. And last but not least to my Grandma H, I'm glad you got to see me soar.

Chapter One

“Oh, shut up. You aren’t cursed.”

Grace Adams placed the unpacked glass in the cupboard and sighed. An hour ago she wouldn’t have believed she was cursed either, but suddenly everything had fallen into perspective. Her best friend had no idea. As far as Grace was concerned she was cursed.

Tory Sinclair continued, “Look, Gracie, I don’t care what this woman—”

“Her name is Nancy Barnes.”

Tory blinked, not once, but twice. “Bottom line, you’re not broken, you’re just...badly sprained.”

Grace snorted. “You make it sound like ‘badly sprained’ is a good thing.”

“Sure beats the curse of Nancy Barnes.”

Grace stacked silverware into a drawer and looked around her disaster area of a kitchen in despair. “Have I said how much I detest unpacking?”

“Only a thousand times,” Tory groaned. “Okay, tell me about this alleged curse again. I want to make sure I have all the gory details.” Tory hummed the *Twilight Zone* theme, cracking up at her own humor.

Grace pinned her friend with a tolerant stare. “It’s not funny.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

"I told you, I was standing there at the school's Open House, meeting all the parents. When Kylie's mother, Nancy, shook my hand, she told me that I had a cursed aura."

"How does she know this?"

Grace shrugged. "Some people can see your aura, I guess."

"You didn't ask her how she knew?"

"There were too many people. What was I supposed to do?"

"Call security?"

Grace snorted. "Can you be serious here?"

"I will if you will." Tory began breaking down a box. "So she told you she had just the thing to lift this curse—a Pennsylvania Dutch ritual that's supposed to be the cure-all and end-all?"

Grace thought about what Tory was asking her for a moment. She'd never attempted anything like this in her life. Okay, she'd been known to throw salt over her shoulder occasionally, and she never walked under a ladder. "Yes."

"Who'd have thunk the Amish would be making up rituals?"

"Pennsylvania Dutch."

"Yeah, Amish people. And you call yourself a school teacher?"

Grace crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"I am helping you. Look, a fully functional and organized kitchen."

Grace decided it was time to change her tactics. "Living room next?"

"Absolutely."

Grace stepped out of the tiny closet-style kitchen and surveyed her new home. It was small, but designed so that one room opened out into the next, giving it an airy feeling. She'd have to arrange her furniture to section it off, but to do that she had to unpack some of the boxes first.

As if on cue, Tory held up a shoebox. "What are these?"

“Parking tickets.”

“Why are they in this shoebox?”

“Every morning, I wake up to one of these on the windshield of my car. Every single morning, I tell the apartment manager. His wife tells me to disregard the ticket. Yet,” she said, lifting a single finger, “every morning, there’s another damned parking ticket littering my windshield.”

“But you don’t have to pay them, right?”

“Not *yet*.”

“Why are you keeping them?”

Grace searched for a plausible explanation. “As long as I keep them, I don’t get a bill in the mail.”

“Throw them out, Grace.”

“If I do, then I’ll have to pay them or worse I’ll go to jail. Things work out that way for me. It’s my luck.”

Tory sighed. “Let’s move the table over there.”

“Okay.”

Once that task was accomplished, Tory surveyed the room and nodded. “Okay, I’ll bite, tell me what else the aura woman said.” She closed the shoebox and picked up another one.

Grace chewed on her thumbnail. “We didn’t have a lot of time to talk, I mean, parents were there. I tried to be nonchalant about it.”

“So, she gave you no cues—”

“She didn’t have to,” Grace interrupted. She leaned against a box. “Bizarre things happen to me and before you go rolling your eyes to the ceiling, you need to listen to me.” Grace drew in a deep breath. “I feel like I’m losing my mind. Last week, I had two flat tires, one on each side, and I don’t know how to change a tire, so off I went to the garage, looking like a dumb blonde. Then, I got milk that looked like cottage cheese from the

cafeteria, and the expiration date was good. I backed into the principal's car."

"So you had a bad week—"

Shaking her head like a mad woman, she said, "I haven't told you the worst part of this yet. I uh, had a faculty meeting that I almost forgot about. I had to go to the bathroom, really, really bad, so I hurried."

Tory giggled. "Let me guess, toilet paper on your shoe?"

"My skirt got caught in my pantyhose." Grace let out a small chortle.

Tory shook her head. "Only you."

"That's what I mean." Grace walked away from the table and into the living room area. "I mean, I didn't want to believe this lady, but as I was driving home, it occurred to me, maybe I *am* cursed."

Tory followed her in. "Honey, listen to me. Stuff happens."

Grace pounced on her overstuffed couch. "It happens to me a lot. Too much. What if it's just a stupid curse? And what's the harm in doing the ritual? Can I take that chance? Can I afford to ignore her? After all the stuff that's been happening I'm beginning to lose my mind. I think need to do this."

"Gracie, come on. It's bunk."

"No, truly, Tory. I'm serious. Shouldn't I pay attention so I can remove it? After all, I moved here to start over. We both know I was drowning living with Brad. What if all the stuff, the tickets, the bad relationships, the panty hose, the flat tires, what if it's not me?"

"Of course it isn't you."

"That's what I mean. I'm beginning to think that I'm some sort of pathetic loser." Grace held up her right hand, thumb and index finger extended, and made the shape of an L on her forehead.

"Grace."

Okay, fine, I've got nothing more to lose here. “Do you know *why* I’m here?”

“You moved to get away from Brad, to start over.”

“Tory, I was given no choice.” Painful color crept into her cheeks. “I couldn’t afford to stay there.”

“What?”

Grace covered her face with her hands and tried to hide her embarrassment. “I didn’t...I couldn’t tell you or Callie.”

“Oh honey, you know you can tell us *anything*.”

Grace shook her head. “Do you know how mortifying this is for me?”

“I had no idea. What happened?”

Grace opened a shoebox full of pictures and mementos she’d saved from her six-month relationship with Brad. “Most of these movie stubs, I paid for,” she said wistfully.

“Brad always promised he was going to get another job, he said he was going through this dry spell. So he planted himself on my couch, stuffed his face with junk food, and watched sports while I worked. I gave him the money to pay the rent.” She stopped. “I even lent him my credit card.”

She lifted a picture of the two of them in their old apartment from the shoebox. Brad had held the camera at arm’s length and taken the photo. She wished she could say the memory brought back a time when she was truly happy, but the truth was, she was in love with the idea of having someone home, waiting for her. Even if it cost her an apartment and a small fortune.

Tory took the frame from her. “Why on earth did you put up with it for so long?”

Grace shrugged. “Fear of being alone?”

“Grace, you should’ve said something—you should’ve told Callie and me. We could’ve done something to help you.”

“Like what?”

“Well, for starters, Callie could’ve beaten the shit out of him.”

In high school, they referred to Callie, Grace and Tory as the three amigos. They’d been inseparable. Grace had been the brains, Tory the flirt and Callie the terminator. No one messed with Callie. Of course her bark was much worse than her bite, but she didn’t take any crap from anyone. She was also a total realist. If it wasn’t in black and white, she thought you were crazy.

“There were days I would have taken her up on that.” Grace chuckled. “But it’s all past now. I want a new life, Tory. A fresh start the whole way around.”

Tory had that here-we-go-again look of disdain. “And performing curse-lifting rituals is the way to do it?”

How much more convincing does she need? “Yes,” Grace replied firmly. “All I need is someone to cut the string.”

“Why don’t you go ask hunk of muscles in 4F to help you?”

Grace felt her heart jump into her throat. They always swooned when they came to her apartment and caught a glimpse of her quiet neighbor. Not one of them had the nerve to say hello. Grace had her own reasons. Hunk of muscles was none other than Eddie Mancilla. A blast from her past, a secret crush. She wanted to see him, wanted to talk to him, but not this way. The last thing she needed was for him to see kooky Grace. She wanted him to see grown-up-can-handle-herself-Grace.

Besides, the last time she’d seen him things hadn’t exactly been the greatest. She’d embarrassed him. Not intentionally. Eddie always bailed her out when it came to algebra so when she’d seen the football players razzing him, she stepped in. She’d never forget the look on his face. And

of course, it made the teasing get worse. He was so tall and had a lot of excess weight, whereas Grace was tiny and petite. She felt a piece of her heart break that day. *Please, stop me from walking over there.* Grace made a move for the door. “He’s going to think we’re all crazy if I go ask him.”

Tory stopped her. “Explain what you want me to do,” she said with an exasperated groan.

“Thank you. Thank you.” She hugged her friend.

“Well.” Tory, ever the cynic, shrugged. “Don’t thank me yet.”

Grace did a little victory dance as she walked over to the grocery bag sitting beside the door. Reaching into it, she produced a spool of thick red twine and tossed it to Tory. “We need this,” she said with a smile. “Let me go to the bathroom first. I don’t want anything excess.”

Ignoring Tory’s exasperated sigh, Grace scuttled off to the bathroom, the tiny room so cluttered with unpacked boxes she could barely get in.

Finishing that, she went to wash her hands. She pushed up the sleeves of her oversized fleece and then decided to discard it altogether, not wanting to get the sleeves wet.

She began pulling the shirt up and sliding it over her head, but something felt a little strange.

Somehow she’d managed to get herself caught up on something.

Blinded by fleece, she turned to look and see what she’d snagged herself on, but then she realized if she moved the wrong way, she risked the infamous eye-gouge-by-big-plastic-zipper scenario.

Turning around, Grace froze. Something had her by the waist. A jolt of panic shot through her. “What the hell?”

She struggled with the jacket until she finally got the fleece up and over her head. Grace held the jacket in one hand, lifted her arms and looked down at herself. A strand of toilet paper snaked around her waist,

threaded its way up through the neck of the pullover she held in her hand and dangled alongside the inside-out sleeve. Somehow, she'd managed to get the toilet paper stuck in her sleeve.

"*Way to go, Grace,*" she hollered.

The only thing she could do at that moment was sink to the floor, sit in the small space available, throw back her head and laugh.

That was exactly where Tory found her.

Grace held up her hands, and her friend roared with laughter.

"Okay, I'm definitely getting a clearer picture now." Tory giggled. "We need to do this ritual before the Charmin really hurts you."

Back in the living room, Grace located her purse and pulled out a piece of folded notebook paper. "Okay, according to this, you have to measure the length of red string from my big toe to the top of my head. After that, the cursed person—"

"The cursee?"

Grace chose to ignore Tory's tongue-in-cheek remark. "The person who thinks they're cursed needs to wrap it from heel to toe seven times. If the string's too short, then I'm cursed. If I have string left over, I'm not."

"Sounds simple enough."

"Yes, with you helping, because unfortunately, I'm not a contortionist." Glancing at the paper again, Grace said, "Oh, but you burn the string when you're done for good measure and you chant."

"*Chant?*"

"Yes, chant." Grace squinted at the paper. "I think it says, 'Turner be turned, burner be burned, angels of flight, hear my plight.'"

"Charming." Tory arched one eyebrow a little. "The easiest way to do this, I think, would be to have you lie down, but, uh, there isn't enough room in here. Is your bed cleaned off?"

“Define clean.”

Tory waved her hand. “We’ll clean it off.”

Tory and Grace shifted clothing off the bed, putting it on top of boxes stacked in the room. They made the bed, and then Grace lay down on the flowery comforter.

“Scissors?” Tory asked.

“The drawer beside the bathroom sink.”

She closed her eyes as she heard Tory pad away. If this worked, there’d be no more little black rain clouds looming over her head. No more embarrassing moments, no more jaded love. She could be normal, just like everyone else. And maybe, with a little luck on her side instead of curses, she’d find true love.

“The bathroom’s an obstacle course, by the way. Why you hang on to so much junk is beyond me.” Tory snipped the scissors open and closed. “Okay, are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Grace tried not to squirm when she felt Tory touch her foot, dragging the red string up and over the length of her body. “You want a trim too?” She held the scissors close to Grace’s hair and snipped the blades together a couple of times.

“No, thank you.”

“It could use it.”

“Two more weeks and I’ll be in to the shop.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Tory owned her own beauty shop/parlor called Hair You Are. Grace didn’t trust anyone with her curly locks, so Tory had exclusive rights to her hair.

Grace heard the scissors snip again.

Tory sighed. "I don't know why you insist on reading something into all these little—coincidences. Okay, some weird stuff has happened lately, especially the toilet paper incident," Tory recounted with a chuckle. "But don't you think this is the tiniest bit extreme? I know you're spooked, but it's all coincidence. There's nothing wrong with you. You're fine. You're energetic, loyal and cute."

Grace sat up on the bed. "You just described a dog."

Tory blushed. "Please. Let me finish."

"I get the message." How could she make Tory understand how desperate she felt? She couldn't. Tory had no idea. She had to do this. "Give me the string."

Grace giggled as Tory held out the string to her. "After this, Grace Adams will no longer be anyone's...dog."

Tory shook her head, laughing. "I refuse to go there."

"Yeah, well, you already did. Here," Grace said, handing her the crumpled piece of paper. "Seven times, right?"

"Um, yes, seven times."

"Wish me luck."

"I don't have to, you're not cursed."

Grace frowned and wished herself good luck.

Untwisting the string, she wrapped it carefully from toe to heel and back again. Just like Nancy told her to. If she could wrap it seven times and have string left over, she wasn't cursed. One, two, three, four, five, six... Almost seven. Almost. It was too short.

"Oh my God," she cried, jumping off the bed. "It's true. It's true. I'm cursed." She stomped her foot on the carpet. "This is so unfair."

"Calm down and try it again," Tory suggested.

Grace fell back on the bed with a thump and repeated the steps. The string still came up a few inches short. “Shit.” She wanted to scream, cry—no, she needed to finish the ritual and burn the string, and fast.

Heading into her tiny kitchen, she found a pack of matches she used for lighting candles. Now she needed something to burn the string in.

“Aha!” She remembered seeing a coffee can tucked under the bathroom after the landlord finished painting her apartment. “He’ll never miss it.” She retrieved the coffee can and took it along with the string and matches to the middle of her living room floor.

“Who’ll never miss it?” Tory asked, joining her.

“My landlord.” Grace struck a match.

“Wait.”

“Wait for what? My fate is *literally* in my hands.”

“Do me,” Tory said.

Grace arched an eyebrow. “You don’t *believe* in this.”

“I know,” Tory said. “But I bet you that string will come up short for me as well.”

“Is there money involved in this, this bet?”

Tory giggled. “No, no money, only your sanity.”

There was a kernel of truth in that statement and they both knew it.

Grace measured Tory with the string from head to toe then watched with a creeping sense of unease. Maybe this *was* all nonsense. Tory wound the string around her foot seven times. She still had some left over.

“See,” Grace wailed.

“See what?” Tory balled the string up in her hand.

“You don’t have bad luck.”

“I most certainly do. Gracie, everyone has bad luck, including me.”

“Not like me. No one has luck like me.”

Tory shook her head slowly. "I'm telling you, this means absolutely nothing."

"Says you," Grace accused her. "You have plenty of string."

"Let's be logical here, okay. Maybe I didn't measure it right. It's not an exact science or anything. And you did for me. Maybe it's as simple as that."

"You're a hairdresser, for Pete's sake. I can't imagine you taking too much off...not when there's so much at stake." She rose abruptly. "We're not done. We have to chant."

"Look, I think maybe someone's been watching a little too much *Practical Magic*."

"If you were cursed I wouldn't be making fun of you."

"Gracie."

"Come on. We have to burn the string and chant."

"Wait."

"Wait what?"

"Where is that box full of Brad memorabilia?"

Tory grabbed the two shoeboxes they'd been looking through earlier.

"Start ripping up these tickets and pictures of you and Brad and all these other guys in this shoebox," Tory commanded her.

"Why?"

"We might as well make this a boyfriend slash curses-be-gone bonfire."

Fifteen minutes later, the coffee can was full of shredded pictures, movie stubs, parking tickets and greeting cards.

This would work. Grace knew it. She turned to Tory with a smile. "I'm about to be liberated."

Grace struck the match and leaned over the can—and her mind suddenly went blank. She was so excited, she forgot what she was

supposed to chant. She took a deep breath. *I can do this.* Lighting the match, she said, “Burner be turned, no. Turner be burned...no.”

“Oh for God’s sake. Where’s the paper?” Tory snapped. “Get the paper.”

“It’s in the can.” Grace yelled as the match burned down to her finger. “Got it,” she exclaimed as she lit another match. Lighting the end of the string, she chanted, rhythmically, “Turner be turned, burner be burned, angels of flight, hear my plight.”

A bright flame flared then flickered out, along with the match. “Damn.” She tossed the smoking match stem into the can.

Lighting another, she held it to the end of the string, and it started to burn. Reluctantly, but it was burning. “Say it with me this time,” she instructed Tory. “Turner be turned, burner be burned, angels of flight, hear my pli—ouch!”

Yes, this burner was indeed burned. Pain shot up along her index finger, and she instinctively tossed the match and the burning string into the coffee can and—poof. The contents of the can went up like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

“Shit,” she yelled as they scrambled away from the flaming can.

Flames licked out and above the rim of the can, popping, crackling and hissing. Thick black smoke filled the room in an instant, and Grace’s heart rolled out of her chest. *What have I done?*

Tory came to the rescue, grabbing the bottle of water she’d been sipping earlier and quickly dousing the flames. More smoke rolled out and Grace could hear the water bubbling when it hit. Coughing, Tory asked, “Are you okay?”

Grace didn’t answer her. *I’m an idiot. I should’ve known better.* All the should’ve, would’ve, could’ve scenarios ran through her mind, until the smoke alarm started screaming.

“Are you all right?” Tory cried above the noise.

Grace couldn’t help it. She laughed. Not just any laugh, *her* laugh.

“Oh, not that. Don't.” Tory grabbed her stomach. “I just ate. I can’t handle that sound right now. Not the braying donkey. Why the hell are we laughing?” Tory wiped her eyes. “You could have been killed. Do you still have your eyebrows?” That question sent Grace rolling on the floor. Tory sank to the floor, howling and holding her aching sides.



Eddie Mancilla thought he smelled smoke.

But then again, he’d fought a nasty blaze today, and those smells sometimes stayed with him, etched into his memory. He shrugged it off and resumed channel surfing, hoping to catch a glimpse of the day's work on one of the news stations.

The loud shriek of a fire alarm ripped his attention away from the screen. There was no mistaking that sound. Eddie’s brain went on autopilot, shoving his body out of the recliner and propelling him into the hallway.

Smoke billowed from underneath the neighbor’s door across the hall. He touched the door, making sure it was cool to the touch. From inside, he heard someone choking. His adrenaline kicked in. Checking the knob, which was also cool and locked, Eddie reared back and used his shoulder to bust through the door.

Paint thinner, mixed with the aroma of sulfur and other various chemicals, hit his nose. Making his way around an obstacle course of boxes, he finally got to the choking victim.

Only the woman wasn’t choking—she was *laughing*—hysterically. A riot of blond curls covered her face, but even after all these years, Eddie

would recognize that laugh anywhere. Grace Adams. Stepping back from her, he sighed. Of course, where there was Grace, there was also Tory.

Frickin' women, what the hell were they doing sitting on the floor in front of a smoke-billowing coffee can? Were they insane? Obviously, the chemicals were affecting their brains. He needed to get them out of there. He pulled Tory to her feet and then reached for Grace. She was still laughing hysterically. He wrapped an arm around each of them and half-carried them out into the hallway where he dropped them.

They sat on the floor before him, eyes wide, coughing and trying to control their giggles. "Stay put," he ordered. "I need to make sure the fire is out. By the way, I'm a fireman."

"Oh man," Grace snorted. "It just gets better and better."

Eddie shook his head and went into the apartment. He had to laugh. The dynamic trio was always up to no good—he wondered where Callie was. With his booted foot, he moved the smoldering coffee can toward the sliding glass doors that led to a balcony.

He hoped for their sake they weren't doing anything illegal in here. He hadn't smelled marijuana, but it could've been masked by the toxic fumes of the paint thinner.

Then again, starting a fire in a coffee can in the middle of the apartment wasn't exactly in a standard lease agreement either.

Once the can was out on the terrace, he left the sliding doors open, trying to get some ventilation going. He'd have to notify his company, get the chief up here and see what the police would make of all this.

Reaching into the pouch he always wore snapped to his belt, he pulled out his cell phone and stopped. The fire was out. No signs of illegal use of substance. He decided to give them a stern warning and go back to relaxing. No sense in calling out his company for something like this. He put his cell phone back and strode out into the hallway.

“Everything okay?” Tory asked. “She—we, didn’t blow the place up or anything, did we?”

Eddie shook his head slowly. “Do you realize how lucky you are? What you did was dangerous. You’re lucky to be alive. What were you thinking?”

He wondered if they even recognized him. Apparently not. No reason why they should. Seven years was a long time, he wasn’t the boy they knew in high school.

“I have to know—I mean, you had to know it was dangerous, right? Don’t you know you’re not supposed to light a flame near paint thinner? What exactly were you two trying to do?” Man, he felt like their father. Grace stood. Her normally pale cheeks were flushed a bright pink. She didn’t look at him with those big eyes of hers. No, she looked through him. Something that always fascinated him was the way her eyes would change colors, like a chameleon. One day they’d be green with flecks of blue in them, and the next they’d be the opposite. Hell, sometimes they’d even have browns and golds mixed in. Cat eyes. He remembered getting lost in them in class, particularly in Chemistry.

“We were performing a ritual,” Grace said with a sigh. She turned to Tory. “Obviously nothing is going to get rid of this curse.”

Eddie shook his head and smiled. “A curse huh? How much did you ladies smoke this evening?” Some things would never change. He almost couldn’t wait to share this story with the guys tomorrow morning. Another botched experiment he had to clean up.

They exchanged glances. “Smoke?” Tory asked him. “Neither one of us smokes.”

Grace shook her head. “He thinks we’re crazy,” she said. “I told you, Tory. See, right here is the proof.”

Tory looked at him. "We're not crazy, just a little unwell." She winked. "Grace thinks she's cursed."

"I can't believe this is happening to me." Tears welled in Grace's pretty eyes. "All I wanted was a new start, ya know?"

For some unknown reason, his chest tightened with a guilty pang. He knew all about wanting a new start, knew all about how far a person would go to achieve it. He also knew Grace, whether or not she remembered him. Right now, he preferred not.

He watched his two former high school classmates hug.

"Awe, honey, its okay," Tory soothed.

Grace looked over her shoulder directly at him. "I'm *not* crazy."

He nodded. "I need to know exactly what you did, though."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. When she started to talk, she wasn't looking at him. "We were performing an old Pennsylvania Dutch ritual a friend suggested to me. You have to burn a string. Tory suggested I do an old boyfriend bonfire too, just for good measure..."

A boyfriend bonfire? He couldn't repress a chuckle. "I'm sorry," he said, containing himself... barely.

"Amusing as that sounds." She began again, "I didn't think it would smoke up like that. We don't smoke, so I don't have any ashtrays, and the can seemed like a great idea."

"Where did you get the paint thinner?"

"It was in the can."

"You put it in this... boyfriend bonfire?"

"No, the landlord did."

Eddie took a deep breath. "The landlord was here?"

An expression of frustration spread over her face. "No. I suppose there was some paint thinner left over in the can."

"And you couldn't smell it?"

She held up her hands. "I've never painted a day in my life, unless you count finger painting."

"She's a teacher," Tory explained. "A kindergarten teacher."

Lord, Grace taught kids? What a shocker. Then again, he'd bet his life she'd never dream of him being a firefighter. Life took strange turns sometimes. A lot could happen in seven years, he knew that all too well.

"Look, mister? Do you have a name?" Tory asked.

Panic surged through him. Why hadn't he thought of that? He didn't understand why he was making such a big deal out of this. They were all adults; it wasn't like he hadn't shocked other people when they ran into him. Hell, a few months earlier, a former classmate flirted with him and then reintroduced herself to him. She'd had no clue who he was.

No longer was Grace looking past him while she talked, she was looking at him. *Busted*. Did she know who he was?

When Grace cleared her throat, he realized he still had her hand in his. "Sorry," he mumbled, shaking away the embarrassment.

Grace stepped back, her eyes never leaving his. If she realized who he was, she didn't give him away.

The distant sound of sirens made his ears perk up and probably just saved him.

"More firemen coming? We're not in trouble are we?" Tory asked.

"Great, *more* people to explain this to. I've never been so embarrassed in my life." Grace buried her head in her hands.

"It'll be okay." Tory wrapped an arm around her slender shoulder.

"You're not in trouble," Eddie told them. "I don't know where they're going, but it isn't here."

Tory stood. "Oh. See, Grace. Does that mean we can go back inside?"

"I guess so." He shrugged.

"Great, thanks." Tory walked past him, going into the apartment.

Grace stood there for a moment, scrunching up her features like she was trying to read his thoughts. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She headed into her apartment and then turned at the last minute, popping her head around the doorjamb. “See ya around...Manny.”

She knew who he was, but how? He’d changed. A lot. Manny had been his nickname in high school. His heart did a little flip flop before he could clamp down on the pure pleasure he experienced at seeing her again. Common sense overruled the pleasure. He didn’t need a woman in his life. Period. Especially Grace Adams. He’d saved her from enough jams back in high school. He’d liked it then, being needed, especially by her, but God knew Grace needed a full-time knight in shining armor. He didn’t have the time or the patience to deal with her now. Grace was clearly stuck in the spin cycle of the washing machine of her life.

He had enough problems of his own. He didn’t need hers compounding and further complicating them. Besides, he saved people for a living. By the end of his shift he’d done his quota of good deeds for the day. Grace was on her own.

He just hoped to God her next stunt didn’t involve fire. They were all lucky enough to have a roof over their heads after the boyfriend bonfire incident.

“God, please deliver me from this woman,” he said, closing the door to his own apartment. He just hoped this wasn’t another unanswered prayer since God never answered the others ones concerning Grace.

Chapter Two

Grace wrinkled her nose as she shut the front door. The acrid smell of smoke still hung in the air. She wondered how long it would take for the smell to dissipate. It was probably in the drapes, and in the furniture and the carpeting too. *The carpet.*

She scurried over, banging her shin on the coffee table as she went, and pushed past Tory who stood silently staring at the floor. “Oh no. Don’t tell me.”

Dead center of the beige carpet, brand spanking new beige carpet at that, was a coffee-can sized black circle. The heat from the boyfriend bonfire had conducted through the bottom of the can, scorching a circular pattern into the acrylic carpet.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. How am I going to explain this? This is brand new carpet. The whole place is new. I’m the first person to ever live here.”

Tory stood in front of her now, her hands on her arms. “Now don’t start panicking, maybe we can get this out.”

“How? I seriously don’t think ‘out damned spot’ is going to work here.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m thinking that’s a good place for the couch.”

“Tory.” Grace’s voice rose to hysteria levels.

“Calm down, okay. Let me think.” Tory focused for a long moment and then brightened, snapping her fingers.

“I think your luck may be changing, after all.”

Still flustered, Grace roared, “How the hell do you figure that? Look at the carpet.”

“All right, calm down.”

“This is as *calm* as I’m getting.” She eyed Tory as her friend grabbed her coat. “Where are you going? You’re not *leaving*?”

“Jeez, Grace, get a grip. I’m just going down to my car. I cleaned the shop this morning and my carpet cleaner is still in my trunk.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious. So, while I run to get Callie—”

“—Callie?” The voice of reason. Yes, this was just what she needed. Callie was always good at pointing and laughing. Her famous reply, “I told you so,” was usually right on the mark.

“Yes, Callie.”

Grace pinched her eyebrows together. “She’s going to have a field day with this.”

“She isn’t going to have time, we’ve got work to do.”

Grace groaned.

“You need to make this apartment look like a teacher has lived here for almost a month, instead of just moving in. This place is hideous, Grace, even for you. And if your landlord shows up here—hell, I’d evict you.”

Grace shook her head. “I have to teach tomorrow.”

“Coffee, learn to love it.” Tory walked to the door. “Grab your coat and let’s go. Time’s a wasting.”

“Hitler,” Grace mumbled, grabbing her coat and following Tory out the door.

“You’ll thank me later.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”



Fresh from a shower and ready to climb into bed, Eddie wasn’t surprised when he saw the light blinking on his answering machine. As if on cue, the phone rang. He’d forgotten to call his mother.

Yes, it was true, he was a grown man, but his mother still felt it necessary to talk to her sons on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Now that his brothers had married, they didn’t get bothered as much, their wives did.

Franny Mancilla was a typical Italian mama who wanted to make sure her youngest was eating enough, was still safe and warm, but more importantly, if he’d found a future Mrs. Edward Mancilla.

“Hi, Ma,” Eddie said into the receiver.

“Drat,” she said. “I’d hoped you were on a date.”

Eddie smiled. “Nah, Ma, nothing like that.”

“Oh, but *something* happened, I can feel it.”

He wondered if all mothers had that uncanny sixth sense. He’d heard the other mothers in the neighborhood telling their kids they had eyes in the back of their heads, along with eyes and ears all over the place. The idea had always freaked him out; however, there were times now, when he believed they were telling the truth.

“Nothing happened. My new neighbor tried to burn the building down tonight,” he said, hoping he wouldn’t regret it later.

“How’d they do that?”

Eddie tried to think of something fast, but he couldn’t and hell, maybe even his ma would find it amusing. He knew his pop would. “Do

you remember the girl in high school that I had as a chemistry lab partner?”

“Grace Adams. I always liked her, she was so nice, Eddie.”

He groaned and fell back on the bed. “You remember me complaining about her botching up our assignments, and that it was a miracle I even passed that class?”

“It wasn’t that bad was it?”

There she went again. “Yes, Ma, it was that bad. Anyhow,” he tried, hearing her yawn. “She tried to burn the whole place down, tonight.”

“On purpose?”

Eddie sat up. “No, at least I hope not. That’s the thing with Grace. I think if she tried to do something on purpose, *instead* of acting like such a dingbat, she just might pull it off.” He hoped she’d find that out on her own someday, take control of her life instead of letting it control her. A hard lesson, but one Grace needed to learn—for herself. “She doesn’t think. She jumps into things and pays for it. ”

Franny sighed. “You never liked spontaneity. I don’t know how that gene got misplaced in you.”

“I can be spontaneous.”

“Ha. You don’t have an ounce of it in your bones. Gino and Anthony, yes, but not my Eddie.”

“Maybe it’s because they got the Italian names,” he teased. He faked a yawn. “I’m tired, Ma.”

“You can go to bed after you tell me more about Grace.”

Falling back on the bed, he stifled a groan and rubbed his face. Next time, he wouldn’t answer his phone. “There’s nothing to tell about Grace, Ma.”

“What’d she do that has you so bothered?”

He rose from the bed. He needed to think and in order to do that, he needed to pace. “She doesn’t have me bothered, she just did something stupid tonight.”

He found himself in the living room, looking at his reflection in the plate glass of the sliding doors.

His plaid lounge pants did nothing for him, but he could tell all the crunches were definitely paying off. Gone was his protruding belly, replaced now with taut muscles stretching across his abdomen. Wasn’t a washboard, but he’d live with it.

His mother cleared her throat, and then he remembered, she was waiting on an answer from him. “She’s got this stupid idea in her head that she’s cursed or something like that. So she and her friend decided to perform an anti-curse ritual—”

“An anti-curse ritual?” Even his superstitious mother sounded doubtful about that one.

“That’s what I said. They decided to burn pictures of their old boyfriends in a coffee can and it got out of control.”

“My Lord. They didn’t get hurt?”

“Nah, but I told you, she’s kooky.”

Franny tsked. “Sounds to me like she needs a good man, like you.”

“Ma, you’re unbelievable. Not to mention certifiable.” Eddie laughed so hard he had to hold his stomach. He didn’t catch half of what his mother was saying, but then again, it wasn’t anything that he hadn’t heard before.

“...I don’t want you to count her out, she may have weird ideas, but you need to stop being such a snob,” his mother finished.

Confused as to whether she’d been babbling about Grace or someone else, and not sure if he should be pleased with her calling him a snob, Eddie shook it all off and said, “Yeah, I’ll try that, Ma.”

As his mother paused to draw breath for the next round, an unfamiliar sound reached his ears. He moved to the door and peered out his peephole. Nothing.

“You’re not getting any younger, you know. You’ll be twenty-seven this year.”

Eddie snickered. “Time to invest in a cane.”

He heard her pull the phone away from her face long enough to say to someone, “He’s in rare form this evening.”

He heard his father grunt something out, and then heard her earrings clicking back against the receiver. If he knew his pop, Anthony Sr. probably told her the same thing he always did—to mind her own damned business.

The noise was back. Sounded like someone dragging a heavy piece of furniture. Maybe. He could hear it bumping and scraping the wall, then thudding.

“Ma, I need to get some shut eye.” And figure out who was out there making all that noise. But if he told her that, there’d be ramifications he didn’t care to deal with at this moment in time. “Love you, talk to you soon.” He waited for her to say the same before he hung up the phone.

He liked this building, it was new, it was quiet and people respected other tenants, especially the “no noise after ten” rule. He opened the door and looked up and down the hallway.

Looking to the right of him, he shouldn’t have been surprised to see Grace wrestling with what looked like an industrial carpet cleaner. The cleaning solution was teetering on the handle of the cleaner.

A walking disaster, that. A beautiful disaster.

Eddie leaned back against the doorframe and watched.

When the cleaning solution finally fell and hit her slipper, Grace let go of everything and hopped on one foot in the middle of the empty

hallway. She switched from a hopping “my foot is hurt” dance, into a full-blown tantrum.

He watched her hair flying, her arms flailing, feet stomping, and wondered if she’d learned that little display from one of her students. He couldn’t help it. He had to laugh, and more importantly, he had to say something. “Feel better?”

Grace stopped and looked up at him with wide, shocked eyes. When she recognized that he was the source of the comment, her features changed quickly to annoyance. She asked, “And just how long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough.”

“Is chivalry dead?”

Eddie considered that an interesting way of asking for help. *Don’t get involved again, man.* “You’re doing a fine job, by yourself.” He chuckled. “I think that thing’s bigger than you are.”

“I’m glad you find this so amusing. But while you’re standing there, looking all *studly*, would you mind helping me?”

Did she just call him studly? No one had ever called him studly, least of all her. So, Grace Adams, cheerleader and all around Miss Popularity had called him studly. His ego swelled a notch. He fought an urge to form a ridiculous smile, even if his shoulders did suddenly feel a little broader and his chest a little fuller. Somehow, she always managed to make him feel ten-feet tall.

Closing the door without locking it, he took a step toward her. “You can handle the cleaner all by yourself, can’t you?” he teased, hoisting the machine along the hallway with one hand.

“Showoff,” she muttered, walking past him toward her apartment to unlock the door

She held it open for him as he drug the monstrosity into her apartment. "I don't think there's room in here for this."

"There has to be," she said from behind him. "And it has to take out that ring."

"Burned the carpet, did you?"

"Yes."

He patted the cleaner. "This isn't going to help

"Maybe it's rust."

"Grace. The can *burned* the carpet. It's a burn mark."

She scowled. "Okay. I'm not a complete idiot, but you're a fireman, how do *you* get things like that out?"

"You don't."

"No," she insisted. "It has to come out, there has to be a way or, or they're going to kick me out of here."

Don't do it. Don't you dare do it. Slowly back out of her apartment before she ropes you in again.

"They aren't going to evict you." *Damn it. He suddenly felt the urge to kick his own ass.*

"Why would a landlord want a tenant who ruined brand new carpet? I almost burned this place down."

"Grace. Just move the couch."

"That's not the point. They'll find out eventually anyway."

Hands on his hips, he shook his head. "Grace."

"I told you about the curse—"

"Would you listen to yourself?"

"Well, well, well, you didn't tell me there'd be eye candy," someone purred behind him. "Shirtless, too."

Oh, hell, he thought and turned to face Callie Roberts

“What have you gotten yourself into now, Grace?” She clucked, curiosity lighting her face. Eddie stepped out of the way as she brushed past to hug Grace.

Well, at least he wasn’t the only one who thought that way.

“This place is a mess,” Callie told her. “I thought Tory was exaggerating, but she was right.”

“As if I wasn’t mortified enough by all this,” Grace said, pointing toward Eddie.

Callie spun around and extended her hand. “Callie Roberts,” she said with a pearly white smile.

Accepting her hand, he introduced himself to yet another woman he’d gone to high school with. “Eddie Mancilla.”

A lot of people thought this reintroduction process was good for the ego. He guessed the first few times, yes it had been, but usually when they found out who he was, they all changed toward him. They didn’t act the way they used to when he was young and overweight. Women like Tory and Callie only came to him or batted their eyelashes when they needed help with homework. Grace had always been the exception and he never figured out why someone like her was interested in someone like him.

It truly irked him when this happened, he didn’t know why. He may have changed on the outside, but he was still the same Eddie on the inside.

Callie looked him up and down. “We went to school with an Eddie Mancilla.”

Grace sighed and explained, “This *is* the Eddie Mancilla we went to school with.”

He felt his lips tug into a wide smile. “So you actually did recognize me?”

Grace laughed. “Well, of course.

Grace bit her bottom lip. She hadn’t been sure it was him the first time she saw him out in the hallway a month ago, but there’d been something familiar about his eyes. No matter how much weight a person gained, lost or otherwise, their eyes never changed. Some people had a fetish with the opposite sex’s anatomy—Grace had a thing for eyes.

It was only a week ago when she was leaving for work that she heard his answering machine as she locked the door. His door had been cracked and the male on the other end of the phone referred to him as “Manzilla.” Everything flooded back. She remembered a chubby, overweight boy; a gentle giant with the heart the size of Texas. But the Eddie standing in front of her now was all man; lean, muscled and—damn sexy. Now there’s a word she never thought she’d use to describe Eddie Mancilla—until now.

“Wait. You can’t be,” Callie stammered, holding up her hands in disbelief. “You’re Eddie? Eddie...”

He blushed and ducked his head. “The *big guy* you had chemistry with. Yeah, that would be me.”

“No way.” Tory guffawed and covered her mouth with her hand. “I didn’t—You look great.”

“Great?” Callie asked. “He looks hot.”

Eddie shrugged. “Thanks,” he muttered uneasily.

“You knew?” Tory asked Grace, grabbing her by the elbow and spinning her around. “How did you know?”

It was Grace’s turn to shrug. “I just knew.”

“And you didn’t tell me? My, my, my,” Tory said with a slick smile. The one which told her friends she was now in flirt mode. Tory purred, “Day-um, you look good.”

"I was sidetracked by the carpet being burned." Grace found herself mildly agitated with Tory. Wasn't like she had dibs on Eddie or anything like that. Tory was a free agent. And as far as Grace knew he was eligible too. She didn't have any hold over him. No, she definitely didn't have dibs on him. Did she want dibs on him?

Eddie didn't seem overly fond of this newfound attention either. "You haven't changed a bit," he told her with a wry smile.

Grace cleared her throat. "Are we here to reminisce or are we here to help me, and yes, before any of you say it, for now, this *is* about me."

The sooner they got done, the sooner she could go to bed and try to erase this from her memory banks.

"I say we move the couch and cover the spot," Tory said.

"Nah, too obvious to have the couch in the middle of the room," Callie said. "I mean really, what *were* you thinking?"

Tory held up her hand. "I tried to stop her."

"You told her?" Grace asked, flustered.

Callie arched a perfectly plucked eyebrow. "I happened to be sleeping, takes an act of God to wake me up. She had to tell me something." She shook her head. "You're lucky the two of you still have hair on your heads."

"That's what I tried to tell them," Eddie added.

Grace shifted indignantly from foot to foot. "Okay, so it was wrong. I'm sorry. Anyhow," she quickly added, "Eddie says we can't get the mark out with the carpet cleaner."

"Throw rug?" Tory asked.

"Too obvious," Callie repeated.

Tory placed her hands on her hips. "Then what should we do?"

"I'm thinking if we get this place looking nice, then the landlord will open the door, and see how nice and clean it is and know it was a fluke, like when someone burns their dinner," Callie told them.

Grace shook her head from side to side, her ponytail hitting the side of her face. "But this is a brand new apartment, Eddie and I are the only tenants on this floor so far. I think he's going to look around. Come on, wouldn't you?"

"Valid point," Callie said.

Eddie cleared his throat and they all turned to look at him. "If you three can get these boxes out of here and give me about twenty minutes, I think I know how we can save Grace."

The words, "my hero," came to her lips, but never made it out. "We can do that," she said with a big, cheesy grin. "If you can save me as you put it, I'll buy you the biggest steak in Pittsburgh."

"No need for that," he told her and sauntered out of her apartment.



When the door was fully closed behind him, the three of them looked at one another.

Grace held up her hand. "No time for talking, ladies, we got work to do."

"Now that's not fair." Tory plopped down onto the couch. "I'm not getting up until you tell me how the hell you knew that was Eddie Mancilla, I mean, he has to have lost, what, a hundred pounds?"

"He looks good, that's for sure," Callie added.

"Okay, but when he said his name, I didn't catch on," Tory said as she examined her nails.

Callie giggled. "And that is supposed to surprise us how?"

Grace couldn't help it, she giggled too. It was a nice diversion. "Okay, can we get this show on the road or what?"

"How *did* you know?" Tory repeated.

Callie sighed. "Gracie, you know how stubborn she gets."

"I just knew it was him."

"How?"

"Tory, people change," Grace said, her voice raising an octave. "We all have."

"Not as much as that," Tory said as she got up and off the couch. "And not usually quite so deliciously either." She winked at Grace. "I'm taking the bedroom."

Callie snickered. "You know, it doesn't matter how you knew, Tory's pissed because she didn't."

What she *really* wanted to tell Tory, to ask her, was *what* it mattered to her. After all, neither Tory nor Callie wanted anything to do with Eddie back then. She loved her friends dearly, but in high school, it was all about being popular and looking good and how your friends looked. To be honest, she was surprised she lasted with them as long as she did, because after all, she never seemed to live up to her name.

Grace supposed she was right. "Time to start hanging these pictures on the wall, while you do what you gotta do to make this place look awesome."

Grace started unpacking boxes full of memorabilia. Things she'd collected over the years and only recently. She loved garage sales and older-looking items and of course, she loved the retro look and the very feminine flowery look. Everything she bought was eclectic.

She also loved taking pictures, so she had album upon album. Family pictures, pictures of her friends and anything else she found interesting. Buildings, lakes, kids playing. She took pictures of her

students and as a final gift, gave their parents little portfolios full of different events. They'd loved it at the school and she was sure the parents this year would appreciate them as well.

As she and Callie quickly straightened up and hung pictures, Grace considered Eddie's willingness to help her, even after all those years. As she considered his new and improved big, brawny form and the gentle kindness and caring reflected in his eyes, the words, *my hero*, kept slipping into her thoughts.



He couldn't believe it. Eddie shook his head as he measured a piece of carpet from his own apartment. To his chagrin and Grace's luck, they'd left remnants in one of the hall closets. He didn't think they meant to, because along with the actual pieces of carpet, they left tape, glue and other accessories, including a staple gun.

Why hadn't Grace made a big deal out of his change in appearance? Everyone else did. Was she so aloof that she didn't care? And why was it bugging him so badly? What did it matter?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, he'd bitched and moaned about others making a spectacle, falling all over him and not having the slightest clue who he was. It was obvious that even Tory and Callie were blown away by the change in him. They'd reacted predictably. But Grace gave him nothing. Nothing but grief.

And despite the mini lecture he'd given himself earlier while in the shower, here he was bailing her skinny butt out once again. She could've at least done one of her famous "Oh...my...God." But no. What was it she said? "Well, of course."

Eddie exhaled. Grace Adams would be the death of him. He just knew it.

He pulled on a T-shirt and grabbed the materials he needed. The sooner he got this over with, the better.

He trudged out of his door and walked the few steps to her door. He knocked and waited.

Callie opened the door and did a come on in motion with her hand. “Whatcha’ got there?”

“Remnants,” he told her as he brushed past. He couldn’t believe his eyes when he walked farther into the room. He wanted to ask if he had the same apartment. He couldn’t have been gone more than twenty minutes, and fifteen of them were to brood and try to make some sense out of what life had dealt him this go round.

The scattered boxes were empty, broken down and laying in a nice, neat pile next to the sliding glass doors. Pictures adorned the walls, the bookshelves were filled, and the aroma of apples and cinnamon wafted through the apartment.

One particular photo caught his eye and he stopped to get a closer look at it. A big picture—more like a poster—on the wall, of Callie, Grace and Tory. They were doing their version of “see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil.” Grace had her hands over her ears. The perfect choice for her.

Laying the carpet down, he knelt on the floor and pulled an Exacto knife from his lounge pants pocket and begun cutting around the burn mark.

“What are you doing?” Grace screeched from behind him, almost making the knife slip out of his hands.

Didn’t she know you weren’t supposed to sneak up on people? “I’m fixing the carpet, Grace.”

“You’re cutting the carpet.”

“Yes, I know that, see these pieces? One of them is going to fit perfectly in here and I’ll make sure you won’t see where it was spliced.”

“How are you going to do that?” Callie asked. “I mean, I see what you’re trying to do, but won’t there be seams?”

Eddie took another deep breath. He wondered if when people prayed for patience, God put people like Tory, Callie and Grace into their lives, to teach them that very lesson. “I’ve helped my family lay enough carpet to know what I’m doing.”

He was trying hard to keep his temper in check. Why did he have to explain everything? “If you let me do this, *without* bugging me, it’ll be done, and you can see for yourselves.”

Grace nodded. “Okay, we’ll be in the bedroom,”

Eddie, grateful for the reprieve, and the peace and quiet to complete his task, finished cutting the carpet. Pulling loose threads and making sure he had everything in place, he pulled out a tape measure and measured what he’d just cut. Cutting a piece off the remnant, he made sure it was going in the same direction of the other piece so there’d be no discrepancy. He set it down into the hole—a perfect fit.

He pulled it back out and using the tape, glue and stapler for good measure, he smoothed the carpet over with his hand and removed any stray pieces. Gathering up the evidence, he stood.

“Okay, I’m finished,” he called out. There was no way in hell he was walking into Grace’s bedroom. Too personal, too intimate, his imagination was way too active. He didn’t want to see where she laid her head at night, sheet up over her breasts, sprawled on her back. No he definitely didn’t need that image stuck on his brain. Shit. Too late.

The three women came down the hallway and walked into the living room. None of them spoke as they stared down at the floor.

“Oh...my...God,” Grace finally said.

Oh, sure, she’d say it for carpet, but not for all the weight he’d lost.

Grace sank to her knees and knelt on the floor. She ran her hand slowly over the pile of the carpet. She smiled up at him, her fingers still caressing the thick pile.

Not “the” look again. Eddie steeled himself not to react to the look on her face as she beamed up at him. The only thing his mind came up to focus on was that he’d never in his lifetime thought he’d be envious of a piece of carpet.

Grace extended her hand to him, and Eddie, flushed and breathing none too steadily, reached out and helped her to her feet.

She stepped toward him, gave a little jump, let out a squeal, and said, “I think I love you.” She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. Leaning back, with that silly, sappy look plastered on her face, she said, “Thank you so, so, so much.”

Eddie felt his eyebrows quirk up slightly before he said, “You’re welcome.” Only it didn’t come out all deep and smooth, no, his voice cracked in response. What was wrong with him? “I, uh, I have to go,” he said, taking a step backward. Instead of her letting go, she held on and went with him for a step. He leaned his head down and whispered, “You can let go of me now?” It came out more in the form of a question.

He watched the heat rise up into her cheeks and her arms dropped from him as if she’d been burnt.

“Sorry.” The excitement faded from her voice. Her smile looked forced as she said, “Thanks, thanks for everything.”

Eddie nodded, not liking what was going on with the fluctuations in the sound of his voice. He straightened. Odd, but neither Tory nor Callie were saying a word, and they usually had so much to say.

He glanced at Tory and Callie's doe-in-the-headlights looks and said, "G'bye."

"Night," Grace said with a weak smile.

He turned on his heel, opened the door and walked out, letting it shut behind him. He could only hope that was the last time he had to save Grace. After all, you could only rescue someone so many times, and he'd had a lifetime of rescuing Grace back in high school. Except for that one time. He cursed softly under his breath as he trudged to his bedroom. She'd always made him feel ten-feet tall until one fateful day their senior year. What the hell she'd been thinking...it didn't matter. Water under the bridge. Or was it? That was the last time they talked. He'd berated himself for that, for how he acted. Too many times he wanted to apologize and too many times he chickened out. After all, Grace had been out of his league. Hell, she was still out of his league. No matter what, he'd always be the fat kid beside the pretty girl. He didn't have time for this. He wouldn't allow it. Period.

Now, if he could only train his voice not to squeak when Grace was near him. What was up with that? It wasn't like she turned him on or anything. Did she? Nah, she couldn't. He didn't even *like* Grace Adams. No, he *liked* staying away from Grace, he reminded himself. And he was determined to do just that.

Chapter Three

Grace stood looking at the closed door like Eddie was going to burst back through. Sheer will of hoping he might wasn't working. Of course the butterflies fluttering about in her belly weren't helping. She wasn't supposed to feel this way.

She closed her eyes for a moment. Now wasn't the time to go all Jell-O over Eddie. Nuh uh. Eddie and tingles—those two words shouldn't go together. No. Mentally scolding herself, she opened her eyes and turned around.

Of course, Tory and Callie were standing right there, giving her heart a kick-start.

Tory held her hand up in the air. "High five, baby."

Grace rolled her eyes. "High five? For what?"

"Just do it."

Grace tapped her palm to her friend's, she wasn't sure why, but, knowing Tory, she wouldn't stop until Grace did.

"Your curse is officially broken," Tory began. "I mean, think about it, you burn the string and a gorgeous man comes to your rescue."

"Keep telling yourself that," Grace said, dismissing the idea.

"No, you need to be the one telling yourself that." She spun Grace around and planted her in empty chair at the dinette. "He's sooooo into yooooooooou," Tory sang, badly.

Callie bobbed her head. "I have to agree, I think he likes you."

Really? Shaking that thought, Grace snorted, crossed her eyes and twirled her finger around beside her ear. “Yeah, he likes me, in an insane asylum.”

“Grace, come on, you had to see it too,” Callie said. “You should’ve seen his face when you hugged him.”

“And he’s Italian,” Tory added. “You know what they say about Italian lovers? Oooh, Gracie, I’m betting you’re going to run into him again and the sparks are going to be so hot, he isn’t going to want to put them out.”

Was she hearing them right? Did she want to hear this? Her friends were hypocrites. Even when he’d been bigger, he had the kindest eyes, the biggest heart and soul. And unlike her, he’d been totally genuine. Not that she wasn’t—but she hadn’t been honest with him, or more importantly, herself. She had avoided him outside of chemistry class. Never wanting to reveal her true feelings for him. She sighed. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. Who was really the hypocrite?

Okay, so the person she was truly angry with right now was herself. If she hadn’t been too damned chicken to confess to liking him, maybe... Maybe what? They’d have lived happily ever after?

Grace held up her hand. “You do realize you’re talking about Eddie Mancilla.”

“Yes, we know we’re talking about Eddie,” Callie told her. “You know, back in the day, you used to talk about him a lot.”

Grace blinked. Recovering quickly, she said, “I’m not wagering on my love life, again.” *Been there, barely survived that*. “I mean it,” she added.

Bets and pranks were what the two of them lived for. It’d started when they were thirteen with a simple game of truth or dare. Double-dog dares turned into bets. They ranged from “I bet he doesn’t kiss you” to “I bet he asks you out.” As the three of them grew older, the bets became more elaborate. When they ran out of things to bet about, the pranks

started. Grace could handle the bets a lot better than she could the pranks.

Callie put her finger up. "Love life?"

"That's not what I meant," Grace said. "And you know it. I meant in the generic sense."

Tory giggled. "You like him, you really like him. I agree with Callie, I think you always did."

Grace shut her eyes as she shook her head. "I did not say that."

"You didn't have to, it's written all over your face." Tory grabbed hold of Grace's cheeks. Grace tried to bat her away, but Tory managed to squeeze them, making her lips pucker up. "And such a face it is."

When Tory let go of her cheeks, Grace stuck her tongue out at her.

"Save that for Eddie." Callie giggled.

Why was the idea having merit in her head? Grace refused to go there again. Every time she pursued anyone, the relationship started off great, then something bad would happen. "I need to be in bed."

Tory snickered, then said, "Oooh—"

"—don't even go there." Grace laughed as she smacked Tory's arm.

"We should go home." Tory yawned.

Grace glanced at the clock sitting haphazardly on the fireplace mantle across the room. It was way past midnight and she had to be up bright and early to teach twenty-three five-year-olds. She stifled her own yawn.

"Thanks for all your help, my apartment looks great."

Tory winked. "Just try and keep it this way."

"And invite us over—a lot," Callie added.

Grace stood and hugged them both one at a time. "I don't know what I'd do without both of you some days."

“Neither do we,” Callie said with a giggle. “But hey, we like it that way.”

Tory opened the door and stood in the hallway a second, waiting for Callie to join her. “I want to see you in the shop this week,” she told Grace. “You singed your hair on the ends, right here.” She lifted some of her hair. “A major case of split ends.”

Callie tsk-tsked. “We can’t have those, now can we?” She waved her hand.

“Call me tomorrow,” Tory said.

“I will,” Grace agreed. She gave them a little wave then shut and locked the door behind her, taking one last peek out the peephole.

Closing the sliding glass doors the last crack; she cranked up the furnace and piled an extra blanket on the bed. The smoke smell should be gone and the heater would move around any left over. She’d make sure she plugged in another apple cinnamon air freshener before she went to work.

What a day from hell this had been. Tomorrow was another day.



The next morning, Eddie stood in the middle of what they liked to refer to as the snake pit. Chief Ron Williams’ office. Of course, it didn’t help that he actually *had* a snake called Lulu sitting in a glass aquarium.

“It is *not* my turn,” Eddie told him. Man, was he irritated.

The chief shook his balding head, sitting behind his massive, ancient metal desk. “Peterson did it last week, Jeffries did it the week before, and this week *is* your turn, Mancilla.”

Eddie scrubbed his face. “Look, I’m not good with kids,” he started.

“Ed, I’ve known you for a long damned time. I’ve seen you with your nieces and nephews and with the kids that tour this station. You’re good with kids.” He leaned forward at his desk. “Why do you insist on fighting me every time it’s your turn? You’re turning into a real grouch here.”

That was his plan, he’d become Oscar the Grouch, hell, if he had it his way, he’d be worse, he’d be like the Terminator.

Now why couldn’t he have a cool name like that? No, no, he got Manzilla. “I can’t be Manzilla when I’m showing a bunch of kids the station,” he half whispered. “I have my reputation to protect.”

“Your reputation?”

Ron Williams and Eddie’s father went way back, too far back for Eddie to comprehend. But then again, that’s what happened when one came from a long line of distinguished firefighters. There were bloodlines, both real and ones you picked up along the way.

Firefighters formed a brotherhood. They had to. They needed to trust the person who had their back when the flames were licking out at you from all sides.

No one ever thought Eddie would make it as far as he had.

When he closed the office door, Chief said, “We all know how you busted your hump to make it where you are.” He moved papers around on his messy desk. “Hell kid, I pulled you by the scruff of your neck more than once.”

Yeah, so he had.

“Look, I know you don’t like Manzilla; do you really think I like Curly?” He rubbed his shiny bald head. “I guess it could be worse, they could call me Shemp. Point is, it’s just a stupid nickname and for as tall as you are, it fits.”

Eddie slunk down in the chair. “That’s not why I have this name, and you know it.”

“The past is the past is the past.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Ed, I’m not asking you to take the kids around today. I’m telling you.”

Oh boy, he’d pissed off the chief. He wondered as he got up if he should salute him. Instead he simply left the office without saying a word, so he could find a quiet corner to go brood in. Man, he hated not getting his way.

Maybe he wouldn’t have been so irritable if he’d gotten any sleep. It was hard to doze off worrying what kind of stunt his neighbor was going to pull next.

Grace Adams seemed intelligent enough to know better, but her flakiness had taken on a whole new level with her ritual. He knew all about desperation. It drove him to lose weight and strive to be the best. Once he figured out his game plan, it was almost golden. He hoped for the building’s sake, she didn’t do anything else foolish.

He, however, couldn’t for the life of him imagine why she thought she was cursed. Hell, she had a killer smile and big, gorgeous blue eyes, although she was a little too skinny for his taste.

Eddie decided he’d never understand women. Someone who looked like her shouldn’t feel cursed. She should feel blessed.

Heaving a well-deserved sigh, he found himself sitting in the shower room, staring at his open locker.

While his coworkers had posters of naked women, their spouses, super models or actresses, Eddie had nothing—nada—in his. He wondered if anyone else ever noticed it. Hell, he hadn’t until just now.

Scrubbing his face again, he decided he’d raid the magazines out in the lounge area and see if he couldn’t come up with something. The station had become the center of his life. More home than his apartment.

The job was his life. And he wanted to be the best. Go as high in the department as possible, prove everyone wrong. He had to prove to himself, to his family, that he could do this. Getting chief became his obsession when he found out Ron would be retiring soon. If he did what he was supposed to and went above and beyond, he might have a snowball's chance in hell of making the cut.

Nowhere did it say in the rules and regulations what the chief should be like, that the person attaining it couldn't have a life outside of the realm of this station. Eddie hadn't bothered with that other world lately, but maybe it was time he gave himself a break and lived a little.

Maybe tomorrow, he thought with a frown, as he slammed the locker shut. Time to go pay the piper and take kids around the station. Then again, his job was a good damned excuse for him not to get involved and risk his heart to someone.



Grace and twenty-three children sat in what was known as Station Twelve's training room for what seemed like an eternity, waiting on whoever was going to start this tour.

They'd been escorted here ten minutes ago. The students were restless, making Grace's blood pressure rise. She knew what a bunch of five-year-olds were capable of when bored. Closing her eyes, she said a little prayer, hoping two things. One, the fireman giving the tour hurry up and get here. Two, he'd be a hunk.

She'd heard the other teachers bragging about the good looking men at this station. How they had to practically carry a tissue around to mop up the drool. With her luck though, he'd be a balding gruff-sounding man, like the one who had escorted them.

Anxious now, she stood and walked the short distance to the door and peered out its glass window. Sucking in her breath, she hoped her luck was changing. Two men stood a few feet from the door. She couldn't see the face of the one with his back toward her, but if his posterior view was any indication, she'd need that Kleenex.

Navy blue utility pants hugged every inch, every corded muscle in the man's body. His white, starched shirt equally hugged his upper physique, showing off tanned, impressive forearms. His black hair, a contrast to the stark white material beneath it, curled slightly at the ends, down over his collar. And that was just his back.

Grace wondered if his features were hard and chiseled or soft and weak. Maybe he was one of those men who looked absolutely gorgeous from the back, but not so good from the front. Did he have eyes the color of the water off some island or were they dark pools of melted chocolate like Eddie's?

Hello. Where did that come from? Why is Eddie sneaking into my fantasies? Look at the other man.

The other man, a blond Adonis, smiled when he saw her. His big blue eyes crinkled and Grace stepped away from the door, feeling like she'd been busted for peeking in the boy's shower room.

Sitting in her chair, with her back to the door, she laced her fingers together and waited. Anxiously.

When she heard the door creak open and felt the breeze on her back, Grace closed her eyes and hoped.

She turned slightly and her heart jumped straight into her throat when her eyes met all too familiar black ones.

Nothing could've prepared her for this moment.

He looked taken aback too, which made her feel just a little bit better.

Eddie was the black-haired hunk she'd been admiring from the window. He was the one who made her fingers itch to slide through that thick, unruly, slightly curled hair. To glide over muscles—*get a hold of your hormones, girlfriend*, she mentally scolded herself, feeling the heat rising into her cheeks. Neither of them had looked away from each other.

Finally pulling his gaze from her, he walked the short distance to the front of the room where the other fireman stood.

The blonde cleared his throat. "I'm Lieutenant Marcus Harris, and this is Captain Ed Mancilla. We're going to give you a tour of the station in just a little bit, but first, Captain Mancilla and I want to talk to you about fire safety."

"We need two volunteers," Eddie said with a smile, picking a boy and a girl.

As he explained fire safety, stop, drop and roll, Grace's mind went back into the past. She remembered the first incident between her and Eddie.

Their senior year of high school. The smell of formaldehyde permeated the room, but what really got to her was the frog in the box.

"Grace, you have to do this," Eddie whispered. "I can't afford a bad grade and neither can you."

"It's an innocent frog," Grace told him, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I promise, he won't feel a thing, just as soon as we put him in that jar with this rag and close it."

"It's cruel."

Eddie sighed. "Okay, okay, just listen to me and do what I say, okay?"

"Okay."

Eddie put the frog in the jar and Grace closed her eyes. She wished her mother would've signed an excuse to get her out of this. Even though it was only a frog, she couldn't bear this.

“Open your eyes Grace,” Eddie said. He handed her a scalpel.

“You don’t think—”

“Grace, you have to look like you’re doing something. I’m going to make a couple of cuts, then hand you my scalpel. If Mr. Johns comes back here, and asks you to cut, you’re going to have to do it, but if you just help and do what I tell you to, we’ll have this done before he comes back.”

“—Miss Adams? Miss Adams, is that okay?” Josh, her aide brought her back to the present.

Grace wasn’t sure what he was asking her, but she nodded her head and hoped for the best. The last thing she wanted was to look like an imbecile.

Josh counted out children and they lined up at the door, then disappeared with Lt. Harris and Josh. Leaving her with Eddie.

Just great, she thought as she stood and called the remaining twelve students to line up at the door.

Grace followed Eddie around the station. He showed them the fire trucks, opening compartments and pulling out tools. The kids oohed and ahed as he showed them various axes, the “jaws of life” which he explained was like a can opener for cars, and other types of wrenches. He was just about to close a compartment door when a big wrench fell out and landed on his foot.

Jumping back, Eddie grimaced, but never yelped. “I’m okay,” he said, looking a little embarrassed.

“Are you sure?” Grace asked. “That was a big wrench.”

He shot her a look and said, “Okay, the others are off the pole now, so I’ll show you where we sleep.”

Eddie led the brood up the stairs to where they slept. He tried not to limp. His foot throbbed inside his steel-toed boots. He’d probably busted

a toe. He was sure he'd put that wrench back right. He raked his hands through his hair. "This is where we sleep."

"It's like a big old sleep-over," one of the kids said. "I wish my room looked like this."

"You wouldn't if you had to listen to a bunch of people snore," he told the little girl.

Eddie scratched the back of his neck as he watched Grace interact with the kids. She ruffled a little girl's hair, bringing a smile to the girl's face. Grace's own face lit up in return. His felt his heart strumming within his chest.

When another child tugged on her sweater, she simply took the child's hand in hers and gave it a squeeze, making some sort of kissy face, and the child's giggles filled the station. Eddie couldn't help it, he smiled.

Being a teacher was the perfect job for Grace.

Their eyes met for an instant and nothing else around him mattered. This was the Grace that had made him get all glassy-eyed in school. To say it was infectious would be an understatement. She made him feel important—needed. There were times when she even made him feel skinny.

"What's that for?" the same little girl asked, pointing to the old wooden pole enclosed partially with a railing.

"That's how we get downstairs to the fire trucks quickly, instead of using the stairs, we slide down the pole."

"Oh. Can we go down the pole?" a boy asked him, making a move toward it.

Eddie stopped him by his shirttail. "No, not from up here. But we'll let you slide a little ways down."

"Aw." The boy gave him sad, puppy dog eyes.

“Are you going to go down it, Miss Adams?” the boy asked.

“No, I’m not going to go down it,” she told him, peering at Eddie with pleading eyes.

“How about I give you a demonstration?” Eddie said. “Then if Miss Adams wants to try it, she can.”

The look Grace gave him made his heart skip not one, but two beats. He decided it was because he hadn’t eaten, or he hadn’t had enough sleep. He wouldn’t allow himself to think that she looked in her element with these kids. Never happier, never sexier than she did at the moment, standing there with faded blue jeans on that hugged every curve of her slim body. It wasn’t the way the fuzzy light red sweater enhanced her breasts and it wasn’t the wisps of curls that escaped her up-do that made his libido go into overdrive.

Walking around the railing, he grasped the pole and explained to the kids what he was doing. “This isn’t dangerous if you do it right.” He linked his legs tightly round the pole. “Watch how easy this is.” He loosened the grip his legs had on the pole and shoved off.

Something second nature to him, something he practically did in his sleep—suddenly became something he’d never attempted in his life.

Eddie didn’t know what happened. He heard himself yell. He felt himself free falling the eleven feet to the ground with a thud.

He sat for a minute, stunned and in pain.

“Manzilla?” someone asked, running toward him.

He would never live this down. He wasn’t sure what had happened up there. The pole was still intact, so he couldn’t blame it on the old thing finally breaking. He didn’t trip, he didn’t lose his footing. It was like he just let go of the damned thing.

“Need some help?” Marcus asked him, extending his hand.

“I’m fine,” he growled.

“What the hell happened?”

Eddie shook his head. “I don’t know.” Man, was this embarrassing.

A couple of the paramedics joined them. Eddie let them do their thing, checking his blood pressure, pulse and just when the one asked him if anything hurt, here came Grace with the kids.

“Are you okay?” Concern was etched across that pretty face of hers.

“I’m fine,” he muttered.

“We’ll make sure he has a parachute next time, ma’am,” one of the guys said.

“That’s not that funny,” Grace told him, smiling. She knelt down beside him. “I had a feeling something bad was going to happen,” she whispered.

“You did? How?” Maybe she saw something he didn’t. He’d take anything right now.

“Mercury is in retrograde.”

Seriously getting annoyed with her babbling, all he could say was, “What?”

She held her hands up so the backs of them showed to him, moving them as she said, “Bad things happen when Mercury is in retrograde.”

“This has to do with the curse, doesn’t it?”

Grace nodded slowly.

He tried not to roll his eyes, but he couldn’t help it. “I don’t think I want to hear any more of this, It all sounds like a bunch of psycho babble to me,” he said tersely.

She raised her chin a notch. “Maybe you should believe it.”

“Maybe you need to take the kids back to school, Grace,” he told her carefully. He sure hoped she didn’t have a voodoo doll of him smashed under a brick. He got the feeling that if he continued this conversation

nothing good would come of it. He didn't need another scene here. The one he was in was enough.

Her cheeks were crimson. "You're right." She looked defeated. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you're okay." She turned and walked away.

And damned, if he didn't feel compelled to watch her.

Chapter Four

Grace slammed the door to her apartment behind her when she finally got home that evening. Traffic had been a nightmare and only added to her foul mood. Most of the day, while she taught class, she'd mentally brooded about her earlier conversation with Eddie and decided to consult the very woman who got her into this situation.

Nancy Barnes would be returning her call in about an hour.

Grace kept telling herself this was insane. Why should she believe Nancy Barnes' revelations? How could Nancy tell if someone was cursed? And why Grace in particular? What did Nancy see in her that no one else could? What was missing when Grace looked in the mirror? Did Grace have little psychically generated devil horns sticking out of her head? What? Grace wasn't even sure what she expected from Nancy. Maybe Tory was right and this whole curse was only in her head.

Collapsing on her sofa, Grace sighed. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She'd intended for her life to change when she moved. She was meant to be happier, more confident. Instead, she was just as miserable here as she had been living with Brad, maybe even more so now that she had a curse hanging over her head. The blinking light on her answering machine on the end table by the sofa caught her eye, so she leaned forward and pressed the button.

"Grace, this is your mother, call me," said an all too familiar voice.

Grace would call her *after* she talked to Nancy. She needed to know what direction she should take next. If the string hadn't burnt the whole way through, she had no choice but to repeat the ritual. Only next time, she'd use a tuna can—and, she'd do it outside on the balcony.

But suppose she was cursed? What if there was no cure for her? Then what? What if she decided her own fate? Was there a how-to manual? *Breaking the Curse for Dummies*. She giggled. Better yet, she'd call a talk show. Surely Dr. What's-his-name would have some advice for her. Fat chance. Sighing, Grace lay back on the couch and closed her eyes. Life was supposed to get simpler, wasn't it? She didn't have problems like her sister. She wasn't raising children and running a household, but some days, like today, the grass looked awfully green.

A knock on her door pulled her thoughts away. She got up and went to the door.

"Hello, Grace," Nancy Barnes greeted her. "I hope you don't mind my dropping by. I thought meeting face to face would be easier."

Grace tried not to open and close her mouth like a guppy. "Um, no, I don't mind at all, please, come in."

Grace closed the door. Her mother had taught her not to be blunt or rude, but she couldn't help it. She had to know how Nancy knew where she lived. "How did you know where I live?" Maybe this woman had telepathic powers. Maybe she was a stalker...maybe...

"We moved into the building around the same time you did. We're up on the sixth floor. I've seen you leaving the building in the mornings when I'm taking Kylie to the bus stop."

"Oh." Grace felt rather foolish for letting her imagination run wild. Nancy was dressed conservatively in a black pair of pants and black sweater. Her long, dark hair had streaks of white and red mixed into it. Stunningly beautiful, she reminded Grace of a young Kirstie Alley.

Her blue eyes were warm and caring and Grace had the sense she was a good mother. In other words, there was nothing obscure or weird about this woman.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Grace asked, feeling more than a little foolish for allowing her mind to grasp for such ridiculous conclusions.

Nancy said, "Hmm. Water will be fine."

"Are you sure? I can make us some hot tea?"

"Even better."

"Great, have a seat." Grace headed toward the kitchen.

She poured water into her kettle and set it on the stove to boil.

Nancy stepped to doorway of the kitchen, and Grace turned around to face her. "I'm assuming you called me here about the ritual. Did it help?"

"Actually, I'm not sure."

"Hmm."

"My friend decided that along with the ritual, I needed a cleansing."

Nancy looked at her with questions in her eyes.

"We had a boyfriend bonfire."

"Is that sort of like burning your bra?"

"Something like that."

Grace motioned for them to sit at the tiny dinette. She sat across from Nancy, closest to the kitchen. "The reason I asked you to call me," she moved the placemat back and forth in front of her, "is because I don't know what I'm supposed to do if I'm not sure the string burned the whole way."

"Honey, if you followed the steps, I think it's safe to say it probably did."

“Then, why don’t I feel any different? And why do these stupid, awkward things keep happening to me?”

“Ah. Well, sometimes—” Nancy began to explain just as the tea kettle whistled.

“Excuse me.” Grace rose and fixed the tea, hurriedly bringing two steaming mugs to the table so Nancy could continue.

“Grace,” she said, stirring in milk. “My husband tells me I open my mouth way too much when I should stay quiet, and in this instance, I agree with him. I didn’t tell you what I saw to make you neurotic. I told you because you’re such a warm, kind woman, with a troubled mind. I only wanted to help you.”

Nancy took a sip of her tea and set the cup back down. “Sometimes I get visions, if you will. I see things that I can’t explain and if I try to figure them out, a lot of times, I’ll get a headache. It drains a lot of energy from me.”

Grace exhaled, not knowing what to say. Never having had a conversation like this before, she tried to absorb everything Nancy told her. None of it made sense to her right now.

“I shared what I saw with you; different colors in the aura surrounding you. The dominant one I saw, brown, is one that means your energy is being blocked and that I got the sense that it was cursed, but now you need to help yourself.”

Ack. Why did it have to come down to *that*? Grace asked, “What if I don’t know how?”

Nancy reached across the table and patted her hand. “I can’t tell you. It’s something you need to figure out on your own.”

“Do you still see the aura?”

Nancy examined her, making her feel extremely uncomfortable for what seemed like an eternity. “Yes.”

Grace swallowed hard. “And is it cursed?”

“No, Grace, it isn’t cursed. Now I see pink, which is the color of love and the brown isn’t as dark now. It’s showing me that you’re entering a period of new growth. It’s all very confusing, because it deals with chakras and other degrees of things that we could sit here all day and talk about, and you still wouldn’t understand it.”

In a sense, Grace supposed she should feel relieved, but she didn’t. It was almost easier for her to comprehend that she’d been cursed. Now that she wasn’t, why hadn’t her life changed dramatically? She waited for feelings of relief to wash over her but they didn’t come. Her life had been so difficult lately, so out of control—at least when she believed she was cursed she knew why these crazy things were happening. It gave her an explanation—a reason. Maybe they weren’t always rational ones, but a reason just the same. However, if what Nancy said was true and she wasn’t cursed, then why was her life spinning out of control? What was wrong with her that she couldn’t get her shit together?

“I sense there’s a man troubling you as well.”

“You do?” Grace asked, surprised.

“Yes, I do.” Nancy smiled. “Want to talk about it?”

No, Grace thought as she exhaled. “My neighbor across the way, his name is Eddie. I knew him in high school—had a crush on him—only he never knew it.

“Eddie was the guy you wanted on your side—he was a big guy—still is, only different now.” At the confusion in Nancy’s eyes, Grace said, “Eddie lost a lot of weight and replaced it with muscle. He was beautiful on the inside in school, now he’s perfect. But, if I tell him that, if I let that show, I know he’ll think I’m a hypocrite.”

“Why would he think that?”

“Why wouldn’t he? Besides,” she said with a soft chuckle, “there was the whole mishap at the fire station and—”

“The fire pole? That was him? Kylie said a fireman fell.”

Grace covered her face with her hands. “Yes.”

“Grace, it’s quite apparent you have feelings for Eddie. Talk to him. Get to know him again. Why not bake him something?”

“Bake him something? But he’s lost a lot of weight—”

“No matter how much they lose, the truth is, the way to a man’s heart is still through his stomach.”

Though somewhat skeptical, Grace said, “I’ll remember that.”

She hadn’t exactly wowed Eddie. Baking him something would be a peace offering—and another excuse to see him... “Do you really think taking him food will work? I mean, nothing bad is going to happen if I do, right?”

“No, I see only good things.”

“Good things, how?” Grace wasn’t annoyed, but she wanted to know what exactly would happen if she took cookies to Eddie. Everyone kept telling her to change herself, so, right here and now, she was going to try. From now on, Grace Adams was going to look before she leapt.

“If you take him food, I promise you something great will happen. That’s the thing with these visions, they don’t always come to me clearly. It’s just a sense, if you will. I know it’s a lot to ask, but trust me on this.”

Yes, it was a lot to ask, Grace thought as she forced a smile. The last couple of days had been overwhelming, to say the least.

“My husband will be home soon.” Nancy pressed Grace’s hand before rising. “Thanks for the tea. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to call.”

“Thank you,” Grace said, seeing her out. She waited until the elevator doors closed before she headed back toward her apartment. The woman was odd, but she’d given her a lot to think about.

Yes, Nancy had certainly given her food for thought. She paused and smiled. What the heck? What would it hurt? She had the perfect recipe. Cookies so sinfully good that even the hardest heart would melt at her feet. And she needed all the help she could get considering how angry Eddie was at her right now.

She didn’t want him to be mad. She wanted to see that smile again.



“You brought me spaghetti and meatballs?” Eddie lifted the foil on the plate of food his mother had brought to him. “What’d I do to deserve this?” The plate was still warm and the aromas of garlic, tomatoes and cheeses tickled his nose and palate, tempting him. He balanced the plate in one hand and walked the short distance from his entryway into the kitchen. Eddie scooped a fork out of the silverware drawer, sat right down at his little wooden table and removed the aluminum foil. He loved when his mother came to visit his apartment. She always brought food.

“So, you got hurt today.”

Eddie sat back in his chair, set aside his fork and closed his eyes. “Who told you?”

“Your brothers.”

He groaned and lifted one eyelid so that he could peer out at her. “This leaked to another fire company?”

Franny shrugged. “Funny news, it travels fast.”

Eddie opened the other eye and regarded the pasta before him. Appetizing, he was sure, but what appetite he did have seemed to have

faded. He wasn't amused. It was bad enough that he'd never live this down at his station, now his brothers knew. His pop probably knew too. Of course, he did. His ma couldn't keep anything secret. Now, his mishap would be brought up at family occasions for years.

When he failed the physical part of training at the Academy, his brothers thought it was a big joke. They loved to badger him. He'd been the butt of their practical jokes for years. This time, he'd *literally* be the *butt* of them for falling off the pole.

Both of his brothers were the epitome of Italian Stallions. They were naturally thin, tall, dark and handsome. Eddie had the height, but unfortunately he also had the girth. Of course, it wasn't until close to his senior year when Eddie acquired some of his height. His mother had promised him when he hit that growth spurt, he'd even out. He didn't.

Their father wasn't as tall as his sons and was quite portly in his later years. Eddie guessed he'd gotten his father's build, because his mother looked more like Sophia Loren. Even now, no matter how much she ate, and Franny loved to eat, she didn't gain weight. The same with Gino and Anthony. His sister, Frankie, was thin as well.

"So, tell me more about your neighbor." Franny interrupted his thoughts. "You can tell me while you eat." She sat across from him, sliding a can of soda across the table.

Graying at her temples, she still had the style of Sophia Loren. Refined, polished and beautiful inside and out.

Telling her he wasn't hungry didn't work. Franny loved to watch other people eat as much as she liked to do so herself. His sister-in-law, Annie, was the same way. It had to be something with Italian women.

"There's nothing to tell, Ma. I told you everything."

"Yes, but you haven't told me about the fall."

Eddie twirled the pasta on his fork. He didn't want to tell her about that, so he tried to make his voice as bland and deadpan as possible. "We had some kids touring the station, I got on the pole and...and I got dizzy, Ma. I hadn't eaten and my sugar level was low. That's all. I'm fine. I don't want to have to reassure you like I did Grace."

Oops.

He took a bite, hoping she missed that slip.

When his mother smiled at him and said, "See, there *is* something to tell me."

Oh, hell, this was it. He was done.

The smooth wine sauce started out good, but now it went plain in his mouth as he answered, "Nothing to tell."

"Grace, she is the little blonde you sat beside in school, no?"

"Yes and she's the epitome of Pop's blonde jokes."

"Grace is also your neighbor?"

"Yes, Ma. She's my neighbor. What? Am I on trial?"

"Oh, I struck a nerve," she said with a smile. "She can't be that bad."

Seeing no way out of this conversation, Eddie twirled more pasta. "She's eccentric at best, Mama. I mean, you wouldn't like her. She's too ditzzy."

Franny laughed. "Our Delanna, you think sometimes she has rocks in her head instead of brains, but I love her. It's not what the person is like on the outside or the crazy things they may do. It's what's in their hearts, Eddie. I thought I taught you better than this."

To hell with it. Eddie balanced his fork on the edge of his plate and fiddled with his napkin. "Ma, Grace thinks she's cursed."

"She thinks she's what? Cursed?"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Why would such a pretty woman think she's cursed?"

Eddie shrugged and twirled another forkful. This was good food, and he was determined to enjoy it, despite the unwelcome subject of the conversation.

“Perhaps she’s just superstitious. I mean, even *I* throw salt over my shoulder, and I never walk under a ladder.”

“Someone told her she had a cursed aura, and she believed them. Grace is also pretty naïve and gullible, *and* she doesn’t see that she is her own worst enemy.”

“Ah,” Franny said with a smile. “Then you two have a lot in common.”

Eddie choked on his spaghetti. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“How am *I* my worst enemy?”

Franny laid her hands on the table and leaned toward him. “You don’t ever give yourself enough credit—ever. You think your father isn’t proud of you, but he is. He may not tell you, but he’s never been good with words. You should know that. It took a lot of courage for you to lose the weight you did, and it took a lot more courage to follow your dream. Your father and I both believe you’ll make chief this year. You know, Eddie, even though your father doesn’t say so, he wants you to be happy. We both want you to, be happy.”

Eddie didn’t stop to think about what his mother just said. If he over-analyzed the words Pop and proud, she’d win. “If I make chief, I *will* be happy.”

Franny shook her head. “You just think it will make you happy. You can’t tell me you aren’t lonely. You come home to this empty apartment.”

He shrugged. “I don’t have to answer to anyone, Ma, except you a couple of days a week.”

"I never thought I'd see the day when I would say my youngest son, my Eddie, was afraid of something, because even when you were heavy, you weren't afraid of anything."

"I'm still not."

"Yes you are, Eddie. You're afraid of love."

Eddie blinked at her then took another bite of spaghetti. He wasn't afraid of anything. Well, okay, maybe he was afraid Grace would fashion a voodoo doll with his likeness, but other than that...nope, he couldn't think of a single thing.

"You make those faces at me, but you know I'm right. Your mother is never wrong. Annie, Dee and Frankie all agree with me."

"What do they know?"

Franny chortled. "They all set you up on blind dates, and you always manage to find something wrong with each and every one."

His enjoying the rest of the meal just wasn't going to happen. Eddie laid his napkin beside his plate, placed his fork across the remaining pasta and stood. "That's because, Ma, there *was* something wrong with them."

"It's all in your head."

Exhaling as he raked his hands over his face, Eddie slumped back down into the chair.

"Look, Ma, when the right woman comes along, I'll know."

Someone knocked at the apartment door. Thank goodness for small favors. Whoever was at the door was granting him a reprieve from his mother's penchant for matchmaking. Maybe his luck was changing after all.

"Are you expecting company?"

"No." He didn't like the speculative gleam in her eye.

"I'll answer it."

“Ma. I can answer my own door,” he said as he got up and strode to the door.

The pixie face surrounded by lots of blonde curly hair looked back at him through the peephole. He turned back toward his mother and leaned against the door. “You know, we don’t have to answer it,” he whispered. “After all, I wouldn’t want anything to interrupt our visit.”

Franny arched one eyebrow. “Oh, I think we do have to answer it. In fact, why don’t you step out of the way? I’ll answer it.”

Eddie smiled. “Better yet, you let me get a head start into the bedroom, and then you can tell whoever it is that I’m not here.”

“Eddie Lorenzo Mancilla, you’re chicken.”

“Yes, Ma, I am.”

Franny stepped over to the door. When Eddie took a step across the kitchen in the direction of his bedroom, she added, “You, you stay right there, mister.”

Eddie scowled and crossed his arms across his chest. “Fine.”

“And no pouting,” she ordered.

“Shh. Ma, she might hear you.”

“A-ha.”

“Just sit and finish your meal.”

This was just great, he thought, sitting back down at the table. Panic welled inside him. How embarrassing was this? He wondered if his brothers ever felt this way, having their mother and their wives in the same room, giving them nothing but grief.

On the other hand, Grace came to him. She came to see him. Was she worried about him? This was a good thing after all, right? Wrong.

Either way he looked at it, it was a no-win situation.

Now that the matchmaker was about to open the door and Grace was standing on the other side. No, he didn’t have a prayer. Of course, she’d

like Grace. Which wasn't necessarily bad—no, it was a goddamned catastrophe. His mother would go home and tell all the sisters, and he would live and breathe the torturous conversations at Sunday dinner for weeks to come. Yeah, that leap from the balcony was looking better and better.

His mother opened the door and ushered Grace into Eddie's apartment. His entire life flashed before him. He could feel his muscles clenching, his heart lurching, and he'd be damned if he didn't feel a bead of sweat forming along his temple.

Grace stood in the doorway, wearing a white T-shirt and faded blue jeans, with her blonde curls cascading down around her face in a wild manner. Eddie's throat tightened. Grace had a smudge of flour on her nose and a little bit on the corner of her jaw. To Eddie, she had never looked more beautiful.

Deep warmth rippled through Eddie's lower abdomen.

Then his mother piped in, "You must be Grace." When Grace nodded, she added, "Well, hello there dear, we were just talking about you."

His stomach clenched, and he felt a cold trickle of sweat trail down the middle of his lower back. Okay, it was official; there was a hell on earth.

Grace's eyes widened, and she asked, "You were?"

"Yes. Please come in," his mother said with a wave of her arm.

"I, uh, I brought cookies as a peace offering. And, I wanted to see how you were doing."

"Oh, that's so nice. Isn't that nice, Eddie?"

He knew his smile probably looked more like a sick grimace, but how much more humiliating could this get? "Thanks."

His mother cleared her throat and extended her hand. "I'm Franny Mancilla, since my son seems to have forgotten his manners."

Grace laughed and accepted her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Mancilla."

"It's nice to meet you, dear. I've heard so much about you."

Eddie stood behind his mother, wondering if he'd be better off making that leap from the balcony. A broken limb might be preferable to this. But, he reminded himself, this was hell on earth, after all.

"Would you like a cookie, Mrs. Mancilla?"

"Please, dear, call me Franny. And I'd love a cookie." His mother tossed him a glance from over her shoulder. Eddie knew that look. It meant take a cookie—or else.

Eddie's stomach lurched. But he bolstered himself, stepped forward, and selected a cookie from the plate. Smiling his thanks and trying to be on his best behavior, he took a bite of the chocolate cookie. The cookie melted in his mouth like a sinful pleasure. He couldn't describe what this cookie did to his taste buds or all the different tastes erupting in his mouth. "Mmm. These are really good. What kind are they?"

"They're called Satan's Cookies."

He swallowed and almost choked. "What?"

"Satan's Cookies," she repeated, a little of the excitement fading from her expression.

After the day he'd had, he just couldn't help himself. "You're kidding, right?"

"Edward Lorenzo Mancilla, where are your manners?" his mother cried.

One quick glance at his mother, and he felt all the blood drain from his body. Body language said it all; hands on hips, lips in a thin line of disapproval. The same as when he'd gotten into trouble as a kid and knew he was going to catch hell. He, Anthony and Gino used to make

bets on who would get it first. He held up his hand before she could say one word of Italian to him.

“I’m sorry, Grace,” he said, “but the name is a little...odd.”

Grace looked pained by his reaction. He’d seen that look many times in the past, and forgotten how much it got to him. She sighed. “I should’ve known better.”

His mother drew herself up angrily. *Oh hell, here we go.* He loved her, but much of what she said and did rolled off his back.

“L’Edward, l’ho insegnato migliore di questo. Edward, I taught you better than this. *Che è la questione con lei?* What is the matter with you? *Questo è una ragazza piacevole.* This is a nice girl.”

Grace looked back and forth between the two of them. At least, his mother hadn’t sworn at him.

“Smetta di essere un asino Eddie della presa.”

“Yeah. What she said,” Grace blurted out.

Eddie and his mother both glanced in her direction. She couldn’t possibly know what his mother said to him. Fate wasn’t that cruel.

He crossed his arms. “Okay, smarty pants, what did my mother say?”

“She called you a jackass.” She shrugged innocently. *“Ho portato quattro anni di italiano Nell’università,”* Grace told him smugly.

Eddie closed his eyes and wished the floor would open and swallow him up. Of course she took four years of Italian in college. Why wouldn’t she? And his mother looked as pleased as ever. In fact, she was laughing and nodding proudly at Grace.

Eddie shook his head. Of course his mother would find it amusing that Grace spoke fluent Italian. Another juicy tidbit to share with his sisters.

All Franny Mancilla could think of were her potential little grandchildren. Well, what his mother didn’t seem willing to consider was

that if Grace were their mother, they'd all end up being kooky little Italian-speaking, voodoo-doll-brandishing trolls.

"Grace, you're welcome to come to dinner with Eddie on Sunday. We'll expect the two of you at twelve o'clock sharp," his mother told her.

The surprise on Eddie's face was—delicious. Keep smiling, Grace told herself, quite sure she heard Eddie gasp.

"Grace might have other plans," Eddie blurted out.

Watch him squirm. "Actually, I don't." She grinned. "I'd love to come to dinner, Mrs. Mancilla."

"Remember, you're to call me Franny. I'll see you Sunday. Eddie knows the way. And Eddie—"

"Yeah, Ma?"

"Essere piacevole, lo significo. L'amo."

"I love you too, Ma."

Franny closed the door behind her, leaving Grace standing just inside the door, still holding the plate of cookies. Franny had told Eddie to be nice to Grace. However, she was sure his eyes were shooting daggers into her back.

Her plan was to come over here, apologize and leave. Meeting his mother and getting invited to dinner was so not in the plan. Why had she so eagerly accepted the invitation, despite Eddie's obvious reluctance? If she kept this up, Eddie was definitely going to hate her.

"Look, I don't have to go on Sunday. I can make up some sort of excuse," she offered, still not daring to turn and face him.

"My mother's too smart for that."

"You could tell her I stood you up."

Eddie laughed. "She knows better than that, too."

"I'm sorry." Grace dared to turn around, and to her surprise, Eddie was smiling warmly at her.

He shook his head. "You know, that's the fifth time I've heard you apologize for something you didn't do."

The light in his eyes changed and, for a moment, she wished she knew what he was thinking. Then again, maybe she didn't want to know...or maybe she did.

She had to be honest with herself. Just before she fell asleep last night, she'd imagined him looking at her like this. His eyes were dark pools, veiled by long, curling lashes. Not brooding at all. They were soft, seductively soft. Intense.

Set the plate of cookies down and get out of here. She didn't know what to say. Wasn't quite sure what to do. She exhaled as she set the plate down on his table. "I should get going."

Eddie stepped toward her. "Wait."

Her heart skipped a beat—somersaulted into her throat. He looked so damned sexy. "You have some flour, right here." He touched his finger to her nose.

Everything in her body ignited.

"And right here," he said as his hand caressed her jaw line.

Her pulse quickened when his thumb found her bottom lip, making her sway slightly. She held her breath and her eyelids fluttered, but refused to fall. She wanted to lick her lips where his thumb stroked, but that'd be too forward and as much as she wanted Eddie to kiss her, she wanted him to come to her.

She didn't have to wait long. When her lips parted, his hand dropped to her waist and he pulled her to him. He lifted her up to her tiptoes, pressing her against him.

Hesitating for a heartbeat, he raised his eyes to hers. His head dipped down, lightly grazing her mouth with his. A soft sound escaped from

deep in her throat. She flicked her tongue across his lips, needing a taste, inviting him to deepen the kiss.

Grace closed her eyes, intensifying the sensations of the kiss. He slid his hands up her waist, over her back, until they found her hair. Burying his fingers in her hair he pulled her closer, enveloping her with the warm taste of her own cookies.

Grace splayed her hands across his chest, feeling his heartbeat, warmth radiating from beneath his T-shirt. She never wanted a man's shirt off more than she did at this moment. She needed to feel, to touch, to caress his bare skin.

She settled on cupping his face with her hands, cradling him as his tongue stroked the inside of her mouth. The kiss consumed her with such a passion, such a feeling of belonging, she could barely endure it.

Her fingers ran the length of his jaw, over prickly stubble, down his throat and finally along the back of his neck and into the thickness of his hair.

Nothing could be better than this.

Feeling him lower her, Grace resisted removing her mouth from his, letting go of him, relinquishing her embrace. She felt his hands at her shoulders and felt him slowly release her. Breathless, she licked her lips before she looked up at him. "Wow," she whispered. "If I'd known you could kiss like that—"

"You'd have what?" he asked. His tone deepened, sharpened. "If you'd have known that I could kiss like that, you would've what, Grace? You'd have kissed the fat guy?"

Her gaze flew to his face. "That's not what—"

He stepped away from her. A muscle jumped in his lower jaw. "I think maybe it's time you left."

The light in his eyes had winked out. His gaze was now cold and distant. Just like that, he'd shut her out.

Grace swallowed the hurt, refused to let him see it. That wasn't what she'd meant, and deep down, Eddie had to know that. She lifted her head, refused to look at him and walked out the door.

Eddie's mother was right, he was a jackass.

Chapter Five

Grace stopped in her apartment long enough to set the cookies on the kitchen counter and grab her coat and car keys. Right now, she needed her friends.

It was hard not to think about Eddie and their kiss. Especially since she could still smell him on her. Clean, woodsy and spicy, all mixed into one, combined with the smell of fabric softener. But she couldn't bring herself to change the T-shirt. Truth was, she wanted to savor the smell of him.

Hair You Are wasn't far from her apartment. Only a couple of turns on some side streets, and she was there. The great thing about having a best friend who owned a beauty shop was that she didn't care if Grace didn't make an appointment. Tory would work her in.

Even if Tory couldn't schedule her in, Grace needed to talk to her. She assumed Callie would be there as well. After all, Callie'd be getting off from work, and dropping by Hair You Are had developed into a favorite pastime.

Grace needed advice and as much as she hated to come clean with them about Eddie and her long dormant crush, she had no choice but to fess up.

She parked along the street, got out of her car and walked hesitantly toward the shop. Maybe Tory and Callie's company would be enough.

Maybe they wouldn't notice Grace's foul mood. Yeah, and maybe monkeys would fly out of her butt.

Okay Grace, here's the deal. If you don't start smiling, they'll know something is up. Then again, if you smile, what will they think? Ah, to hell with it. She pulled the shop door open. *Time to face the music.*

To her surprise, there was only one older lady tonight, instead of the usual crowd of women. Grace missed coming over here and decided she needed to drop by more often. She liked talking to the older women they affectionately referred to as "the blue haired ladies".

Thursday night most of the older ladies came in to get their hair done so they'd look nice for bingo. Grace never got that. They made a fuss over their hair, yet sat dobbing numbers with cigarettes hanging out the corners of their mouths.

"Hey. I didn't expect to see you this soon," Tory said as she teased the older lady's white hair. "Have a seat, I'm about done here, and Callie should be by any minute to pick me up."

"If you two have plans—"

"Oh, don't be silly. Sit, sit."

Grace sat in a chair adjacent to the woman. Hair You Are had to be one of the cutest, trendiest shops in town. Tory kept it spotless. The décor bordered on eclectic and tended to be very homey and relaxing.

Everything was very country, despite being all mirrors and chrome. Pastels of blues, pinks and various shades of greens appeared in every type of décor. Even the chairs were the various shades. It didn't look tacky at all, just reminded everyone of things from yesterday. Very feminine, very soft and very warm, much like Tory.

"What's new?" Tory put some type of hair product in her hands.

Grace shrugged. "Nothing," she lied.

“Pretty lame,” Callie said from behind a curtained off back room. She came into the room, her red tresses pulled up in a ponytail swinging back and forth at the back of her head. “Your face doesn’t look like nothing’s new.” Callie was the complete opposite of Tory. Subtlety wasn’t her thing; she dressed in bright bold colors, flattering her personality.

Tory stopped what she was doing and looked Grace up and down. “Yeah, she’s right, what gives?”

Grace inclined her head toward the woman. Tory nodded in response, the highlights in her hair glistening with the lights.

Grace hated the fact both of her friends had the best hair. Straight, thick, and they could put it in any style. Not her. She had thick, naturally curly, unruly hair. It took her hours to straighten it, so most of the time she wore it up. She liked the length, too afraid to try a short style, but hated wearing it up all the time.

Callie pumped the peddle on one of the other chairs, raising it several inches, and sat beside Grace.

“What are you doing?” Grace asked.

“I uh, like to let my legs dangle.”

“No, she just likes to play with the chair,” the older lady explained.

Grace giggled.

Callie laughed. “Whaddaya know, Esther?”

“I know there’s a new man named Carl who’s got his eye on me.”

“You go, Esther,” Callie hooted.

After twenty full minutes of gossip with Esther, Grace had a complete list of Carl’s good and bad points. And she was positive about one thing—dating sure didn’t get any simpler with age.

“Esther, you’re all done.” Tory spun her in the chair. “Go knock Carl dead.”

“Honey, I want him alive.” She gave a wink and a smile. “I’ll be back next Tuesday.”

While Tory cleaned up the area, Callie escorted Esther to the door.

Fifteen minutes later, after Tory washed and conditioned Grace’s hair and put it up in clips all about her head, Tory was ready to begin cutting.

“Thank you,” Grace said when Callie handed her a glass of wine.

“So, what are we doing today?” Tory asked as she ran a wide-toothed comb through Grace’s wet hair.

“Hmm.” Grace sipped the wine. “Surprise me.”

“Cut it all off,” Callie suggested.

Tory shook her head. “No, I think we’re going to give her some layers this time. Make it easier if you want to straighten it.”

“Good idea,” Callie said. “New apartment, new life, new hair.”

Grace bit her lower lip. “Speaking of new,” she began, then waited as Tory snipped off some of her hair.

Tory paused. “I get the feeling you don’t want me to cut your hair while you tell us this.”

“No, I think you should sit down.”

“Uh oh,” Tory said, slinking away.

“Don’t say anything, and I mean anything, until I come back,” Callie warned. “I have to use the little girl’s room.”

Oh great, Grace had finally gotten the courage to say something and they were making her wait. How cruel was that?

“Tell me,” Tory said. “Whisper it.”

“And face death-by-Callie? Nah. You can just wait.”

Tory stood. “Hey, I hold the scissors.”

“Fine.” Grace glanced over her shoulder, and checked out the rest of the shop in the reflection of the mirror. “It’s about Eddie.”

Tory set the scissors down. “Callie. Hurry the hell up.”

Callie returned after what seemed like an eternity. "Okay, what is this about?"

Tory said, "Eddie," before Grace could even get a word out.

"Oh? The fireman. The born-again beefcake?" Callie asked, "What about him?"

Grace took a deep breath and tried to figure out the right way to tell them, only she was afraid there wasn't one. So, she'd blurt it out. "Eddie kissed me."

Tory clutched her chest. "Oh my God! Eddie kissed you?"

Grace nodded. "And, boy, did he kiss me."

This time it was Callie who said, "Oh my God."

"I want to hear everything, every last detail." Tory bounced in the chair.

Callie clapped her hands. "All right, let's hear about this kiss."

"It was nice."

"That's all? Nice? It was nice," Callie cried. "There has to be more. *Nice* wouldn't put a dreamy look on your face."

"I was so nervous. But, wow. He touched my face and then his hand was on my jaw because I had flour there and I...oh God, it was like I could feel the kiss down to my toes, you know? And then his hands ended up in my *hair*."

Grace sighed at the same time both Callie and Tory said, "Ohh."

"Okay, you can't stop there," Tory said. "You have to tell us more."

Grace sighed again. "That's it, that's all there is to tell."

Tory shook her head. "No. There *has* to be more."

"Well, before all this happened, Nancy dropped by house."

Tory groaned. "The Nancy that sees cursed auras. The fruit loop? Grace, I thought we discussed this."

"Nancy's really a nice lady, and she's a perfectly normal."

Callie huffed. "She told you had a cursed aura, Grace. That's not normal."

Grace held up her hand. "Okay, forget about Nancy. I took cookies to Eddie, as a sort of apology."

"I have the feeling we're missing a whole lot here. Grace, why not back up and start over," Callie suggested.

Grace did. She told them about the tour of the fire station, about how Eddie fell, and that brought her back to the cookies. As her friends laughed, she realized this was how she should've started the conversation in the first place. The other events of the day paled in comparison to the kiss.

It was as if she could still feel his lips on hers. Still smell the clean, spicy scent of him. She couldn't remember ever feeling this way about a kiss. What she'd felt was hard to grasp, difficult to define, she couldn't even begin to describe what it truly felt like.

"So, he almost choked on the cookie? I can see why," Callie said. "You have been talking pretty crazy. We know you aren't, but this is new territory for this guy. I mean, think about it. You've been talking about curses and Mercury in retrograde. The two of you had a bonfire ritual in your apartment. Then he falls off the pole...c'mon, if it was anyone but Grace, we'd all be saying how kooky this woman is."

"This is hopeless." Grace sighed.

"No, not yet."

"His mother was there, and she seemed to like you?" Callie asked.

Grace nodded. "And she told him to stop being a jackass."

"Well, jeez, that's a no brainer. The man really needs to lighten up," Tory said.

Grace held up her hand. "Now, in his defense, I knew him in school, better than either of you did...."

“So, what’s your point?” Callie asked.

“I’m beginning to wonder if the reason he’s acting like such a grouch, well, maybe he’s entitled to act like a jackass.”

“What?”

“We’ve been such hypocrites.”

“Hypocrites?” Callie bleated. “How?”

“Well we treat him differently than we did in high school. What’s he supposed to think—that the only reason we’re interested in him now is the way he looks.”

“He looks great now.”

Grace nodded. “My point exactly.”

“But we’ve all changed, matured. Well, some of us.”

“He still finds our motives suspect. He doesn’t trust us. Well me anyway.”

Tory smacked her hand to her forehead. “Oh, man. We treated him differently last night, Callie. I *flirted* with him. I *never* flirted with him in high school.”

“Bingo.” Grace crossed her arms over her chest.

Callie seemed confused. It looked as if it took her a minute to determine that two and two made four. After a moment, she smiled. “So, what are you going to do?” Callie asked.

Grace relaxed her arms at her sides. “I don’t know. His mother invited me to dinner on Sunday.”

Tory snapped her fingers. “There you go. You really like him don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Why *wouldn’t* he trust you?”

“I messed up.”

“How?” Callie asked. “How did you mess up? You didn’t treat him any differently last night.”

Grace lowered her head. “But he thought I did today. He misinterpreted what I said about kissing him. I was teasing him—and it came out wrong, or he took it wrong. I don’t know. Anyway, he’s angry and hurt. And that’s the last thing I wanted to happen.”

Tory stood. “Yeah, well, we’ll make it better. We were putting together a plan anyhow. The way you and Eddie were looking at each other last night said it all.”

“Yes,” Callie said. “You dropping by saved us a phone call.

Tory and Callie looked at each other and smiled. “As it happens, your new hairdo fits perfectly into our plans for tonight.”



Eddie took a long sip of his second beer for the evening. He wondered again what he was doing here. He was supposed to be celebrating, it was a stag party after all, but he wasn’t in the mood. He took a long swallow and listened to the party going on around him.

He’d screwed up royally.

He got what he wanted, right? He wanted Grace out of his life. He didn’t want to save her, didn’t want to have to save himself, he just wanted to do what he had to do.

Make chief.

All of his carefully laid plans were beginning to fall into place. So, if this is what he wanted, why the hell wasn’t he happy? He snatched peanuts from the bowl and leveled his eyes at the TV mounted on the far side of the bar. Why was he so miserable?

Tapping an almost empty bottle of beer on the bar to get the bartender's attention, his brother Anthony sat beside him with a slap on the back.

"Buy you a drink?" Anthony asked.

"Why not?"

"Why the sour face, little brother?" Anthony motioned for the bartender.

"I'm just tired."

"Bullshit."

Eddie arched his eyebrow. "What?" Eddie growled. "I'm not allowed to be tired?"

"Yeah, you're allowed to be tired, but that isn't a tired look. That's an I-lost-my-best-friend look. So, what gives?"

"Nothing gives," Eddie told him as the bartender brought them fresh bottles of beer. He pointed to the money he had sitting on the bar. "I have one thing on my mind, the only thing that matters to me—making chief. Period."

Anthony took a swig of his beer. "You know that's in the bag, no one has worked harder for this than you. But little brother, there's more to life than being the fire chief. Trust me, I know."

Anthony was chief of another company just outside Pittsburgh. But he also had a family—a wife and kids.

"No. I know what you're talking about," Eddie explained, "I'll be twenty-seven. I still have plenty of time for all that. It's not like I'm forty-seven."

"Doesn't matter."

Eddie sipped his beer. "Maybe I want to live a little first."

Anthony snickered. "Have you even been laid?"

Eddie coughed and almost spewed his beer all over the bar. He narrowed his eyes at his brother. "More times, more places and more positions than you can possibly imagine."

Anthony snorted. "In your friggin' dreams baby."

Eddie shrugged a broad shoulder. "Trojan wants me to be their poster boy."

Anthony laughed and pounded him on the back. "You're so full of shit."

Eddie shook his head, laughing. "Since when is my sex life up for discussion?"

"Since Grace Adams reappeared in your life."

Anthony might as well have punched him in the gut. He'd forgotten all about the "love sick" talk he had with Anthony all those years back. Of course, he never imagined it'd come back to haunt him. It'd been prom time, and he desperately wanted to ask Grace. Of course, Anthony told Eddie to come right out and ask her. Not that Eddie had taken Anthony's advice.

Gino never really had time for Eddie, but Anthony made the time. Anthony was one of his biggest supporters when he went on a diet and started working out at the gym and running. So much so that Anthony went running with him.

Eddie couldn't remember exactly what he'd said to his brother all those years, but he was almost positive Anthony did.

"Okay," Eddie said. "I admit I had a crush on Grace. Had."

"Nuh uh. I think you still have the hots for her."

"I'm way out of her league."

"The Mancilla's aren't out of anyone's league."

Eddie scratched his head. "*This* Mancilla is."

He couldn't understand why it was so hard for Anthony to grasp the fact that he was out of her league. Fact was, nothing had changed. Yes, his appearance had, but deep down, he was still that same insecure guy he'd been back in high school. He hated it, but he had to admit it to himself, especially after the way he'd behaved with Grace earlier that evening.

Eddie remembered the way he'd treated her, her expression falling, hurt reflecting in her eyes. It was his own insecurity creeping out. He felt guilty.

Looking back, he knew what she meant and it scared the hell out of him because he felt it too. He could hear himself telling his mother when the right woman came along, he'd just know. One kiss with Grace and...he knew.

Anthony asked, "So, how do you figure you're out of her league?"

Eddie exhaled and then took the last swig of his beer. "Look around you. You think Grace would be caught dead in a place like this?"

"Nothing wrong with O'Reilly's." Anthony scanned the bar. When he turned around, Eddie didn't like his expression, not at all. Anthony's Cheshire grin was almost blinding. "Why don't you ask her yourself?"

Eddie swiveled on his barstool and his heart nearly hit his feet when he spotted Grace crossing the pub with her posse in tow.

Chapter Six

“Why here?” Grace asked incredulously, looking around. They made her get all dressed up—scratch that, they made her dress in their *borrowed* “clubbing” clothes to come to a pub?

Maybe they brought her here to put a buzz on. From the looks of it, the drinks had to be considerably cheaper.

Looking around, she saw mostly men. This was a men’s bar. Fire and police paraphernalia adorned the walls. Helmets, jackets, axes, handcuffs, you name it, it was there.

A sick feeling settled in Grace’s stomach. Grace realized *why* Tory and Callie had picked this place. It was a fireman’s watering hole, somewhere they thought a firefighter like Eddie might hang out. Somewhere Eddie might be—

Grace spotted him across the room. She’d know his walk, his butt anywhere. It was most definitely Eddie Mancilla making his way through the crowd toward the pool tables.

“Never mind, I know *why* we’re here, and can I just say that I’m ready to go home?” Grace turned toward the door, hoping to make her escape. But that was next to impossible as more big, burly, hunky men made their way into the bar.

“This,” Callie said with a smirk, “is the watering hole for Pittsburgh’s finest.”

“We’re not going anywhere.” Tory took Grace’s arm in hers. “Not with this much testosterone and *day-um*, did you see him? Why haven’t we come here before now is what I want to know.” Tory toyed with one of her dangling diamond earrings. Her bright blue eyes scanned the room. “Is he here? Did you see him?”

“Oh yeah, he’s here all right.” Callie gave Tory a mini high five.

“We’re overdressed,” Grace added to her complaint. “I feel like...I feel like my pants are falling off.”

Callie laughed. “You need to relax, those pants are snug on your hips, they aren’t going anywhere. You look sexy, you look ravishing, and Eddie the fireman is going to regret pushing you away.”

Grace couldn’t help it, she rolled her eyes. In her own estimate, she looked like a hussy. Tory’s black pants fell just below Grace’s hips—supposedly made to be worn that way. Grace had seen these types of pants on other women. The low waistline accented Grace’s hipbones, dipping almost too low for comfort. The bright red top she wore, also Tory’s, wasn’t much better. The neckline dipped low, really low. Tory had boobs. Grace didn’t. So her two industrious friends had taped the inside of the fabric to her breasts. Duct tape was the only thing stopping her from exposing her breasts, such as they were, to the world, or in this case, the clientele in O’Reilly’s Pub.

The only thing, aside from the big gold hoops earrings Callie insisted she wear, that she liked about her whole ensemble was her hair.

Tory had outdone herself this time. Long layers and an iron had made her long, curly locks straight, framing her face and making her look like a whole new person. Her hair made her feel sexy—she could do without the clothes.

“I’m going to get us some drinks,” Tory said.

Grace could've made a getaway, but Callie repositioned herself between Grace and the door, moving into the space Tory just vacated. Her friends knew her all too well.

Callie took her hand and dragged her along the perimeter of the bar to an empty table near the pool tables.

Once they were seated, Grace, purposefully targeting away her gaze from the pool tables, leaned across the table. "So, what's the game plan here?"

"The game plan is for us to have a couple of drinks and see how fast it takes lover boy to realize you're here. And if he doesn't, then we go play pool."

"I can't play pool."

Callie shrugged. "Neither can I, but that isn't why you go play pool."

"It isn't?"

Callie burst into laughter. "Not tonight it isn't."

Grace wasn't following her. Truth be told, she hadn't participated in a lot of dating rituals. Most of the men she met and became involved with, she just stumbled into.

Going to bars wasn't something she normally did. A lot of it had to do with getting up early and teaching class. Some of it had been that she was more content to stay home with whoever happened to be her current boyfriend at the time.

They'd never seemed to mind.

Tory and Callie went out quite a bit. It helped that Callie bartended most weekends. Callie's dream was to own her own bar. Grace had lost count of all the times the three of them had watched the movie *Coyote Ugly*. Callie was dead set on having a bar like that one day, and they all knew she'd die trying.

One of the greatest things Grace had was the support of her friends. Sure, they got into squabbles, what friends didn't? But theirs was a friendship to last an eternity. No ifs, ands or buts about it. As corny as it might sound, they were all for one and one for all.

Tory returned with three cosmos. They each took a glass and raised it. "To rescuing Eddie," Tory said with a big grin.

"Rescuing Eddie?" Grace asked.

"Yes, from himself." Callie said, clinking their glasses.

"Oh, oh, okay, and to saving Grace." Tory added.

"To saving Grace," Callie said with a smile.

"My shots suck," Eddie yelled over the jukebox behind him. "I think it's time for me to go home."

"No way," Anthony yelled. "You're just getting warmed up."

"Yeah, what An'tony said," Curt Bellows slurred.

Curt was a dog. If a woman breathed and had a pulse, he was all over her. Didn't matter who she was, if she was involved with another guy or not, Curt saw fit to pounce on her.

"Hey," Curt said. "I see fresh meat."

Translated, he saw new women in the bar. Eddie groaned. He figured he knew exactly who Curt might be referring to. And, if that were the case, Eddie found himself in an awkward position.

If Eddie showed the slightest bit of interest in what Curt said or in the women he was referring to, Curt would be all over them. No consideration at all for his friend's interests, Curt looked out for one person, himself. Of course, Curt hadn't always been like that, but, lately, it seemed to come naturally to him.

Of all the nights for Grace to show up here, it had to be tonight. This was the busiest he'd seen O'Reilly's in a long time. But it wasn't every day that one of the guys had a bachelor party on the premises either.

"I think we should go talk to them," Curt said.

Anthony shook his head. "I think the only stick you need to be worrying about is the one in your hands. It's your turn."

James "Slash" Slater, the groom-to-be, came over and joined them. "You got room for one more?"

"Sure," Eddie said.

"Great, great, I haven't seen youns for a while. Okay, so I see Antony all the time, but you, Manzilla, I haven't seen you in ages." Slash smacked Eddie on the back. "Glad you came to join me on my last night of freedom. But you know, it isn't all that bad."

"What isn't that bad?" Eddie asked.

"Love. It's great man. You should try it sometime."

"He's working on it." Anthony bumped Eddie's shoulder.

Eddie shook his head, disgusted with his brother. Grateful for the noise. The look on Slash's face led Eddie to think that if Slash had heard what Anthony had just said, Anthony's comment hadn't sunk through Slash's alcohol haze.

With one eye on the guys and the other on the table where Grace and her friends were seated, Eddie was trying to figure out what was different about Grace.

One, she definitely wasn't dressed like a teacher. He couldn't see what she had on the bottom, but that red top was screaming at him. He wondered how the hell she kept her breasts inside it. Or hell, for that matter, why she didn't just slap on a couple of Band-Aids and get it over with?

"You're up, Eddie," Anthony said.

At least someone knew what his real name was. Too bad it was only family.

Eddie aimed the cue at the cueball and made his shot. It banked the side and ricocheted off the right ball into the pocket.

“Niiiiiice,” Anthony yelled. “One more time, lil bro, one more time.”

Anthony sidled up to him. “Good going on playing that off.”

“Playing what off?” Eddie asked as he chalked his pole.

“Trust me. I know that Curt is an asshole. Just play it cool.”

“I can play it cool.”

“You forget who you’re talking to.”

Eddie laughed. “I’ve grown up since the backyard brawls.”

Anthony nodded his head in the direction of the table where Grace, Tory and Callie were sitting. “Better keep that cool, ‘cuz it looks like they’re coming this way.”

“Shit.”

“Stay cool.”

Easy for him to say. Here came Grace.

Grace.

Grace, dressed in a top cut down to there, flashing her belly button and her hair different—looking all hot. Most of the men in the bar were focused on her, their tongues lolling out of their mouths.

Well, Grace was asking for it. No doubt in his mind. And he decided then and there, that no matter how much Curt came on to her, he would not intervene. He would not rescue her, and he would not let Curt’s behavior, no matter how inappropriate, bother him.

He was here to have a good time, not to rescue Grace.

Nope, she was on her own. Period.

Eddie leaned down. It gave him the perfect angle to the last shot and her belly. Something shiny caught the corner of his eye as he reared the

cue back to shoot. His fluid motion became a jolt—the eight ball scratched. All because little Miss Thing had a diamond stud in her belly button. So much for not letting Grace get under his skin. She made him lose the damned game.

He tried hard not to look at her. But not hard enough, because he quickly gave into temptation.

Her hair. Wow.

Gone were her trademark unruly curls. He liked them, but wow. The way her hair flowed and shined and fell around her face. Wow. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

As she got closer, his eyes traveled the length of her, stopping when he saw the exposed skin from her belly button to her hip bones.

He would not think about splaying his hands across her tiny belly, he would not think about grabbing onto her hip bones... He needed to stop looking at her.

What he needed was more beer. In fact, all of them needed more beer. Eddie decided he'd be the gopher. Putting aside his pool cue and grabbing up the empty bottles, he sauntered to the bar.

"He's avoiding me," Grace half-yelled, half-whispered in Callie's ear.

"Nope, he's getting refills. Besides, he won't be able to avoid you for long. Those guys are finishing up, and we've got dibs on their table," Callie said as she pulled her along. "You worry too much."

How could she not worry? She was barely dressed, in a bar where the only people she knew were Tory and Callie. If they left her side, she'd make a break for it. Who cared if her car was still parked at their apartment? She'd take a cab.

She couldn't believe they'd talked her into this, and if it weren't so damned noisy, she'd tell the two of them exactly that. But she could

barely hear herself think, let alone breathe. They needed better air filters in here. Even though they were all firemen and perhaps used to the smoke, man, it had to get old.

And the attention the three of them received, especially Grace. Why couldn't they have just let her wear clothes she was comfortable in?

Grace sighed as Tory put quarters into the slots on the table. Balls dropped with a loud clatter, and Callie immediately started piling them on the table.

Grace had never played pool. Ever. She hadn't the foggiest idea what the hell she was supposed to do—just stand there and look slutty? Okay, so she really didn't look like a slut, but, considering everyone else had on jeans, including her friends, she sure felt like one. Her outfit screamed, "I'm desperate, look at me."

As if on cue, she caught a glimpse of the wannabe Casanova out of the corner of her eye. He was slithering his way toward them through the crowd, a big, cheesy, drunken grin plastered on his face. Callie and Tory were oblivious to the blond-haired, blue-eyed snake staggering in their direction.

She supposed if she weren't so irritated, he wouldn't be bad looking. But the man had "male whore" written all over his face. Grace knew the type. Wham-bam-no-thank-you-ma'am. Love em' and leave em', or worse—stay on the couch and demand you fetch him a drink.

"Hey, hey, lovely ladies," he slurred.

Callie and Tory exchanged glances, and Grace decided to let them handle this poor excuse for a guy.

"My friends and I are playing pool. There are four of us and three of you, but I don't mind sharing," he continued, totally oblivious to the women's cool expressions and lack of smiles.

Grace searched her brain for some type of hilarious comeback, one that would make him go slithering back to his friends with his tail between his legs, but the only thing she could think of was “pocket-pool”. However, the image of him stuffing his hands into his jeans pockets to play with his own balls was a little too much at the moment so she said absolutely nothing.

He was beside her now, his hot breath on the bare skin of her shoulder. She didn’t like it.

Callie cleared her throat loudly. Good, she was going to kick this guy’s ass.

Grace looked at Callie and saw her make a sideways glance with her eyes. Without looking, Grace knew who was watching. Eddie.

Grace was so out of touch with the dating scene. Callie and Tory didn’t intend for her to try to make Eddie jealous, did they? That was so not her. It seemed so juvenile, like an adolescent ploy.

Besides Grace didn’t *want* to flirt with this guy. Why couldn’t someone normal approach her? Better yet, why couldn’t Eddie just come over and say hello? She sighed. Maybe he wasn’t finished brooding yet.

If she were nice to this guy, just a little bit, her friends would be pacified and then she could go home. God, she couldn’t wait to get out of these clothes and into her own things. With a newfound resolve, Grace smiled weakly. She could do this. She could fool Tory and Callie. *Face your fears*. She turned toward snake man.

Grace took a deep breath. Okay, not a good idea, because his breath was enough to make the whole bar high on alcohol fumes. She shuddered inwardly. She could do this.

Besides, why should she worry about what Eddie thought? She wasn’t in a relationship with him, they weren’t even dating. So why did any of this matter anyway? Grace was out with her friends, at a bar,

having her second drink. And who cared if what she really, really wanted to do was to adjust her thong for comfort's sake. The sooner she got this over with the better. Then she could go home.

She genuinely smiled now. "Hi there," she said, leaning back against the pool table. "Are you a fireman?"

The guy puffed out his chest, and nodded. "Yes ma'am."

"Cool." Of course, she could have said something a little more elaborate than that, but she was out of practice. She extended her hand. "I'm Grace."

"Curt," he said, accepting it and bringing it to his lips.

Score one for the snake.

"I thought all firemen had nicknames," she said coyly.

He nodded again and chuckled.

"So what's yours?"

"They call me Bull."

Darn, Grace figured "Cobra" would've been much more appropriate. She giggled. She was really getting into this. Callie and Tory would be so proud of her. She snapped her fingers and pointed. "Let me guess why you got that name, is it because you're so good at spreading a line of bull?"

Curt put his hand on the pool table near Grace's hip and leaned toward her. He shook his head. "Nah, it's because I was bullheaded when I was younger."

Grace grinned. "Same difference."

"I guess so," Curt said as he nodded. "So, I've never seen youns around here."

Youns. The very word grated on her nerves. She never quite got that word and when she was old enough to know better, she stopped using it.

It fit in the same category as her mother and friends adding an “r” in the word “wash”.

“These are my friends, Callie and Tory.”

Tory gave him a wave.

“This is our first time here,” Callie said, sliding up to them. “We’re O’Reilly virgins,” she told him.

Grace stifled a giggle.

“So, you going to stand here all night, or are you going to put your money where your mouth is?” Callie yelled.

“Let’s play.” Curt flashed a perfect orthodontic smile.

Grace pushed off the edge of the pool table and walked over to join Tory as she selected a pool stick.

Callie had put all the balls in a triangle. She handed Grace a stick. “You wanna break?”

“I have no idea what that means,” Grace said, examining both ends of it.

Tory balanced a cue of her own as she removed the triangle from around the balls. “Come over here, and we’ll show you.”

Playing at flirting was one thing. Humiliating herself in an attempt to play pool was another. “Look, I don’t have to play.”

“You can’t stand there and just look pretty for the rest of the night,” Callie told her. “Get your ass over here.”

One thing Grace rarely did was argue with Callie. Callie moved to stand behind Grace, lining their arms up.

A few catcalls sounded out, and Curt clapped his hands and said, “Very impressive.”

Callie straightened and took a step back away from Grace. “Think you can do better?”

“I know I can.”

“Be my guest.” Callie said, stepping away from the table.

Oh hell no. She’d seen this in movies. The guy teaches the girl how to play pool, and his hands went there, would slide up here, and suddenly the camera panned to them having wild hot sex.

No way was Grace going there. “You know, really, Callie can help me. I don’t need—”

Too late. Curt’s hands were sliding up her arms. No tingles, no nothing. Just outright disgust. *Play along.*, Grace knew there were several pairs of eyes aimed at her. Were Eddie’s?

His hands were on hers, his breath in her ear. She supposed he was trying to be seductive. If that were the case, it wasn’t working.

Now, if this were Eddie, with his hands sliding over hers, pressing his body against her that’d give her tingles.

Grace tensed. If this Bull guy pressed himself against her, that was it. Tory and Callie could be pissed off at her if they wanted to, but she was out of here.

Grace went through the motions to break the balls. They scattered across the table with a vengeance. When she straightened up, Curt’s hands found their way to her waist. Reaching down, she pried his fingers away from her and stepped aside.

Grace had had enough. “Excuse me, I need to go to the restroom,” she told her friends. She intended to visit bathroom, and then she was out the door. Eddie or no Eddie, she wanted to get as far away from snake man as she could possibly get.

“I’ve had enough, I’m going home,” Eddie told Anthony when the last ball went into the pocket.

“Go talk to her.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yeah, your pride never is.”

“My pride?”

Anthony sat down on a stool. “Yes, little brother, your pride. You’ve got Pop’s disposition.”

Eddie leaned the pool cue up against the table. “Pop’s?”

Anthony nodded. “Yes, he needed Ma to tame him and make him human.”

Eddie laughed.

“Look, I can’t tell you what to do, but man, I remember how you used to talk about Grace all the time. You pretended to be annoyed, but I knew better. You liked rescuing Grace, and if she didn’t like being rescued by you, yes, I said you, she wouldn’t have done the bumbled things she did.”

Anthony put his hand on Eddie’s shoulder. “The way I see it, you have two choices. You can go home and be miserable for the rest of the evening, or you can go back down that hall, wait for her to come out of the restroom and talk to her. Set the record straight, once and for all, and apologize to her for being a jackass.”

“Why does everyone keep calling me that?” Eddie asked as he stood.

“Because you’re being one.”

Eddie shrugged. “Fair enough.” Set the record straight. Maybe that’s what he needed to do to get Grace from under his skin. “I’m going home,” he said.

Anthony flapped his arms like a chicken.

“Fine. You win. I’ll talk to her.”

A flash of humor crossed his face. “Good luck.”

Eddie groaned. He was going to need it.

He had no idea what he’d say to her as he moved through the crowd toward the restrooms. He’d apologize for pushing her away, for

misinterpreting what she'd said, for jumping to conclusions, but, as far as them ever having a relationship...it wasn't in the cards, not right now.

His intentions were simple. Save her from Curt, make her happy enough to spend dinner tomorrow at his mother's in peace, then move on with his life. He could do this.

As he rounded the corner, someone opened a door to what he supposed was a closet or storage room. If he could work it out, it might be the perfect place to talk to Grace.

The barmaid came out of the room with an armful of napkins. He nodded at her then caught the door with his foot before it closed. Eddie waited for Grace to come out of the bathroom. When she came out, he took her by the arm, and pulled her into the small room, letting the door close behind them.

"Eddie, what the hell are you doing?" she yelled.

"Right now," he said, feeling around for a light switch, "I'm trying to shed some light on this situation."

He heard her sigh. "You have two seconds, so you better start talking."

"I can't find the switch."

"Okay, time's up."

Eddie swatted into the air, catching a dangling string. He yanked on it.

A very dim, bare light bulb dangled just above their heads. "There, that's better."

His gaze moved over her, taking in the low dipping neckline of the gravity-defying blouse and the way her pants' waistband seemed to hang on her hips, as if waiting to be peeled off.

Grace crossed her arms across her chest. She didn't look too happy with him.

“Look, the reason why I pulled you in here, was because I wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?” She looked down at floor and jiggled her heeled feet. “My feet are sticking to the floor. I think maybe I stepped on a piece of gum.”

He smiled. “Good, that just means you won’t be running off on me.”

“Well, I suggest you start talking before the search party comes for me.”

“Right,” he said, remembering how protective Callie could be. “Look.” He stopped. Improvising wasn’t one of his strengths, not by any stretch of the imagination. Not when it came to women anyhow. Of course, when it came to speaking to a reporter about a fire or anything, he could do it—just like that, no problem. “I wanted to say, that I uh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

She dropped her arms to her side. “You didn’t mean what?”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you.” There, he said it.

Her mouth fell open. “Well,” she said, recovering, “for someone who *didn’t* want to kiss me, you certainly did a damn good job of it.”

He couldn’t help it, he had to laugh. “I guess that was a compliment?”

Grace smiled. “Yeah, I guess it was.” She shifted the weight on her feet again. “While we’re here,” she started. “I need to tell you something.”

“Let me guess. I’m a jackass?”

She snorted. “Please, let me get this out, or else, I’ll never say it.”

This was interesting. “Say what?”

“Okay, basically, I’ve *sort of* had feelings for you, since high school and seeing you, lately, that’s brought that back.”

Eddie leaned back against a stack of boxes. He couldn’t believe this. “*You’ve* had feelings for me?”

Grace raised her chin. "Yeah, so? You going to tell me you never had feelings for me?"

Eddie scrubbed his face. "Whoa."

Maybe it was the alcohol, but she was feeling more brazen. "I'm not stupid, Eddie, I could...tell. I mean, it's easy to tell when someone's feeling the same way."

"This is all very...unexpected, Grace, but that's not the point."

"There's a point to this?"

"Yes, a very valid one." His hand shook as he pointed his finger toward her. "The point is I...I don't need this right now, Okay. I have making chief to think about and the fire company. I just don't need this right now."

"Are you saying that if you did have feelings for me, you could just put them aside? Is that what you're saying?" She tilted her head to one side, and her gaze met his straight on. "Because I can't do that."

He laughed. "Hey, I've been doin' it since the eighth grade, I've gotten pretty damn good at it. And obviously you did. I mean, you had a boyfriend bonfire, for God's sake. You couldn't have worried too much about good ol' Eddie Mancilla over the years."

"All right, fine, you go ahead and do whatever you need to do to make Eddie happy."

"Fine."

"Good."

"Good," he said, stepping toward the door. Eddie turned the doorknob. "This is just great, just great." He twisted the doorknob back and forth. Frustrated and needing air, he banged his palm against the door. "We're locked in."

"How did that happen?"

“How?” he asked, picking his head up. “Because you had to be so stupid.”

“Stupid?”

“Yes, wearing that and coming here.”

“So, you pull me in here, and now we’re stuck in a closet, and that’s *my* fault?”

“Yes.”

“You know what, Eddie? I am sick of things always being my fault where you’re concerned.”

He turned to face her.

“So things don’t always work out as planned. You’re pissed at me because I tell you that if I’d have known you could knock my socks off with one kiss, I’d have built up the courage to try it back in high school, and you push me away like I’m nothing. I tell you I’ve had feelings for you, and I still do, and that isn’t good enough. What do you want from me?”

He crossed the tiny distance between them. “This,” he said simply and pulled her to him.

Chapter Seven

Eddie's mouth consumed her with such fire, such passion, that it stole her breath away. A rush of longing flooded through her as his hands cupped her face. Warmth curled in her lower abdomen, and flames of desire flickered to life deep within her.

Nothing mattered, not the sticky floor her feet seemed hell-bent on sticking to, not the heady smell of overly fermented beer. None of it. The only thing that mattered, here and now, was the man whose kisses stoked the embers of longing building inside of her.

Pure raw need scorched through her veins. Never had she wanted a man this much. His mouth left hers, trailing hot, fiery kisses down her throat. A small moan escaped her lips and, for a moment, she longed to be somewhere this deliciously volatile embrace could heat up, and the two of them could completely and totally melt into each other.

"God, you smell so good," he whispered in her ear. His hot breath against her skin sent her senses into a sizzling orbital spin. His tongue darted wickedly over her earlobe and dipped brazenly into her ear. She gasped and braided her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer to her, pressing her body tightly against him.

She needed him almost as much as she needed the air that she took into her lungs in short shallow, ragged breaths. It didn't—couldn't get any better than this.

"Eddie," she groaned. "We need to stop."

His head came up. His eyes were dark pools, reminding her of melted chocolate. God, this man was sexy. The expression on his face was priceless; he looked like a wounded child who'd just been told he couldn't have another lollipop.

"Eddie, someone could walk in."

He took a deep breath. He shook his head and said, "Not for hours."

"You forget who you're with," she told him. It'd be just their luck that someone would open the door at the precise moment they were in a compromising position.

It was his turn to groan. He stepped back, his eyes never leaving hers, and she wondered if he heard the swear word that slipped out from between her lips.

"Besides," she told him with a smile. "If this comes off," she tugged lightly at her blouse, "you'd have to give me your shirt, because this is literally taped into place."

"Ah, I wondered how you were accomplishing that." He took another step toward her. He almost purred, "Let me see."

"You can look, but you can't touch." Her breath caught in her throat.

"I make no promises," he said as he reached out and gently caressed her breast through the silky material.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back. She didn't care that something hard and jagged was poking into her backside; she was mesmerized by his gentle touch.

Grabbing hold of the front of his shirt with both hands, Grace pulled him closer to her. His mouth crashed down upon hers, ravishing her with his tongue. She moaned and clung to him. With all her being, she wanted this man; mind, body and soul.

He lifted his head. His fingers searched for the tape holding her blouse on. Giving a light tug, Eddie managed to free the tie around her

neck. But because of the tape, the top stayed in place. He slid his hand over the silky material of the top. Her nipple hardened and strained against the fabric. He rubbed it with his thumb. She moaned and arched her back toward his hand.

This man was driving her absolutely wild.

“Baby,” he whispered. “If I take the tape off, is it going to be like pulling off a Band-Aid?”

Why did she allow Tory and Callie talk her into things like this? “I don’t know. I’ve never, never worn anything like this before.”

He kissed her forehead. “I’ll be gentle.”

With a light tug, the tape gave way. He repeated the process on the other side of her chest.

His gaze caressed her, sending tendrils of desire straight down to her toes. His touch alone, the sound of his voice sent her mind reeling. This wasn’t just physical. Grace felt as though she was connecting with this man on some deep, extraordinary level, and the thought of that both excited and scared the hell out of her.

She trusted him. Not knowing how or why she came to this revelation, she just knew she could. He knew how to bring her delicious thrills of pleasure with his touch and with his kiss, but it was more than that. The gentle way he caressed her skin, the tender expression in his eyes when he looked at her. She felt like he could see right through her, to the real Grace.

She knew should stop before she got herself in way too deep. She’d trusted before, but Eddie was unlike any man she’d ever known. His mouth sought hers, hungrier, more desperate, and she buried her hands in his hair, yanking his hard frame against hers.

His lips left hers and he dipped his head down. He sucked, licked and teased her breast until she cried out. Grace had never endured such

pleasure. Her body was alive and on fire with want, with need. His tongue flicked over her taut nipple. She wanted to arch closer to him, but the molten honey that seemed to pour through her fused her movements. A delicious warmth enveloped her, and her body tightened as his caress ignited a fiery release.

She gasped and allowed her body to respond to him, to tremble with need, to welcome his touch. His hand splayed across her abdomen, stroking around her belly button. "Oh, yes," she sighed, succumbing to the euphoric pleasure in his touch. His hand moved lower. She inhaled sharply when he lightly stroked across the inside of her thighs. Oh, God, his touch...she'd never known anything like it. She arched her hips, ached for him to do more than just tease her. Much more.

"Mm, Eddie," she said on a blissful sigh, as she tugged on his blue dress shirt, undoing each button with shaking fingers. The shirt joined her blouse on top of the stack of boxes. He raised his arms and allowed her to peel his T-shirt up and over his head. She had to touch him, feel his skin against her own.

"Grace, sweetie, you're killing me here," he growled against her cheek as she caressed his bare chest, gently dragging her fingernails downward over his flesh, stopping at the button on his Levi's.

Gazing into his eyes, Grace caught her breath when she saw how shockingly dark they'd turned. They burned with such intensity, searing a hole right through her. She reached up, her emotions running wild, and brushed her fingertips over his smooth jaw, allowing them to glide across his parted lips. His eyelids drifted shut and a small sigh escaped from him. Lowered his head, he kissed her. His lips devoured hers with the hungry appetite of a starving man.

Pulling away, he undid the button of her pants, then struggled to peel the tight cloth down over her hips. She helped him, wriggling a little until

they fell to the floor so she could step out of them. She stood before him, nearly nude in black lacy panties and nothing else, trembling with need and want.

His ragged breath caught in his throat. "You are so beautiful, sweetheart. Just beautiful."

Beautiful. He'd called her beautiful. Heat built within her, and her heart raced. Eddie hastily removed his pants, revealing his need for her straining against his boxer briefs. As he took out a condom from his wallet, her gaze swept over his long, muscular legs and back up. Through the material of the briefs, she could see that he was magnificently rock hard and pulsing. She sucked in her breath in anticipation as he closed the narrow gap between them and lifted her into the air, holding her against him. He kissed her again with such a force that she felt like she would burst into flames.

He secured his arm around her, holding her. He dragged the panties down over her hips. She scooped them up and threw them toward the boxes as well. She wasn't sure they hit her intended target. She didn't care. Nothing mattered, nothing except the man generating such intense yearning within her.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she felt him, hot with need. She wiggled her hips against him, and he groaned. Her heart fluttered in her chest, the mere thought of making love to him terrified her. He ground against her and her fears slowly dissipated, bringing in raw, unbridled passion. "Please," she begged.

He anchored her against the wall with one arm and easily shimmied out of his briefs. He handed her the condom with shaking hands.

Her own hands shook as she opened the package and slid the condom over the length of him. He raised her so she settled against him.

His eyes locked with hers. Grace couldn't speak, she could only plead with him with her eyes to fill her, to quench her desperate need.

Her eyes were such a brilliant dark blue, almost deepening to black with need. What had started out an innocent kiss had turned into something unexpected, something so much more. Something he couldn't define, something he didn't want to think about. Hell, he didn't even want to think. What he wanted was to take this slow, but now the urge to make her his had taken over. He could feel the wetness of her soft silky folds beckoning to him, and he pushed the thought of going slow out of his mind.

He readjusted her and guided her velvety opening over his shaft. Eddie slid into her tight wetness and stopped to allow her to adjust to his size. She was so incredibly tight that at first he didn't think he was going to fit inside her. He held her against him, feeling her warm wetness tightening around him. He could wait; he would give her all the time she needed. His tongue skimmed her jaw line. Grace's body shuddered, and she arched back, taking him in more deeply, and that gave him the signal he was waiting for.

Her eyes were closed, her lips slightly parted. He watched the pleasure glide over her face as he slid deep inside of her.

Somehow, Grace knew she was in for the ride of her life, and she welcomed it. Her hands clenched his shoulders, holding on as he repeatedly drove himself deep inside her. Their bodies were in exquisite harmony with each other as he took her to places she'd never been, and brought her feelings she'd never experienced. His eyes burned with desire as he drove her to the point of ecstasy.

Her body convulsed, sending him into a release of his own. She shuddered, shocked by the powerful feelings that tore through her. She'd never felt anything like it before. Ever. It was such an intense, mind-blowing release. Her chest tightened, tears burned her eyes. Grace tried to blink them away, but they just kept coming, and she buried her head in his chest, awed by the power of the feelings he created within her.

Grace reached up and stroked his hair as reality started to settle back in. She wasn't sure what had just transpired between them, but she knew now it was much more than lust. He was still there, caressing her back and holding her. In her past experiences, men she'd been with normally jetted out of the bed and to the bathroom as soon as they could. But then again, the two of them were currently trapped in a storage room.

He whispered into her hair, "You're amazing, you know that?"

She shivered at his words; the thought of anyone thinking she was amazing made her tears flow more freely. Was she really here? This was so surreal for her. This was the stuff dreams were made of, not her reality. She hugged Eddie's neck tighter and reached around to pinch her arm—this was real all right. Hot, salty tears ran down her cheeks. She didn't care anymore whether he knew she was crying. As long as he held on to her like this, she would be okay.

Her breasts tingled against the fine sheen of sweat along his chest, and Grace shivered. Nothing would ever be the same between them. She could never look into those eyes and not see the caring she'd seen reflected there today. Hell, nothing would ever be the same with her again.



“And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Grace’s blouse on again,” Eddie chided some fifteen minutes later.

She looked up at him, smiling as she zipped her pants. “They’re going to know what we did,” she told him, a blush creeping into her cheeks. “I don’t know if I’m ready to explain it yet.”

What was there to explain? Ah...chicks always had to kiss and tell. He groaned. “Well, what if you slip my shirt on over your blouse? Then you can just say you got cold.”

She was smiling again. “Thanks.”

He handed her his shirt and stepped back. It wasn’t supposed to feel this awkward. His legs felt like rubber, and he suppressed a yawn. He couldn’t help it, a long day at work, along with what they’d just shared, and he was beat.

He brushed his thumb along her cheek. He’d heard of women crying after an orgasm, but this was the first time he’d witnessed it. That she could reach such a level of emotional intensity stabbed at his heart. He wondered if the fumes of the beer leftovers here in the closet were finally starting to get to him. He knew one thing for sure—they would probably be stuck in here, together, just the two of them, for quite a while longer.

Music still filtered through the crack under the door, and he knew there was no sense in busting his hand to get someone’s attention. The only place to sit was the floor and after much protesting from Grace, who wouldn’t even take her shoes off when it was time to put her pants back on, he decided she was right. He could feel his socks sticking to the inside of his shoes. He tucked his T-shirt into the waistband of his jeans, and surveyed the closet. He debated about checking to see how much beer might be left in the kegs sitting against the closet’s back wall, then considered again that the fumes must really be going to his head.

Grace held out the straps to her blouse. “Can you get this?”

He took the straps and tied them loosely around her neck. His hands trailed down her bare shoulders, resting on her hips, pulling her back toward him. "If we were anywhere but here," he murmured into her ear. "There'd be no need for clothes."

He heard her moan as she fell back against him. "I wish we were anywhere but here."

The door of the storage room flew open. "Oh," a blonde haired woman exclaimed. "What the hell?"

Eddie glanced over his shoulder and said, "We, uh, we needed to talk. We didn't realize this door locked."

She snickered. "Yeah, we hear that all the time."

He retrieved his shirt from atop the boxes and handed it to Grace.

"We can always tell them we went outside," Grace told him once they were in the hallway. Grace slipped on his shirt. "It's like twenty degrees and it's snowing. I think we'd have frost bite hanging from our noses, or in your case, from the tape stuck in your hair."

Grace put her hand to her head. "Oh my God."

Eddie reached out and took her hand. "Let me get it."

"I think your whole Band-Aid speech—it's going to apply here."

"Want me to do it fast?"

"No."

He kissed the top of her hand. "Trust me."

"You have expert hands," she told him as he gently removed the tape.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," he purred.

"Keep that up, and I'm pulling you back in that closet," she said as she wrapped her hands about his waist.

He placed another kiss on the top of her head. "Promises, promises."

As they made their way down the hallway and into the bar, Eddie took her hand in his.

He wanted to get out of there. He wanted to take Grace to his place, or go over to her place, and take up where they'd left off. No, he wanted to begin again and make it even better. He wasn't sure if he'd ever get enough of her, and if that were the case, that would make walking away when the time came that much more difficult.

Then there was Sunday dinner at his mother's. He didn't know if he was looking forward to that or not, especially after tonight. A part of him was half-excited—this would be the first time he ever brought anyone home. The other part of him worried what his family might read into the fact that he'd finally brought someone to dinner. And with what had happened between Grace and him tonight—

Feelings of regret flooded through him. Man, what the hell had he done?

They stepped out of the hallway and into the bar. Eddie released Grace's hand. The funny thing was, his hand felt so damned empty without her tiny hand tucked inside.

The bar had thinned out. It wasn't as noisy, with the exception of Curt and Callie who were still playing pool in a flirty-fun fashion, with Curt hitting on Callie and with Callie flirting back, yet putting Curt in his place. Eddie grinned. Some things never changed.

Tory stood propped up against the wall. The girl looked exhausted and as if she'd had more than a few drinks. Eddie guessed that it had been a big night for them all.

Grace said, "Wait a minute."

"I thought you didn't want to explain anything," he said, not sure what she had in mind.

Grace grinned. "You have much to learn."

Eddie just shook his head. Grace walked over to Tory and Eddie heard her tell Tory, "We're heading home."

"Great," Tory replied. "Can you drop me off? I can't stand watching this anymore," she said with a wave of her hand. She pushed off the wall and put her hands on her hips. "Hey, Callie?"

"Yeah?"

"Get a room already."

Eddie laughed. So did Callie, Curt and Grace. At least, he told himself, Grace didn't gear up and slip into that infamous laugh that was all hers. He watched Tory step beside Grace and put her arm around Grace.

"Grace," Tory said putting her head on Grace's shoulder as they walked toward Eddie, Tory a little unsteady on her feet.

"Yeah, Tory?"

"Take me to my bed, or lose me forever," she drawled, mucking up the lines from *Top Gun*.

"Show me the way home, Tory," Grace said. She grinned at Eddie and repeated, "Show me the way home."

The three of them piled into Eddie's Dodge Ram, with Grace riding on the hump, and in ten minutes, they pulled up in front of the condo Tory and Callie shared.

When they pulled into the parking space, Grace's eyes seemed drawn to Eddie's lips. They were full, sensuous Italian lips. Shaped just right for kissing. Something Eddie Mancilla did very well.

Eddie's eyes cut back and forth from Grace to Callie, and he cleared his throat. "Well...."

She sighed. "My clothes are here and so is my car. It makes more sense for you to drop me off here."

Eddie cleared his throat again. "About dinner on Sunday...."

Grace stuck out her chin, mentally daring him to try to weenie out of dinner at his mother's now, especially after what they'd shared tonight. "Yeah?"

"I just wanted to remind you about dinner on Sunday. We're still on, aren't we?"

Grace nodded. "Sure."

"Well, as much as I would like to stay and listen to this drivel, interesting drivel though it is..." Tory opened the passenger door and more slid than stepped out into the parking lot.

Grace glanced at Eddie. In the dome light that had come on when Tory had opened the door, Eddie's expression looked reserved, his eyes distant. Grace forced her lips into a wide smile. She wouldn't allow anything to rob her of what they'd shared tonight. No one, not even Eddie himself, could take that away from her. "G'night," she said and winked at him.

Once inside the condo, Grace hurriedly changed out of the borrowed clothes and returned to the living room to flop down on the couch.

"I told you, you can just spend the night here," Tory said, sprawling into the oversized recliner. They were both exhausted, and Grace still needed to drive home.

Grace shook her head. "Nah, I'm going home."

Tory sighed. "Ten bucks says Callie doesn't come home tonight."

"Well, she is a big girl now, Mom."

Tory snickered. "I hate being alone. You're going to go home to lover boy across the hall, have more nookie—"

"More nookie? What makes you think we had any nookie?"

Tory rolled her eyes dramatically. "Because you both had the whole just-been-nookied hair thing going on."

"Tory."

“Grace.” She giggled, throwing a pillow at her. “Come on, you *know* you want to tell me.”

Grace threw the pillow back at her. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“You’re so damned full of it.” Tory tossed the pillow at her again. “Okay, so just tell me this—humor me,” she said with pleading eyes. “Was it good?”

Grace sighed. Not the discontented type of sigh she usually did. No, she didn’t feel discontented at all, not even after the way Eddie behaved when he’d dropped them off. She couldn’t put a name to the feelings she’d experienced with Eddie. For now, she really wanted to keep it to herself, like a special secret. She toyed with her hair as scenes from their time in the closet resurfaced in her memory. A contented smile settled over her lips.

“Oh my God,” Tory said. “You are so smitten with him.”

Grace shook her head to clear out the wisps of what had been. “I am not.”

Tory hugged onto the pillow. “Oh, puh-leeeeeeze. You are so smitten, and you know it. Miss Queen of Denial that you are.”

Grace needed to be in the here and now. She released her hair and sat up. “Do you really think I look smitten? I mean, is it showing?”

“Honey, you’re glowing.”

“Glowing?”

Tory nodded. “Whatever happened while the two of you were gone for so long, looks really good on you.”

Grace shrugged. “Aw.”

“That’s all you’re going to say? ‘Aw’?” Tory leaned forward, trapping the pillow between her stomach and upper legs. “Grace, I would tell you.”

Grace put her hand to her forehead and rubbed her temples. Guilt wasn’t such a wonderful thing. Dropping her hand, she fought for the

right thing to say. "If I say it out loud, I...I might curse it, and I don't want to do that. I can only hope you'll understand that."

Tory bolted from the chair and made her way to the couch. She practically jumped into Grace's lap. "Aw, honey," she said as she wrapped an arm around Grace. "You can't curse this. You're not cursed. You never were."

"I'd really, really like to believe that. But right now, I just...I can't, and I want to hold onto this as long as I can."

Tory sighed. "I'm not going to try and change your mind on this."

Grace feigned shock. "You're not?"

Tory shook her head. "No, you can tell me when you're ready."

Grace reached across and hugged her. "Thanks." She pulled away.

Tory said, "I'll live."

Grace giggled. "I hope so. But tomorrow is going to be hell, so I need to get home and get some—"

"Nookie."

"Sleep." Grace laughed. "I think you're the one who needs the nookie."

Tory looked down at her nails. "Yeah, you're right, I do. If you were nice, I could live vicariously through you."

Grace snorted as she got up off the couch. "G'night, Tory, thanks for everything." She walked toward the door, knowing if she didn't head out now, Tory would talk her into staying.

Tory got to her feet. "Name your firstborn after me, and we'll call it even."

"I'm not even thinking about that."

"Good." Tory opened the door and held it open for Grace. "I really wish you'd stay."

"Some other time," Grace told her.

“Call me when you get home, just so I know you made it okay.”

“I will.” Grace gave her a little wave.

As Grace drove toward her apartment, she considered how great it felt to be wearing her own clothes. The jeans and T-shirt were just more...her. Yet right now, she didn't feel much like herself, not at all. What had happened between her and Eddie, it had changed her somehow. With her life, with Grace's thought-to-be-cursed life, Tory actually wanted to live vicariously through Grace. And after tonight, Grace was starting to believe that maybe the curse actually *had* been lifted and that maybe she actually *did* have a life.

The fifteen minute drive home was uneventful. Eddie already missed Grace. He shook his head, pulling himself away from staring at her apartment door. He wasn't supposed to feel this way, and he needed to get his head in the right place.

Chief.

Once he got chief, his mind would always have to be there, despite what his brother told him tonight. Eddie knew where his priorities would lie, and he couldn't afford to be thrown off track. No matter how much he might want Grace right now—it was driven by lust. Period. As long as he kept telling himself that, eventually, he figured he'd believe it.

He took a shower, all the while trying to talk himself out of why he and Grace wouldn't work. Mentally making a list and checking it twice. Flaky hitting the top of the list.

He guessed she couldn't help being flaky. For Pete's sake, the woman had thought she was cursed. And she'd actually performed a ritual that could've burned down the entire building. Although while at the fire station, Grace had seemed good with the kids, maybe she hadn't found her own “chief-slot” yet. Maybe once she found a situation she found

fulfilling, she would settle down and wouldn't be as flaky. Maybe then, they could get together.

The hot water did nothing for his disposition. He grumbled under his breath as he grabbed for the towel. He just wanted his bed now.

His cold, lonely, unmade bed.

Rubbing the towel briskly through his hair, he tried to push all thoughts of Grace far away.

Tried.

Fate must've been on her side, because as he padded to his kitchen, he heard the distinct sound of Grace's keys rattling as she unlocked her door and her voice telling Tory she'd made it home.

He couldn't explain what happened—what possessed him to open his door, wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist, but there it was, suddenly ajar, and she turned to look at him as she snapped her cell phone shut. In jeans and a T-shirt, Grace stood at her door looking ravishing.

Eddie's breath caught in his throat. Completely oblivious to any other warning shots firing off in his head, Eddie returned her widening smile.

"Hey," he said, his voice cracking.

She lowered her lashes. "Hi. Are you checking up on me?"

"Maybe," he said, his voice calm, his gaze steady. He leaned against the doorframe. "Would that be so bad?"

Grace took a step toward him. "No, that wouldn't be bad at all. It's...sweet."

He crossed his arms about his waist. "Did you have fun dishing?"

Taking another step, she shook her head. "Me? Dish? Never."

"You forget. I used to sit beside you in class."

Her features became more animated. “I didn’t forget.” She took one more step, mere inches from him. “Let’s just say I left a very sexually frustrated Tory.”

He stared at her for a moment and then burst out laughing, his arms dropping and reaching out to her. When she accepted his embrace, he whispered into her hair, “You’re lucky I understood that.”

She giggled, her laugh rippling through the air.

“Door locked?”

“Keys are still in it.”

“Get them.”

“Back up.”

Together, they half-waddled backward toward her door. He reached out and pulled them out of the door, then checked the knob. Shaking the keys, he took a step backward, toward his place.

He’d listen to the warnings going off in his head later. Right now, he just wanted to hold her and not spend the night alone. He half felt like he had cheated her by making love to her in the closet, and he wanted to make it up to her, make it up to himself.

“What are we doing?” she asked as he stopped.

His arms left the embrace just long enough to scoop her up over his shoulder.

Grace hooted. “Oh my God. What are you doing?”

Eddie patted her backside and took her into his apartment, shutting the door behind them with his foot.

Grace found herself gently laid down in the middle of his bed. She hadn’t expected this, but she welcomed it. She wondered if she should feel some guilt for the relief she felt. After all, anything this great always had its price, didn’t it? At least for her.

Standing at the foot of the bed, Eddie looked her over seductively, and she felt butterflies in her stomach.

"You don't need an outfit like the one you wore tonight to look sexy, Grace," he told her hoarsely.

"No boob tape?" She giggled.

He smiled as he shook his head slowly. "Definitely not."

Eddie eased onto the bed, sitting beside her. "How are they doing?"

"How's *who* doing?"

Gently, his hand outlined the circle of one breast, then the other. "These, that's who."

Grace sucked in her breath, his touch sending currents of desire through her. Blood pounded in her brain, leapt from her heart and made her legs tremble.

Leaning over, bracing himself on his elbow and propping his head up with his hand, he made more circles with his index finger, starting out big, until they were tiny circles around her nipples, each in turn. "I didn't bring you here to take advantage of you."

Her eyes flew open in surprise. She sat up, almost hitting his head with hers. "You didn't?"

He shook his head. The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of his mouth. "No, I brought you in here to sleep."

"Sleep?"

Eddie chuckled and sighed. "Yes, sleep. You have to meet my family tomorrow."

Grace tilted her head to one side. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

He toyed with a piece of her hair. "My family can be...tiring."

Grace smiled and shrugged her shoulder. "No more than mine."

He threw his head back, laughing. "Baby, you have no idea."

Her pulse quickened. Just hearing him call her “baby” made warm shivers trickle down her spine. “Okay. But there will be, more, you know, right?”

His hand cupped her face and held it gently. His lips brushed against hers as he spoke. “You betcha.”

This woman got to him. And boy, did she get to him good.

Eddie brushed his lips against her cheek, breathing in the scent of her. One he found addictive, intoxicating, stimulating.

He trailed kisses down the hollow of her throat, feeling her pulse flutter beneath his lips. He nibbled his way upward, along her jaw line, to cover her lips with his, coaxing her, demanding more of her this time.

God, how he wanted this woman. Lust, pure lust, that’s all it was. He’d keep telling himself that, then he’d believe it. He couldn’t get enough of her. Flaky or not. Need coursed through him. He deepened the kiss, felt her body hum with excitement as he trailed his fingers up her arm and along the upper part of her chest.

He closed his eyes. He wanted her here, to pleasure her, to please her, to lose himself in her. But most of all, though, he wanted her *here*.

Chapter Eight

Grace opened her eyes. Her body hummed. Sleeping with Eddie made her feel as if her body were wrapped in a cocoon of warmth, and dare she think...love.

For the first time ever, she didn't mind the weight of someone's arm around her, the heat of a body behind her. No, she relished feeling his chest rise and fall, his heartbeat against her back and, wiggling closer, his erection against her bottom.

She snuggled against him as their legs intertwined.

"Mmm," he murmured, his breath hot on the back of her neck.

"Was that a 'morning'?" she asked, as his hand reached out to caress her bare thigh. Closing her eyes, she let her other senses take over, memorizing every tiny touch, every stroke as his hand moved expertly over her skin, teasing and tempting, until she wanted to turn in his arms and tell him to make love to her—now.

A soft whimper escaped her lips as his hand trailed up and under her T-shirt, stroking her belly, his fingers dipping just below the waistband of her panties, then sliding back up to her belly.

She sucked in her breath then exhaled it sharply, wanting his hand to go back and further stoke the flames inside her.

Turning to face him, wanting to kiss him, it occurred to her that she hadn't yet brushed her teeth. To avoid exposing him to potential morning

breath, she scrunched her lips up and wiggled her hand free, covering her mouth with it.

Amusement showed in his dark eyes. He leaned his head back, smiling, his dimples dancing. “Yeah,” he said with a chuckle, “we need to get up and ready.”

Grace strained her eyes to see the clock. “It’s only eleven,” she whined from behind her hand.

“We have to be at my ma’s at noon,” he said, stretching.

Grace sprawled out and up, almost hurting them both as her toenails grazed the inside of his calf, elbowing Eddie in the ribs in the process.

“Ow.”

“Sorry.” She jumped off the bed. “You’re only giving me an hour to get ready for this?” she asked, pulling on her jeans, panic welling inside her. “I need more than an hour.”

All of a sudden, Grace didn’t want to go, she wanted him to cancel their plans to go to his mother’s for dinner. She rummaged for her shirt and bra and threw them on. What Grace wanted was to spend the rest of the day lazing in bed with Eddie, making love with him, until neither of them could crawl out of bed.

“Once I get my breath back, I’ll hop in the shower. It should take me ten minutes tops and I’ll be ready to head out of the door.”

“Eddie.” She crossed her arms against her chest. “What the hell am I going to wear?” she asked.

He laughed, rich and deep, as he got up from the bed. She sucked in her breath. Standing there in boxer briefs, his body was magnificent. She hadn’t seen him this well last night in the shadows, or in the dimly lit closet. He looked very powerful, his chest broad and muscular. His shoulders appeared to be a yard long and molded bronze.

There were touches of humor around his mouth and near his eyes as his arms encircled her waist, pulling her to him “Baby, whatever you decide to wear will be fine. It’s cold, and we’re getting more snow, so pants.”

“Jeans, pants?” She couldn’t help it, her tongue licked out against his taut nipple.

His breath caught and he growled, dragging her away from him. “Baby, later.”

She looked up at him with pleading eyes. “Promise?”

“Promise. Now scoot,” he said with a smile, smacking her backside lightly. “Oh hey.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have pants with an elastic waistband?”

Elastic waistband? Why the hell did he want her to wear pants with an— “Why?”

“Because Ma makes a lot of food, and she’ll expect you to eat a lot of food. Most of my family, including me, unbutton our jeans. Hell, my brother Anthony gave up, and he wears sweatpants.”

“Thanks for the heads up, I’ll have to see what I have.”

Eddie kissed the top of her forehead. “One more thing.”

“Hmm?” Grace asked, nuzzling back into the warmth of his chest.

“Hurry.”

Grace groaned as she pushed herself away from him. “See you soon.” She grabbed her socks and shoes and hugged them to her chest. One shoe fell and she picked it back up before practically running out of his apartment.

Eddie collapsed on the bed. Covering his eyes with his arms, he exhaled sharply. He did not want to do this. If he didn’t get his libido in

check, if he didn't monitor his behavior, his family would know that he felt something for Grace.

Okay, he had just admitted it to himself. So, he felt something for Grace. But it was no big deal. He wanted to pursue her, but on his terms, no one else's. Right now, his terms were limited.

He'd have to somehow shake off these feelings. It wasn't fair to ask Grace to be his occasional bedside partner. Although, he had to admit, he hadn't slept better in months.

His parents hadn't raised any of their boys as users though, and that's exactly what he'd be doing. Making him no better than any of the guys she'd dated before him. If they did spend time together and decided to part ways, he wanted to do so on friendly terms—Eddie wanted no part of the ex-boyfriend bonfire ritual, that was for damn sure.

When did life have to get so damned complicated, he wondered as he pushed himself off the bed. He'd wait and talk to Grace about his feelings, what he thought they could do after their visit to his parents, hoping like hell his family didn't make any assumptions about Grace and him. Better to just rip it off like a Band-Aid and spell it out for her, but after the dinner.

Fully dressed in a pair of black flared slacks and a white button down blouse, Grace was just trying to decide what to do with her hair when she heard a knock at her door.

Running into the living room and glancing at the clock, she saw it was eleven-forty-five. "Oh shit," she said as she opened the door. "I'm not ready yet."

Eddie smiled. "No, you're not, unless you've changed into a meticulous eater, you're not going to want to wear white."

"Oh," she said, closing the door behind him. "I meant my hair."

“Your hair looks great, Grace.”

She was stunned. “What?”

“I said—” he took her into her arms, planting a kiss on her nose, “—your hair looks great. Go change your shirt so we can get out of here.”

Too startled by his suggestion to offer any objection, she left his embrace and went back into her bedroom to change her blouse. Into what, she wasn’t sure.

Sliding the tops across the rack in a flurry, she paused on a black button-down blouse with a floral pattern on it.

“That works,” she heard from behind her, making her jump.

Before she could turn around, he wrapped his arms around her bare midriff. “I changed my mind,” he said in between kisses to her bare neck, “I don’t want to go.”

Grace sighed. She couldn’t believe what she was about to say. “We’d disappoint your mother.”

Eddie growled, pulling himself away from her. “I hate when someone else is right.”

“You really think my hair is okay?”

“Yes, Grace, I like it better with the curls.”

“Huh.” She slipped on the blouse.

“Ready?”

“Just let me grab my purse.” *And throw up.*

Stealing kisses on the elevator on the way down, Eddie deduced that Grace made him feel like he was eighteen again. Although he mentally scolded himself, he just couldn’t get enough of her. He loved the way she smelled, like warm vanilla sugar cookies. He liked her smile, warm and oh so inviting. He liked her curves, the sway of her hips, her firm backside and the flat little tummy she had.

And he loved that hair. That silky chaos of curls, made even curlier this afternoon, he supposed, since she'd gotten it cut.

If he didn't know any better, he'd say he was in over his head with Grace.

He opened the door for her and shut it once she was in. Eddie padded to his side of the car. Hesitating before opening his door, he knew he had to put some of this in check, or he'd never be able to tell her what he had needed to later.

Not surprised he didn't have to remind her to put her seatbelt on, he started his truck. "Are you ready for this?" he asked, letting the engine warm up as snow softly began to fall.

"No." She grinned. "Are you going to give me some sort of heads up?"

"About?"

"About your family—you know, their quirks and stuff."

"Oh, that kind of stuff. Okay, okay, let's see, you met my ma," he said as he backed up the truck "My pop is a bear, or at least most people think he is."

"Uh oh."

"No, no, nothing to worry about, he's going to love you. My ma, she'll have already made sure of that."

"Oh?"

"Yes, one thing my ma can do is tame my pop."

"What's his name?"

"Anthony."

"Like your brother?"

"Yes, like Anthony. Anthony's married to Ann. We sometimes call her Annie. You'll like her. She's really nice."

She held up her hand. "Okay so, Anthony and Ann. Not Tony for either one of them, just Anthony?"

“Yeah.”

“So, how do they know which one is supposed to answer?”

Eddie laughed. Very good question, one he’d never thought of. “They just do.”

Grace giggled.

“My oldest brother, Gino and his wife, Delanna, will be there. We call her Dee,” Eddie continued. “Gino is kind of quiet, more like me in that sense. And Dee, she does most of the talking for the two of them.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Eddie laughed, shaking his head. “No, it’s actually good. Gino comes across as...hell, I don’t even know how to explain it.”

“Subdued? Shy?”

“Nah, you’ll see.”

“Okay, so Anthony, Ann, Gino, Dee, Anthony Sr. and Franny.”

“Yep, almost got it.”

“Almost?”

“We’re a big family. There’s my youngest sister, Frankie, short for Francine, but she hates it. My pop thought since he had a namesake, my ma should too. But no way was Frankie being another Franny. So at age five, she declared she would forever be known as Frankie.”

“I think I should be more afraid of her than your pop.”

Eddie laughed. “She’s tough, she had to be with us boys, but she’ll like you.”

“Is Frankie married?”

“Married to Mike and pregnant. My mother is most pleased.”

“First grandchild?”

“No. Ma has several, but there never seem to be enough to make her truly happy.”

The tone of his voice changed, and Grace sensed there might be a lot of pressure on his part as the only child who wasn't married and didn't have any children. Today was going to be fun.

Eddie grew silent, and she wondered if he was pondering today's possible adventure in his own thoughts as they turned down a street lined with elegant, beautiful homes. Their groomed lawns were covered in snow, as were the trees lining the street. Picture perfect and breathtaking.

This was the kind of street she wanted to live on, raise children on. She could imagine them playing with the other children in the neighborhood. Smiling to herself, she realized they were in a cul-de-sac. The truck slid a little while pulling into the long, sloped driveway of a big two-story brick house. This was it. They were here. No turning back. Whether Grace was ready or not, she was about to meet Eddie's family.

Eddie parked the truck on the street and shut off the engine, got out, rounded the truck and opened her door. "Ready?"

Grace shook her head. "I feel sick."

His left eyebrow raised a fraction. "Sick?"

"I don't want to go in there, I can't. I'll make an ass out of myself."

He chuckled. "They're going to love you, trust me on this."

She met the smile and the hand he offered.

"Just be yourself," he told her, helping her out of the truck. "Just be the school teacher, meeting a parent for the first time."

The tension eased a little from her shoulders. "Oh, you're good at this."

His smile widened in approval. "I have to do this all the time, coax rookies they can run into that burning building."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "You're very good at it."

They walked up the snow covered walk, their footsteps etching into the snow, and her heart skipped a beat. “Wait.”

“What?”

“I’ve never met *anyone’s* parents.”

A grin overtook his features. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ve never brought a girl home to meet the family.”

“Never?”

“Ever.”

“I don’t know whether to feel special or barf.”

Eddie reared his head back and laughed. “Feel special, baby. *Please* feel special.”

Grace didn’t even have a chance to say anything else because the front door flew open as soon as they stepped onto the big, wooden porch, and people started pouring out.

“You must be Grace,” a woman with dark red hair said. She was slender and beautiful. “I’m Ann—Annie. Franny calls me Annie, but you can call me whatever you’re most comfortable with. It’s so nice to meet you.”

Grace let go of Eddie’s hand to accept both of hers. “Nice to meet you too.”

Ann stepped aside, and a shorter, woman with long, ebony hair and olive skin stepped up. “I’m Delanna, but you can call me Dee. Everyone does.” Dee embraced her, kissing each one of her cheeks. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Grace wiped her hands on her slacks. Nothing worse than shaking someone’s hand with sweaty palms. As cold as it was, she was surprised they were sweating so profusely. But she couldn’t remember ever being this nervous.

Franny embraced her next, kissing her cheeks as well. "I'm so, so glad you came. Come on, let's go inside. It's too cold to stand around out here."

Grace followed her in.

The aroma of garlic, tomatoes and all kinds of yummy spices tickled Grace's nose. The house itself was so warm, and not just the temperature kind. The main foyer was decorated beautifully with dried flower swags. She could see into the living room, adorned with pictures.

Grace had to be nosy; she had to check out the pictures. She walked straight in and in front of the television peering at the smiling faces on the walls. Some of the framed photos were of the whole family, some of Eddie when he was heavier, younger, and some more recent with him in his uniform, standing tall, proud and looking downright sexy.

Babies, lots of pictures of babies adorned the walls. Beautiful, brown-eyed, dark-haired babies. Grace felt a pang in her chest, an ache. She wanted one of those. With Eddie.

Oh God.

Panic welled up inside her, and when she felt someone touch her shoulder, she jumped.

"Hey, why so jumpy?" Eddie asked.

"Nerves," she croaked.

One corner of his mouth pulled up in a lazy smile. "It's okay." He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Hey Pop, you gonna meet Grace?"

Grace turned and saw an older, distinguished man sitting in the recliner, staring right at her.

"No, I wanted to see how long it'd take before she noticed me here."

Grace knew she must truly be nervous because she hadn't noticed Eddie's father sitting there when she'd come into the room. A warm flush rose into her cheeks. Her legs grew weak as Anthony Mancilla, Sr. rose

from the brown leather chair and walked over the plush, beige carpet to her.

When she extended her shaky hand, he didn't take it. Instead he engulfed her in a bear hug, lifting her completely off the ground. "Welcome to the Mancilla family," he said loudly, before setting her back down.

Grace felt the warmth in her neck and cheeks strengthen and knew she had the granddaddy of all blushes going on. She smiled. "Thank you."

She turned to Eddie and watched the play of emotions on his face. Obviously, his father's welcome wasn't what Eddie wanted to hear. She supposed for him this was going all too quickly. Hell, it was for her too. It wasn't every day she got the urge to have babies, especially with anyone specific.

Grace didn't expect to feel any of this, not this soon. Maybe not ever.

"I'm Anthony." A masculine voice interrupted her thoughts.

Pushing her lips into a smile, Grace turned. "I'm Grace."

"I know," he said with a cheesy grin. "This is Gino. Little brother needs to learn some manners."

"Little brother needs to be given a chance." Eddie sounded irritated.

"Hi Grace," Gino extended his hand. "Nice to meet you. We've heard a lot about you."

"I don't know if that's good or bad," she told them, still shaking Gino's hand.

"All good," Gino said as he dropped his hand from hers.

Grace tried to see the resemblance between the three brothers. Eddie was the tallest. Gino, the shortest. All three of them had dark eyes and hair. Eddie's hair seemed to be the longest. Gino wore his in an unflattering buzz cut, while Anthony's was more tapered.

Anthony was tall and lean. Gino was not quite as lean, but she could tell that he probably worked out a lot. His build was stockier, thicker.

A woman with long, ebony hair waddled toward her from the hallway. The front of her silk dress clung to her delicately protruding belly. This had to be Eddie's sister, because although the woman's features were delicate, she resembled Eddie the most. She had his big, beautiful eyes, his clear, flawless complexion and eyelashes to die for.

Her smile lit up the room, as did the glow she had. "Grace? You have to be Grace," she said, chuckling. "I'm Frankie." She extended her hand. "Mike will be here in a little bit."

"Nice to meet you." Grace took her hand.

After shaking hands with Grace, Frankie embraced Eddie. "About time you brought one home," she said with a snicker. She turned to Grace. "We always said that the one he finally brought home would be a keeper."

Eddie's jaw muscles tightened. "Oh, you did?" he asked, his tone cool, almost angry. He should've anticipated the ambush. All the family together, trying to get him to settle down. It was bad enough that the women had been trying to set him up for years, but they'd obviously gotten his pop involved as well. What the hell were they all thinking?

What the hell was he thinking?

He knew his family better than anyone, knew what they were capable of, and how far they'd go to get it.

"Sure, that's what we said," Frankie explained, squeezing his arm and giving him *the* look. The one that said, "Chill out before I punch you".

His mouth spread into a thin-lipped smile. "We should see if Ma needs help," he offered.

Frankie shook her head. "No, go get Grace a beer. She looks like she could use one. She'll be fine. I'll watch her."

Eddie rolled his eyes. He dutifully asked, "Beer?"

"Water," Grace told him flatly. Her faint smile held a touch of sadness, and he realized that this was exactly what he didn't want.

Cursing under his breath, he walked away, leaving them to talk about him, to give Frankie a chance to give Grace pointers she was never going to need.

This whole thing was cruel, and he didn't like it. His family needed to know he couldn't offer Grace what they expected him to.

"She's cute." Gino slapped his arm around Eddie's shoulder. "You should marry her."

Eddie stopped dead in his tracks. "Man, don't go yelling that shit."

His mother turned abruptly. "Don't make me use this," she said, shaking a wooden spoon.

"Yes ma'am," they said in unison.

"Look," Eddie half whispered. "Don't be giving anyone ideas, especially Grace. I don't have time for this. I'm just humoring Ma this weekend, okay?"

Gino laughed. "Yeah, whatever, little man. You keep telling yourself that, maybe you'll believe it. We were all spying on you, we know what we saw."

Eddie shook his head, but Gino continued. "It's written all over both your faces. If you can't see it, then that's your loss. But I'm telling you, you blow this, you're gonna regret it. Mark my words."

"I need some air." Eddie walked away from Gino, past his mother, and stepped out onto the back porch.

Grace listened intently as Frankie pointed out who was who in some of the pictures. Gino and Dee had two boys, ages six and three. Gio, short for Giovanni, the oldest, looked a lot like his Uncle Eddie had as a child. The boy reminded Grace of a thin mint. Black hair with creamy white contrasting skin and beautiful dark eyes.

Dante, the littlest one, looked like his mother. His complexion more olive than his older brother's, matching his brown hair and long, gorgeous lashes. "Where are the children?" Grace asked.

"Ah, downstairs with Trey."

"Trey?"

Frankie pointed to an older, handsome boy. "This is Trey. Anthony's oldest. He's thirteen. We call him Trey, because he's Anthony Giovanni Mancilla the third. It gets confusing enough with two Anthony's, let alone three."

Grace nodded.

"And this beautiful little girl is Maria, Annie's youngest. She'll be six this month, look at those eyes," Frankie said, shaking her head. "Anthony's going to be chasing off the boys with that one, that's for sure. That one, she has my heart."

"She's gorgeous," Grace said, staring at the exquisite long-haired darling.

"And you have to see this one in person to appreciate her," Frankie said, tugging Grace's arm.

Grace followed her out of the living room, around a small wall, through the dining room and into a small den. Inside a playpen lay a sleeping child. All she could see was curly mahogany hair and lots of it.

"This is Isabella, Anthony's baby. She just turned ten months old today. Isn't she edible?"

Grace's fingers itched to hold her. She simply nodded, watching the baby's tiny chest rise and fall.

She could smell her too. All baby powdery and sweet. The baby rolled over, eyes wide and sleepy, peering up at Grace.

"Eh," she said, waving her hand.

"Can you get her?" Frankie asked.

"Me?"

"Yes, you, my belly is too round to lean over—if you're uncomfortable, I can get Ann—"

"No, I can get her." Grace lifted the baby and held her out for a brief moment. Isabella was perfect. The baby smiled and Grace smiled back before sliding Isabella around to her hip. Expecting her to cry any minute, Grace was shocked when Isabella smiled at her. "Eh," the baby said again.

"Hi there," Grace cooed.

"Come and get it," Franny yelled.

"Guess that means us," Grace said.

Isabelle made her "eh" sound.

The three of them walked out into the dining room the same time Eddie entered off the kitchen. A momentary look of discomfort crossed his face.

"Here, let me take her. You go sit beside Eddie," Ann said, taking Isabella from her.

Grace's feet felt weighted as she walked the short distance to the other side of the large, oak table. Everything looked and smelled delicious, but somehow, seeing the look in Eddie's eyes made her start to lose her appetite.

He definitely wasn't the same Eddie she had walked into this house with. No, this particular Eddie seemed cold and distant. She noticed that

he didn't even pull out her chair or wait for her to be seated. His chivalry, she guessed, replaced by something else. And she wasn't too thrilled about what that something might be.

The chatter of the children in the kitchen gave her a slight distraction.

When he didn't reach under the table to give her hand a squeeze of reassurance, she realized that during dinner she'd be on her own.

Again, wanting to turn back time, Grace closed her eyes and said a little prayer.

His mother and sisters started to set the food onto the table. Eddie tried like hell to make the most of this, although it was hard when the sisters were already planning a bridal shower. He'd heard them too, when he was out on the porch, so he wasn't exaggerating in the least. Ann had said Grace looked like a pink person, pastels. She'd even bet she'd pick pink as one of her colors.

Eddie flat out hated pink.

Firemen didn't have pink at their weddings. They had red, black, orange, blue, but not by any stretch of the imagination did they have pink. Why the hell was he even thinking about this?

His mother was already describing the cake she'd make. Almond poundcake with almond-vanilla icing. It'd be four tiers with a freaking fountain in the middle of it.

Hell, the next thing they'd be discussing would be releasing doves or something corny like that.

Grace, he hoped, was oblivious to all of this nonsense. He knew what they were up to though. He'd seen Grace touch Frankie's belly, watched her pick up Isabella.

He shook his head then took a drink of the wine sitting on the table in front of him. Miss Delusional sat beside him, making silly faces at his nephew.

His pop cleared his throat. "So," he said, "the burning question, Grace, is that when our Eddie proposes, do you intend to say yes?"

Chapter Nine

Thankfully, once the table was completely set, no more out of the way comments were made. Grace felt like fleeing from the scene of the crime an hour ago. Eddie wouldn't even look at her. She couldn't blame him really. His father's outburst made them both reel.

Grace had never been so miserable in her entire life.

That is, until it was time to say "grace".

Bowing her head, she peeked out the corner of her eye and Anthony Sr. started praying. Every few words the entire family joined in. Catholics. When they did the sign of the cross, Grace just sat there.

She could feel all eyes on her, heat creeping into her cheeks.

"You're not catholic, Grace?" Franny asked. Her features scrunched up.

Grace couldn't talk, so she shook her head.

"Oh," Franny said, disappointment etched across her features. "That's too bad."

"Too bad indeed." Anthony Sr. shook his head. "Lutheran?"

Grace chewed on her lip a minute and shook her head again. "No, we're Methodists."

"*Methodist*. Hmm. That's—that's *nice*." Franny pressed her lips tightly together.

A hushed silence fell upon the table. She supposed now wouldn't be the best time to tell them that her parents were divorced.

Grace swirled fettuccini on her fork, suddenly losing her appetite, but with all eyes on her, she knew she had to eat. Forcing herself to eat, she assumed it was delicious, but right now, it just tasted like mushy cardboard. Chasing it with wine, she kept her eyes on her plate or on the table. She didn't dare look at anyone.

Feeling their scrutiny, she wanted to run.

It wasn't that she had anything against Catholics, because she didn't. She'd forgotten how the older generation could be against outsiders.

Forkful after forkful, Grace continued to force the first helping down. She couldn't guarantee it'd stay down. She felt as if she were sitting there naked, and making a pig out of herself in the process, cramming food in by the mouthful.

Her family gatherings were nothing like this. As she listened to the chatter around the table, she found out his parents were very intrusive in their children's lives. Okay, so maybe intrusive wasn't the exact word, she was high on the defensive. But Franny seemed to want to know every little detail of her children's lives.

It wasn't that her mother didn't want to know about Grace's life, she guessed sometimes that her life could be tiring. It was to her. Nothing ever went smoothly for Grace, and she didn't know how to change it.

There'd be no way she could be anything like the women at this table. No way would she ever fit in here. She fidgeted in her chair, the very idea making the bile rise to her throat at the realization she had no business being here, no place in Eddie's life. "Where's the restroom?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"Up the stairs—" Ann started saying.

"I'll show her." Eddie stood. He waited for her to stand, then put his hand on her back, leading her in the direction of the stairs.

He didn't say anything until they got into the bathroom and shut the door.

Grace flipped the down the toilet lid and collapsed onto the toilet seat, putting her head in her hands.

"You okay?" he asked, knowing full well it was a stupid question.

She shook her head violently back and forth.

Shoving his hands in his jean pockets, he leaned against the bathroom door.

"You—you can't say I didn't warn you," he started, feeling disgusted with himself. "I mean, I guess I should've warned you more."

She brought her head up, tears staining her cheeks. "Ya think? I mean, what the hell was that?"

Eddie shook his head. "Baby—"

She threw her hand up, "Don't, okay? Don't call me that. You just let them scrutinize me—judge me."

"They weren't judging you."

"Oh no? Your mother looked like she was going to have a stroke."

Eddie chuckled. "Grace—"

The hand flew up again. "My parents are divorced," she said weakly. "You think that's going to make them any happier?"

Closing the gap between, Eddie knelt in the small space between the tub and the toilet. "This, this is exactly why I never brought anyone home before."

If he were trying to make her feel better, he wasn't. "Oh, so you just chose me to be the guinea pig? Thanks, Eddie."

His features twisted. "It wasn't like that. I didn't want to subject you to this. We should've canceled. I'm sorry. I don't know what else you want me to say." His hands cupped her face. "I'm sorry I subjected you to these horrible people."

She smiled faintly. “They’re not horrible.” And they weren’t. They just seemed eager for their son, their brother, to get married. It seemed to be a tradition here.

She half admired them for having such a close, loving relationship with the entire family. Not that Grace didn’t have that with her own family, but they weren’t as close as this.

Wiping away her tears with his thumbs, Eddie leaned his head in to touch hers. “Yes, yes they are. Listen—”

Grace stopped the rest of his words, crushing her lips to his. He tangled his hands in her hair, accepting and deepening the kiss. Grace wrapped her hands around his neck, pulling him closer.

His mouth left hers, but instead of talking, he decided to show her. With her soft curves molding to the contours of his, he planted a kiss on the pulsing hollow of her neck. Her head fell back, and she let out a soft sigh, driving his need even further. He showered kisses around her lips and along her jaw.

Bringing his head up, he looked at her, her eyes almost shut, fluttering, the color of sapphires. “We need to get out of here.”

She shook her head, pressing her lips to his.

“Grace,” he said. “Grace, we’re in my parents’ house—in their bathroom.”

She smiled, wickedly. “Oh yeah, that.”

A soft knock sounded at the door.

“Oops.” She giggled.

Eddie reluctantly got up and went to the door. Grace stayed seated on the toilet.

He wasn’t surprised when he opened the door and his mother stood there. She had impeccably bad timing.

“Everything all right in here?”

“Yup, we’re coming back downstairs.”

His mother leaned in close to him, “Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’ll be fine,” Eddie told her. “Just nervous.”

“Tell her no more prayers today, so not to worry,” she whispered. “Dessert is on the table.”

“I think we’re just going to go, the roads are probably getting bad. This is one helluva snowstorm.”

“Yes, you’re right,” she said, her bottom lip trembling. “I’ll make you a dessert plate to take with you.”

“Thanks.”

Eddie turned to Grace. “I’m going to get our coats. I’ll see you downstairs.”

Grace nodded. She just needed a few more minutes before she faced Eddie’s family again. Grace used both hands to tuck her messy hair behind her ears. These thoughts of a future with Eddie had to stop.

This was all happening so fast. It seemed so utterly uncontrollable that it scared her.

She really liked Eddie. She loved his kisses, his hungry growls, his body—and even his family. She figured everyone had their quirks.

She couldn’t remember ever feeling this way about anyone. She wasn’t going to give it a name—no, she wasn’t ready to give any feelings she had for Eddie a name.

The sooner she could get Eddie home, the sooner they could continue where they’d left off a few minutes ago. Tomorrow, they’d have to go back to work, step back into the real world. And this week, she had all kinds of things happening, so she’d better make the best of tonight.

Grace stood, catching her reflection in the mirror. Thank goodness, her eyes weren’t too red or puffy. Her tummy, however, still felt horrible.

Descending the stairs, Grace made her way back to the dining room. Eddie was giving hugs and high fives to the kids in the kitchen, while Frankie threw on her coat.

“It was so nice to meet you Grace,” she said, walking toward her. “Don’t be a stranger, and don’t take any crap from my brother.”

They exchanged hugs and the rest of the family gave her hugs as well, each one whispering a polite apology in her ear.

Grace, glad to be leaving, relieved it hadn’t been worse, waved to the kids in the kitchen. With Ann’s help, Baby Isabella blew Grace a dainty kiss.

It felt like an eternity, saying goodbye, but in all actuality, it only lasted ten minutes. Finally on the road to home, Grace sat back in the seat and tried to relax.

She hummed to the tune on the radio while Eddie maneuvered the truck effortlessly on the slick roads. He glanced at her from time to time; she could see him out of the corner of her eye, making her secretly smile.

Everything shimmered around them. The snowflakes sparkled like diamonds falling from the sky. How something this beautiful could be so dangerous made her cringe. It also made her thankful Eddie had driven.

She looked at the ditches along the side of the road and knew she’d be in one if she were driving. They’d been there for three hours and the snow hadn’t stopped yet. Big, soft flakes, perfect for building snowmen or having snowball fights.

If ever a light bulb appeared at the top of her head, this would be the time. She knew exactly what she had to do to relieve the tension between them.

“Grace?” Eddie asked, startling her.

She turned to face him. “Yeah?”

“Promise me your parents aren’t as neurotic as mine, that is, if I ever have to meet them.”

He said “if”. That was good, no? See, there she went again, reading. “You want to know about my parents?” she squeaked.

He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s better than listening to you hum.”

Grace giggled. “Okay,” she said, straightening herself out. “As I said, my parents are divorced.”

“You okay with that?”

Grace shrugged. “It’s better for all of us that way.”

“All of you?”

Grace nodded, looking at her hands. “For Lisa, my sister, and I. And of course for my parents, who are both happily remarried.”

“That’s good then, right?”

“Yes.”

“Lisa’s older than us, right?”

“Yes. Do you remember her?”

“I think so. I think I remember your mom too. Jean, right?”

Grace smiled. “Right.”

Eddie pulled into the driveway that led to their brick apartment building. It wasn’t as nice as the condo Tory and Callie lived in, but the rent was cheap, and they were brand new. They didn’t have garages, so they just had to park on the lot. Grace didn’t wait for him to open her door for her. No, she bolted out, scraping snow off the roof of her car, slipping and sliding until she got around the back of his truck. She pelted him with the snowball she’d made.

Her hands stung from the cold, but she didn’t care. His deer-caught-in-the-headlights look turned instant grin said it all. She was so going to get it.

Her shoes weren't the best for running, but she made do as she sought shelter behind her car. Frantically making snowballs, she knew she didn't have a chance in hell at winning this, but she couldn't stop giggling and could hear Eddie laughing, letting her know he was closing in on her.

"You're dead meat," he hollered. "I have an arsenal, fastest snowball maker in Pittsburgh. You chose the wrong battle."

Grace hailed a snowball up and over her car.

"Hey," Eddie yelled. "How'd you do that?"

Grace peeked her head up and wham. Snowball to the head. "Ow."

"Works every time." He laughed richly, hurling more snowballs at her.

She tried to duck out of the way, but he was too fast. Instead, she just threw what she had as he walked closer to her.

Exhausting her small supply, Grace was defenseless against his ongoing assault. She had no other choice but to run as fast as she could toward the building. He snared her within a second or two. She felt her feet lift up and off the ground in his big, strong arms.

She wiggled and feigned disgust, squealing and laughing at the same time. "Put me down."

Eddie laughed, tightening his grip. "Let's not forget who started this."

"And you finished it, so let go of me, put me down."

Grace saw what he was walking toward, a big snowdrift made by the plow. "Okay, okay, don't you dare put me down," she screeched. "Hold me here as long as you want, just don't put me down, please."

"Oh, no, no, no," he said, laughing. "You distinctly told me to put you down."

"Yes, I did, but I didn't mean there." She pointed to the pile of snow.

He stopped walking. "Then where would you like me to put you?"

"Not there."

“Where?” He teased, coaxing her.

“In my apartment,” she finally said.

The light in his eyes changed from playful to seductive. “Just in your apartment?” he asked, his hands caressing her cold backside.

She shivered, but not from the cold. “You can’t guess where?”

He shook his head. “No, I want you to tell me.”

Grace bit her lower lip. Aggressiveness wasn’t her strong suit. She was proud of herself for kissing him in the bathroom. Did he want her to come right out and say, “take me to bed”? Could she even say it? He did promise her more. But could she tell him, demand for him to take her to bed without blushing from head to toe?

“One, two, three—”

“Okay, okay,” Grace hollered as he held her out over the snow pile like a rag doll. She squinted her eyes. “You really want me to say it?”

Bobbing his head up and down, he said, “Yes.” His left eyebrow arched. “I want you to tell me what you want.” He leaned his head down and licked a snowflake off her cheek.

“Five more seconds, Grace.” He licked another snowflake, this time off her nose.

If she wanted more of this, she’d better start talking and fast. She cleared her throat and tried to imagine a southern accent.

“One...”

“Eddie,” she drawled. “Take me to bed, or lose me forever.” *Eek.*

He kissed her lips, gently, all the while smiling like a kid in the candy store. “Show me the way home, honey,” he drawled, right back.

Grace pointed in the direction of the entrance. He didn’t put her down, he held onto her, walking quickly toward the entrance.

Damn, they kept this up and he'd never be able to tell her what he needed to tell her. Eddie cursed under his breath, but never lost his cool as he swung open the door and walked through the lobby to the elevators. If the muscles in his legs still weren't a little overworked from their whole closet rendezvous, he would have carried her up the four flights of steps. The sooner he got her, and him, undressed, the better.

He needed to be inside her again, but this time, he wanted to explore every inch of her, leave her begging for more, wanting him so badly she wouldn't be able to resist his proposition. Sex on the weekends. Nothing more, nothing less. And sometimes, the weekends weren't even an option.

Who the hell did he think he was kidding? A woman like Grace needed so much more than that.

Once in the elevator, he set her down on her feet, turning her around and pulling her to him, so he cradled her from behind. He didn't want her looking at him right now, not when he had too many decisions to make, and fast.

If he didn't make love to her after making her go through all that in the parking lot, he'd be an ass. If he ripped off the emotional Band-Aid and told her as soon as they got on their floor that he couldn't offer her anything but sex, he'd be an ass. Any way he looked at this, he couldn't see any good coming from it.

He'd messed up. Bad. Worse than bad.

The elevator doors opened, and Eddie paused. Grace tried to wiggle in his arms to look at him, but he wasn't ready. His heart pounded in his ears. Damn, he hated this.

He let go of her, and she caught the elevator just before the doors closed. "You coming?" she asked, her features all scrunched up. He knew that look. She knew something was up.

Plastering a smile on his face, Eddie nodded. He took a step, even though his feet felt like lead. He knew what he had to do. They rounded the corner, and Grace gasped.

Chapter Ten

Not expecting to see anyone, let alone a *guy* camped out at Grace's door, Eddie tried to decide if her gasp was a good one or a bad one. All *he* knew was this guy had better be her brother-in-law or long lost cousin, because judging by the dirty duffle bags piled up at her door, he planned on staying.

Eddie should feel grateful, right? He wanted an easy way out. Maybe this was it.

Maybe he needed his head examined.

It was a cruel catch twenty-two. He couldn't give Grace what she deserved, but he sure as hell didn't want anyone else giving it to her either.

All he could see at first was long, greasy looking brown hair, and then the man looked up and saw them standing there. Grace clutched Eddie's arm, her fingernails almost penetrating through the down of his coat. Again, he asked himself if this was a good or bad thing. He still didn't have the foggiest idea. Her hand fell from his arm, and her shocked expression became one of great determination.

If anything, this guy reminded him of Shaggy from *Scooby Doo*. He needed a shave, bad. His smile was crooked as he leapt toward Grace, scooping her up in his arms. She looked terrified.

"Baby," the guy said. "Was getting worried I was camping out at the wrong apartment. I've missed you so much."

Grace started shaking her head vehemently. And then the guy, whoever the hell he was, overstepped his bounds and laid a kiss on her. Her hands clutched at this guy's jacket, trying to push him away.

"Oh, hell no," Eddie bellowed, shocking the guy into bringing his head up.

Grace's mouth was as pale as her cheeks—that was enough to piss him off, but when she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked like she wanted to spit, that was plenty enough for him.

He grabbed a hold of the guy and growled, "Put her down—now." And when he did, without thinking, Eddie slammed the man's body up against Grace's door and held him there by his forearm. "Grace," he said through gritted teeth. "Get in my apartment."

She glared at him with burning, reproachful eyes. "Let him go."

"Grace, go into my apartment," he repeated with contempt.

She shook her head. "I said, let him go," she countered icily.

Eddie glowered at her, pushed his arm off the scrawny guy and turned away.

"I can handle this," she said

When he whirled to stare at her, anger rising in his eyes, she added, "By myself."

"Fine, Grace." His voice was cold. "Well, that's that, then." He turned on his heels, dragged his keys from his pocket and started to unlock the door.

When Grace followed and placed a hand on his arm, he pulled away from her. Rage filled him and he wasn't quite sure why. Maybe he hadn't believed his own bullshit that he could walk away from her just like that and pretend he didn't want more himself. Truth was he didn't know how to deal with any of this. He was jealous and he hated it. Hated it so

much, he opened his door, walked through it and slammed it behind him.

Grace's hands flew up to her face, and she swore under her breath. She closed her eyes for a moment and felt hands on her shoulders, kneading her muscles.

Swinging around, she hit Brad in the chest with her open palms repeatedly, just because she could and needed to. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I love you," he said, his green eyes pleading.

Grace held up her hand. She didn't want to hear this, not now, not ever. "Oh please. The only person you love is yourself."

"Gracie, if you would just listen."

"I don't want to hear anything that comes from your mouth and if you ever kiss me again, I'll kill you, do you understand me? We are over."

"Don't...don't say that."

Grace turned her back on him. Her hands were shaking so badly she could barely hold onto her keys. "You need to leave," she told him, not looking back. "Because if you don't leave, I'm calling the cops."

She kicked his bags away from her door. He'd planned on coming back, moving in with her. Rage filled her. "You have some nerve." She kicked the bags again.

His hand touched her shoulder and she flinched. "Keep your hands off me, Brad, I mean it."

"Grace, look, I've got nowhere to go."

She turned to face him head on. "Not my problem."

He gave her his pleading look. One that used to work on her. "Just for tonight, I swear."

Grace hit him again. "No."

“Gracie—”

“Don’t you ‘Gracie’ me.”

Brad hung his head. “I’m sorry...will you give me five minutes, just five minutes, Grace?”

Grace threw her hands up in exasperation. “Argh.”

She hated being weak. He looked so desperate to talk to her, and the last thing she needed was for one of her neighbors to report them for yelling and screaming. She could hear people talking on the other side of the building. Not in the same hall, but their voices were echoing. If she gave him five minutes, maybe he would leave her alone. *Give him an inch, he’ll take a mile*, a little voice screamed in her head.

“All right,” she said. “Five minutes, but I swear to God, Brad, if you try anything I’m calling the cops.”

With shaking fingers, she unlocked the door and stepped inside. When he started to pick up his bags, she said, “No, those stay out here.”

He looked up at her. “What if someone steals them?”

“Not my problem,” she told him. “Besides, you have five minutes, and the clock is going to start ticking...now.”

He shut the door behind him, and Grace stood in the doorway of her kitchen. “Nice apartment,” he said looking around.

“Tick tock, tick tock.”

“Okay,” he said, shaking his head. “Just tell me one thing, first.”

Grace crossed her arms at her waist. “What?”

“Was that your boyfriend?”

“None of your business. Four minutes.”

Brad ran his hand through his hair. “All right—all right. I didn’t mean exactly five minutes, you know.”

“I did.”

Grace remembered his “five minutes”. She also remembered every other way he swindled his way into her life and slithered back out.

“You’re a lot feistier,” he told her, rubbing his chest. “Look, I’m sorry, Grace. I really am. I know I messed up.”

Grace scrutinized him. He acted jittery. Nervous looking and not as attractive as she had once thought. He looked ragged, straggly and just sad. And for the first time, she felt absolutely no pity for him. Whatever he wanted to say, she’d let him say it and then push it out of her mind.

“I’ve changed so much, Gracie, I have a job now. I have money, and I have plans for a future, but none of it matters unless you’re in it.”

“You can’t have me,” she said, pleased at how nonchalant she sounded. Even more pleased that she felt it this time too. “I’ve changed as well,” she told him. “And, I have to thank you for that.”

He smiled, looking triumphant. “You’re welcome.”

Oh was she going to have fun bursting that bubble of his. “So, anyway, your time is up.”

He put his hand to his chest like she’d stabbed him. “Gracie, just one night?”

Don’t you dare give in, she warned herself. She shook her head slowly, sadly. “No, Brad. Your one night will turn into many, and frankly, I barely survived it the last time.” She scrunched up her face. “I’m done taking in strays.”

Uncrossing her arms, she walked the few steps to her door and opened it. “Goodbye, Brad.”

He stood there for a moment, until she raised her eyebrows. Hanging his head, he walked out the door.

“Make sure you take everything with you, so there’s no excuse to come back. You’re not welcome here.” And with that, she closed her door and locked it.

Eddie paced the floor like a raging bull. He'd looked out the peephole five times now, and the bags were still outside the door. He still had no idea who the hell that guy was who had kissed his woman.

She wanted to do this by herself, fine by him. He wasn't going to worry about her. *Yeah, keep telling yourself that, maybe you'll believe it.*

Muttering under his breath, he grabbed a beer from his fridge and chugged it. *Women*, he thought, crushing the can and tossing it into his garbage can. Did she have to take him inside her apartment? What, she dismissed him for this other guy?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. He wasn't supposed to be feeling jealous, wasn't supposed to be...hurting.

But it did hurt, like hell. He was alone, after spending the past few days with Grace. Maybe he blew it. Maybe the closet wasn't good enough; maybe he should've made love to her last night.

"Damn it," he bellowed, his words ricocheting off the walls. This was exactly why he shouldn't have gotten involved with Grace.

Fat Eddie was back.

He was that self-conscious seventeen-year-old boy who'd had a crush on the popular girl. The one he could never have. The one he used to talk incessantly to Anthony about. The one who never had a chance to get away—until tonight.

He hated feeling like this.

Looking out again, he saw the bags. He took a deep breath, walked away from the door and grabbed his coat and his keys. No way was he staying here to find out. He didn't care if the roads were bad, he couldn't stay.

Twenty minutes later, he found himself at the fire station. With this weather, someone was bound to need help. But in the meantime, until they did, Eddie decided his best defense to getting rid of his anger, resentment and the stabbing pain in his heart was a good old fashioned workout.

But before he went into the locker room, he grabbed some magazines off the table, leafed through them, ripped out some pictures and went into his tiny office long enough to grab some scotch tape.

He taped up some pictures of babes from one of the magazines, making sure they didn't have blonde or curly hair. The other picture he put up was one of a firefighter carrying a child from a flame-engulfed house. *There, now I don't feel so un-normal about not having something up here.*

Eddie changed into his workout shorts and wife beater and headed to the workout room. It wasn't a big workout room, but there was enough equipment in there to do what he needed—blow off some steam.

So, he no longer had to break the bad news to Grace that he didn't have time for a relationship in his life. This was something, right? He'd just concentrate on his tests over the next week and blow them away with his scores. Who knew, maybe Williams would retire a little sooner. And if that happened, Eddie would be ready.

This was what he had lived for, this was what he wanted. To follow the legacy of the Mancillas, being chief. He smiled wryly, no one thought he'd move up the ladder as fast as he had. But his determination and drive had shown them all.

Grunting, he lifted the weights above his head and back down again. His muscles were burning, but that was okay, he needed this. Had to look good on camera when they swore him in. It was no longer an "if"

option. Nah, he wanted it so bad he could taste it, and he would have it. And now, there was nothing in his way. Nothing.

Keep telling yourself that, buddy. He set the weights down. His heart was screaming at him, warning him he was making a huge mistake. His brain argued back, telling it that they didn't need Grace.

He had to get her out of his system.

"Eddie." Grace yelled, "I know you're in there, and if I have to stand here all night beating on this door, I will."

Her determination faltered. She'd been standing here for five minutes, making a fool out of herself. She knew he was watching her, probably laughing his head off. Shaking her head, she went back into her own apartment and went out onto her terrace.

The snow whipped around her as she opened the door, chilling her instantly. His truck was gone. Frustration overcame her.

She knew he'd been trying to protect her, but why couldn't he see that dealing with Brad was something she had to do on her own?

Ohh.

Grace shut the door to her apartment and climbed onto her couch. She shivered from the cold and from the realization of what it must've looked like from Eddie's perspective.

They'd had a helluva day, a playful ending up until the point where Brad showed up. She'd never explained Brad to Eddie. He didn't understand what was going on. He had no clue. None.

Eddie didn't know that Brad was the reason she moved here, the reason she thought she was cursed, and the reason for her life change. Wringing the blanket she pulled from the corner of the couch in her hands, she bit back tears.

Her phone rang. Fingers hesitating over the receiver, she dropped her hand and stood. Talking on the phone wasn't going to solve anything. Grace nodded to herself. A feeling of determination settled over her. She knew what she needed to do.

With her car inching along the parkway, Grace kept reaching to change the radio station every time a slow song came on. Swearing she had a camera in her car plugged into all the radio stations—they were on this torturous love song marathon. At this rate of speed, she'd finally get to her destination in four hours. She sped up a little bit, but not too much. The last thing she needed was to crash into a ditch. With her luck, Eddie's company would be the one to respond.

Pondering that for a moment, she realized banging up her car wasn't the right way to do this, but she knew who could help her. Her cell phone rang, but she didn't answer it. She kept her eyes on the slippery road ahead of her.

Tomorrow was another day. She could do this, even though she felt headed for a nervous breakdown. Her life had spun out of control, but for the first time, she felt like she was going in the right direction.

She pulled off the parkway, off the ramp and went through two lights until she turned into a circular drive. The lights were still on, so she knew someone was awake, and she was grateful, because she really needed them to be.

Barely putting her car in park, Grace ran up the sidewalk of the large white-sided home and tried the door when she got to the stop of the stairs. Locked.

Ringling the doorbell frantically, when the door finally swung open, Grace flung her arms out and the tears streamed down her face, the floodgates, opened. "Mom," she cried and wrapped herself around her.

“Oh my God, Grace, what’s wrong?” her mother exclaimed, dragging her in from the cold. “Mark.”

“No, no,” Grace pleaded, “I’m fine, I just need you.” She didn’t want her step-father seeing her like this. Right now, she needed her mom.

Twenty minutes later, Grace and her mother were curled up on the sofa of her mother’s den, two steaming cups of tea on the table in front of them. Grace lay on the couch with her head in her mother’s lap. Her mother gently stroked her hair.

“Feeling better?”

Grace shook her head. “I just feel so stupid, you know? I blew it. I blew it with his family today, and then I really blew it when Brad showed up.”

“Honey, you don’t know that.”

“I do, I do. I blew my chance with the one guy who treated me like I was somebody special, without...I don’t know. I mean, it’s Eddie.”

“You used to talk about him all the time. He was the big guy, right? The one who always got you out of scrapes in chemistry. Always coming to your rescue.”

Always coming to your rescue. The words twirled in her head. She sat up, looking at her mom. It was like looking at an older reflection of herself. Same blue eyes, laugh crinkles at the corners, same long blonde hair

“You should’ve seen him jack Brad up against the wall. It was great, and I really wanted to cheer, but at the same time, I thought, I don’t want him rescuing me this time, I wanted to rescue myself. For the first time in my life, I didn’t want to be the damsel in distress.” Grace swallowed and chewed at the inside of her cheek. “I wanted to be the one who jacked him up against the wall, you know.”

Her mother nodded. "I know, and in your own way, I'm sure you did."

Grace pinched her eyebrows together. "But I did it all wrong."

"It happens. You just need to tell him exactly what you told me."

Grace shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes. "No, he's gone. He's not going to listen to me. He was really, really angry and confused and I didn't take the time to explain any of this to him."

Her mother took Grace's hand in hers. "Grace, people make mistakes, couples fight—"

"We weren't a couple, not exactly. And Eddie's so full of pride."

"You went to meet his family, honey, I'd say that constitutes as a couple. You all do it so much differently than we did way back when. It's hard to keep up with you."

Grace sighed. "I wish things were simpler."

"Then make them simpler, Gracie. You...you worry about the silly things, when you should really be worrying about more important things. There's so much drama, so much energy bottled up inside you, and if things don't go your way, you're like a champagne bottle and you just pop."

Grace's mouth dropped open. *Ouch.*

"I'm not saying it's bad, so don't give me that face." She cupped her hand under Grace's chin. "You have so much to offer, honey. So, so much. You just need to love yourself a little more."

Her mother was right, Grace knew that. But she also knew that she'd changed somehow, and she would eventually figure it out. As the light bulb went on for Grace, she wondered why hadn't seen this before. The reason why everything was so different with Eddie was because she could be herself around him. When she was around him, she did love herself, so maybe she did it ass-backward, but she had learned to love herself through Eddie the last few days.

She actually felt comfortable in her skin, felt comfortable with being silly old Grace. He said he liked her better in an old T-shirt than a fancy dress. Life had been so complicated before, but then with Eddie, it didn't feel like it. She could let her hair down, say anything crazy, and he might look at her like she had lost her mind, but at the same time, she could see it in his expression, in his eyes. She knew Eddie felt the same way.

Eddie made her walls come down, and crashing down they came. She remembered him saying, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Grace back together again. She needed Eddie. As the realization washed over her, she became terrified. What if he didn't want her back?

"Someday, somehow, I need to make this right." Grace lifted her chin.

"And you will, but not tonight," her mom told her. "Tonight, you're staying right here."

Grace smiled. "I have to go to work in the morning, so I'm going to need to raid your closet."

"Ah, her ulterior motive finally comes through. I think that happens to be one of my blouses you're wearing right now."

Grace giggled, sat up, and hugged her mom. "I love you."

"I love you too, Gracie."



Fresh from a shower and feeling about the same, Eddie went out into the open lounge where a couple of guys were sitting, watching ESPN. Eddie wanted to catch some football scores, so he joined them, needing to give his mind a rest from Grace. He wondered—hoped—she was all right. He hoped the guy was gone and not spending the night with her.

Pushing those thoughts out of his head, he picked up a phone book in front of him.

“Yo, no deliveries tonight, road’s too bad,” one of the guys said, Eddie couldn’t quite place him, so he figured he must be new.

“Thanks,” he said, putting the book down. Her number probably wasn’t in the book anyhow.

“We made beef stew earlier, there’s still some in the fridge,” the guy offered.

“Thanks.”

“Hey, don’t be scared of it,” he continued, “I made it, and I used to be a cook in the Army.”

“Don’t do it, Manzilla,” Tony said. Tony he knew, this other guy he didn’t. “Hey, why are you here? We have a full crew.”

Eddie nodded. “Figured you might need a hand tonight. Besides I had some paperwork to do.”

“Starting chief duties early—hey, that’s pretty smart.”

Yeah, he guessed saying he had paperwork was a smart move. He didn’t feel like spilling his guts to Tony or anyone else about why he was really here. He prided himself on keeping his personal life outside of work. He knew most of these guys’ problems, which was part of his job, but all they knew about him was that he ate, slept and breathed in fire and everything that came with it.

They knew he was on their side and one of the most dedicated firemen they’d ever known, and they knew he’d have their backs, just as long as they didn’t screw up. Sometimes Eddie liked it that way, and other times, he wished he could sit down and shoot the bull like they did from time to time.

It'd be nice to be able to vent to another guy about his feelings for Grace, but then again, he didn't want to show any signs of weakness. He'd shown that enough, for most of his life.

No, he would not revert back to pathetic, lovesick Eddie, even if he had to fight it the whole way.

Love.

Funny how that word popped into his head, although he supposed he had always loved Grace on some level. How could he not love sweet, zany loveable Grace? Eddie felt like his hands were tied. He'd given a part of himself away to her, and he didn't know if he wanted that part of him back.

Eddie shook his head, pretending it was about the Prowlers losing another game. When deep down, he was cussing himself out for losing Grace, and the kicker was, he lost her the one way he knew how to help her best—by trying to save her.

Chapter Eleven

For the next couple of weeks, Grace went through the motions of her life. She tried not to think about Eddie and had the aid of Tory and Callie to direct her thoughts to other things. Grace barely spent a night at her apartment, preferring to stay with them. She didn't want to be alone. She felt like a piece of her had been ripped off, and she didn't know why. Best she could figure was that Eddie had shown her a taste of what love was supposed to be like, instead of what she'd had during all these years.

With Christmas a week away Grace sighed, snatching a piece of buttered popcorn from the bowl. In her heart, she'd wanted to spend the holidays with Eddie. When she'd gone to the mall with the girls, she'd seen a million things she could've bought as gifts...for him.

Although the movie they were watching starred Hugh Jackman, one of her favorite actors, Grace felt bored, restless. They'd sworn off romantic comedies for Grace's sake, but these action flicks were starting to get on her nerves. She needed a break. Maybe it was time for her to go back to her apartment. It wasn't like she could stay here forever, although her friends told her if she wanted to move in with the two of them, they'd love for her to.

Grace loved them, she really did, and there was definitely room in Callie's bedroom, but with Callie's lifestyle of having strings of flings, Grace didn't want to be sleeping on the couch or worse yet, waking up to a fling in progress just across the room. Not that she thought Callie

would do such a thing on purpose, but she remembered one night a couple of months ago when she'd stayed in the spare twin bed when she'd had a bit too much to drink to drive home safely, and she woke up to moaning and grunting. Not something she cared to repeat.

In Callie's defense, Callie hadn't realized Grace was spending the night and had been too enthralled with what she referred to as her dessert of the night to notice Grace. She'd never even spotted Grace crawling out of the room with one hand over her eyes.

Grace never thought the day would come when she would say what she was about to say. "Okay, I've had enough Hugh for the week, ladies. It's been fun, but I think it's time for me to go home."

Callie pushed pause on the DVD player. "You can never, ever have enough Hugh."

Grace furrowed her brows. "I've had enough, besides I need to do laundry."

"You can do your laundry here," Tory offered.

"They'd be great," Grace said with a grin. "Only problem is, my laundry is over at my apartment."

"Well, hey, how about I give you my laundry, and you can do it here and stay with us?" Tory said. Grace could tell she was trying to keep a straight face.

"Nice try, but I'll pass, thank you."

Callie threw herself across Grace's lap. "You don't love us anymore," she fake sobbed.

Grace giggled. "Come on, you know I outstayed my welcome here—"

"Never," Tory said. "Don't ever say that again, because you know, no matter what, you are always welcome here."

"If you go now, you'll miss the new delivery guy," Callie told her. "You have to see him."

"I can see him some other time," Grace told her. "Really, I need to get going, I have some things I need to do for the kids' Christmas party and pageant tomorrow."

Grace stood and stretched, then started toward the door. She heard them whisper as she picked up her bag she'd left by the door on purpose, knowing they were going to give her a hard time about leaving. She hated to think she was being ungrateful here, but she really did need to do laundry and get together the Christmas stockings and goodies she bought for the kids.

Tory ran past her like a streak and stood in front of the door. "Promise me you won't watch television tonight."

A flicker of apprehension swept through her. "Why should I promise you that?"

"Maybe you should sit down," Callie offered.

She gave an impatient shrug. "I'm fine, right here."

"Fine," Callie said, leaning back against the wall. "Have it your way."

Tory and Callie exchanged a brief glance and Tory nodded. "Grace, Eddie made chief. They're going to have his induction on the news, we saw it earlier, which is why we were apparently boring you to death with Hugh Jackman."

Grace squeezed her eyes shut. "It's no big deal." She opened her eyes, plastering a smile on her face. "It wasn't like we were a couple or anything." She shrugged again. "More like a one night stand, ya know?"

Callie shook her head no. "I know one night stands. I've never met anyone's family while having one, which is why they're called one night stands."

"I meant...in theory," Grace said.

Tory wrapped her arm around Grace. “Honey, you’re not being pathetic for missing him. He’s not some stranger, he was your friend. Anytime you cross that line, I think it’s worse.”

Grace chuckled back the tears. “How did you know I felt pathetic?”

“Because we know you,” Callie told her.

Grace tousled the back of Tory’s hair, trying to keep herself from crying. “Eddie felt like home,” she whispered. “He made me realize that all this stuff, all this crap I keep holding onto, wasn’t half as fun as letting it go. He made me strong, and he helped me to love myself, and God knows I feel so stupid saying this, but—I really, really wanted this to work out.

“I mean, I *knew* we could get past the past. And I knew that his family would grow to love me, because hey, I do that.” She wiped away the tears slipping from her eyes and sliding down her cheeks with the back of her hand. She tried to smile. “I fell so hard and so fast for him, and it wasn’t a curse that ruined it, it wasn’t something out of my control. It was just...me.”

Callie joined them, wrapping her arm around Grace’s other shoulder. “You needed to prove to yourself you could be strong enough to stand up for yourself. We understand that, and I’m sure if you just talked to Eddie—”

“I can’t talk to him, because I don’t think he ever wants to see me again. I mean, if he did, he knows where I work.” Grace shook her head.

“That works both ways,” Tory told her.

Grace nodded. “You’ve both been the greatest, but I need to get back out there on my own.”

Callie pressed her head to Grace’s. “Our little baby is leaving the nest.”

“It’s time for her to fly,” Tory said.

“No,” Grace told them. “It’s time for me to soar.”



Franny fumbled with Eddie’s tie. “I’m too nervous, Eddie. My hands are shaking.”

They stood in the Federal Building in downtown Pittsburgh. The whole swearing in thing would take ten minutes tops. The fact that it was going to be in front of all the stations in Pittsburgh was a little unnerving. He had about twenty minutes to wait, and he wasn’t satisfied with the way his tie looked.

Standing in front of the mirror, he looked himself up and down, his black pants starched with a perfect seam running up the front of them, his black shoes shined to flawlessness. The pristine white shirt had all of his medals on it, and his name badge was straight. His black tie, however, looked crooked.

Excitement etched with dread ran through his veins. What if he screwed up his lines, with all the cameras poised at him, like shotguns? What if he looked stupid? What if he wasn’t ready to be chief? What if?

His father’s reflection appeared in the mirror behind him. “Can you fix this tie?” Eddie asked him.

“Turn around.”

Eddie turned and bent his knees so his pop could get a good angle to fix the damned tie.

“I thought I had all of my boys perfecting the art of tying a tie at an early age, you should be able to do this with your eyes closed.”

“Could you do it when you were sworn in, Pop?”

“Hell, no. I can barely do it now,” he chided.

Eddie felt some of the tension coming off him as his old man worked his magic.

“How’s that?”

Eddie turned around, looked in the mirror and smiled. “Perfect, Pop.”

His pop squeezed his shoulder. “Eddie, I know I don’t tell you this enough—your ma is always on me—but son, I just want you to know I’m proud of you.”

Eddie saw the tears glistening in his pop’s eyes. It seemed the older he got, the more emotion Anthony Mancilla Sr. showed. It was strange to Eddie, because his pop had always been the hard ass, the Terminator when his boys were bad.

Turning around, he gave his pop a hug. It made him proud to have his family there, all the men dressed in uniforms, the wives all dressed up and looking snazzy. His mom was her usual self, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

He took one last look in the mirror and decided this was it, there was no turning back. He hated the reason behind the early decision to inaugurate him as chief. Chief Ron Williams announced his tearful resignation last week. His explanation sucker-punched every firefighter in their station. Ron had cancer. Even though the odds were in his favor of fighting and winning the battle, he didn’t think it fair to stay on as chief.

Ron pulled Eddie aside and assured him that he’d earned the position. Ron couldn’t and wouldn’t see it going to anyone else. It went a long way toward making Eddie feel better about accepting this appointment.

This was what he’d wanted all his life; his dream, his ambition, his goal, and here it was, just a few minutes away from coming true.

Eddie couldn't stop smiling, even though he was nervous as hell. He was probably going to look goofy, but he didn't care, he felt like he was on top of the world.

Of course, the party waiting for him at O'Reilly's was also on his mind. Beer, food, friends and family; he had it all. Eddie ignored the little thought that kept trying to creep up in his brain. It made his neck itch.

"Tie too tight?" Anthony asked, joining them.

"Nah."

"Yeah...um," he said, scratching his chin. "I remember another time I saw you scratching your neck like that."

"Don't say it; just keep it to yourself, because that's not why I'm scratching. There's too much starch on the collar, that's all."

Anthony shook his head. "Okay, but hey, glad to see you finally shaved, the whole Grizzly Adam's thing you had going on—"

"I was cold," Eddie retorted, getting irritated with his brother.

"Were you growing a beard, son?"

"I thought about it and changed my mind." He glared at Anthony.

"He was growing the beard for the same reason he's still scratching his neck," Anthony said.

Eddie tried to keep his cool. He didn't know if the cameramen were recording this. "Could we not discuss this?"

"Discuss what?" Ann asked.

"Grace." Anthony's cocky smile was a mile long.

"Eddie, I tried to tell him not to speak of her," Ann told him as she shook her head. "You have my permission to kick his ass when we get to O'Reilly's. Unless, you want me to see if Grace would like to meet us there."

He felt like she punched him in the gut. “You two should come with some sort of warning,” he told them. “I don’t have time for this, not now, not ever and don’t you dare call and invite her there.”

Ann touched his arm. “This stubbornness you possess isn’t flattering in the least.” She turned her attention to his pop. “You should be so proud.”

Ann walked away, shaking her head, and his pop looked at his sons and shrugged. “What’d I do?”

Anthony laughed. “We’re too much like you, especially this one. He has too much pride to take this on the chin and go talk to the woman he loves.”

Eddie threw his hands up. “Thanks, An-Tony. I really, really appreciate that.” He walked away. He needed air. But, too late for that, they were motioning for him to step up to the podium.

Kill me now, he thought as he put on his dress hat. One last glance in the mirror, and he walked over to the podium.

The proudest moment of his life was upon him. His family and comrades were all packed into the Mayor’s office.

All thoughts of Grace were pushed back to the recesses of his mind. He’d deal with them later, maybe. Right now, he was so damned happy for this day to finally be here.

Stepping in front of the cameras and Mayor Lisa Sherman, Eddie stood at attention, then snapped a salute. She gave him a smile as she held out a Bible. Eddie moved his fingers before placing his palm on it. He hoped no one could see his shaking hand. She began the oath, and he repeated it. His voice never wavered, his eyes never left hers.

Flashes from cameras went off all around them as they spoke, but Eddie didn’t dare tear his eyes from the mayor’s, because he knew the

second he did, he'd mess up and that was the last thing he needed or wanted at this point.

Within a few moments, but what seemed like an eternity, he finished stating his vows, and the mayor shook his hand and congratulated him.

The worst part wasn't over yet. Now, he was expected to speak into the cameras poised and directed at him.

"How do you feel?" was the first question shot out at him.

Eddie beamed. "I feel great."

Another question was yelled out. "You come from a long line of firemen. Your father was a chief. How does he feel?"

"Why don't you ask him? He's standing right over there."

Eddie saw his pop wipe his eyes with the back of his hand before he said in a very deep voice, "His mother and I are very proud."

Eddie answered a couple more questions. "I'll take one more," he said. His throat was dry, and he was thinking he could really use a beer.

"Now that you've acquired the role of fire chief, what do you plan to do now?"

He could say he was going to Disneyland like the athletes and so on, but nah, that was too cheesy and too expected. "I'm going to O'Reilly's." His face split into a big grin and he stepped away from the cameras.



Throwing her clothes in the washing machine, Grace figured instead of leaving them in the laundry room while she went back up to the apartment, she'd just stay right here and read a book. Of course, the only book she could find, aside from the ones she used in class, was an older romance she had bought because she fell in love with the hunk on the cover.

Too bad he reminded her of Eddie.

Sighing, she put the laundry soap in and then slid in the quarters. Grace decided she wouldn't read after all. No matter how bored she got sitting here watching the paint dry on the walls, she would not go back up to her apartment. Even when the clothes were done, and she had to go back to her apartment, she would not listen at Eddie's door to see if he was home. She promised herself she'd put the stereo on while she decorated Christmas stockings for the kids in her class. She'd turn it up loud enough so that she wouldn't hear him when he came home.

She'd also picked up some over-the-counter sleep aid pills. Sleep had become a commodity for her lately. The best way to get over this was to just do it. Sooner or later, the hurt would go away. It had to.

Eyeing the candy and pop machines, Grace looked at her quarters. If she needed more, the bill changing machine would give them to her. So she indulged in a Coke and a candy bar.

Grace closed her eyes and tried to imagine Eddie standing up there being sworn in as fire chief, oh so proud, accepting his new position and saying his oath. Would he smile the way he did at her? Would it be a more serious type of smile?

She wished she could be invisible and....

Wait, she already was to him now.

Sighing, she opened her eyes and concentrated on her candy bar. What a thing to concentrate on. She needed to learn to deal with these types of things better.

The door to the laundry room swung open and Nancy Barnes walked in. She smiled when she saw Grace sitting there.

"Ready for tomorrow?" Nancy asked, as she sat her basket down atop one of Grace's running washers.

"I still have some things to do, but other than that, I'm ready."

“Kylie is so excited.”

“I bet.”

Nancy looked at her quizzically. “Grace, you look down. Not feeling well?”

Grace breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment, she thought Nancy was going to tell her that she was cursed again. “I’m just tired.”

“Hmm. Haven’t seen you around the building much.”

“I’ve been staying with friends.”

Nancy shook her head. “See, that’s just me being nosy again. I’m sorry, Grace. I can’t help it.”

Grace chuckled. “That’s okay. I think it’s part of our nature as women. We know when something isn’t right, and we want to fix it.”

Nancy nodded. “Still feeling cursed?”

Boy, was she ever.

“I’ll take your silence as a yes. Truly, Grace, I’m not seeing the cursed aura around you anymore.”

Grace twisted her hair around and examined a split end. “That’s good.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk? You look like you have a lot on your mind.”

Grace chewed on her bottom lip. “I think I’m all talked out,” she admitted. “Just having a rough spell, trying to convince myself I can get past all this.”

Nancy closed the washer lid and slid the quarter’s in. “Love does that to you.”

“Who said anything about love?” Was there an aura for that too? Because she was sure hers was black, abysmal. Dead.

“Oh, did I touch a nerve?”

Grace blew out a breath.

"I may be out of line here, but I know what lovesick looks like. And I'm sorry that you had that helplessly, hopelessly, recklessly falling in love look two weeks ago, and it's gone now. That's why I mentioned the word love." Nancy smiled and crossed her arms across her chest. "You were all goofy, walking in the clouds—"

"Okay. Okay, you're right, I don't know how you do it, but I'm miserable, and if I knew what to do, I'd do it. If I knew...knew that you could conjure up some spell to make him forgive me for what I did, trust me, I'd be asking for it. I just want him back, and I want to start right where we left off, because I know we'd be great together. But no curse in the world is at fault for this whole damned mess. I am. And I hate it." Grace lowered her head, feeling ashamed for her sudden outburst.

Nancy uncrossed her arms. "You don't need a spell, Grace."

Her head shot up. "What?"

"You don't need a love spell, and even if you did, I don't do that sort of thing."

"Then what do you do?" Grace knew that probably sounded worse than she'd meant it to. But she hated riddles, and Nancy was standoffish about things with her, sometimes almost cryptic, like she had been when she told Grace she was cursed.

Nancy joined her on the bench. "You're probably going to think I'm crazy."

Grace shook her head. "Then that would be like the pot calling the kettle black, because let me tell you, if anyone feels nuts, it's me."

"Sometimes I see things," Nancy began. "Like someone's aura, like I described to you before. Sometimes, I hear voices, people talking to me and sometimes I have feelings of major déjà vu. Other times, I get visions. I can't explain it and I don't try to anymore. I usually don't say

anything, as I told you before, because sometimes people aren't always receptive and I need Kylie to lead a normal life."

"I understand...I think."

Nancy smiled. "You probably have some type of ability as well, you just don't know it. They say everyone does."

"If you're asking me if I've ever experience déjà vu, then, yes, I have. I don't question a whole lot of things these days, I mean...I do, but not like that. I mean, am I going to out you to any of the parents? No."

Relief washed over her face. "Good, because the last town we lived in, I was like the party favor, and of course, because of my dark hair, my husband was always asked if I was a gypsy."

Grace smiled. Her washer buzzed. "That's me."

"Want some help?"

"No thanks, but you can keep talking while I do this."

Nancy's smile widened. She didn't realize it, but she was taking Grace's mind off the televised ceremony and off Eddie.

Grace started pulling her clothes out of the washer when she noticed something that made her start laughing. She held up a long piece of the red string they'd used that fateful night. "Don't ask me how this got in here. I thought I threw it away."

"It's a sign," Nancy told her.

Grace hesitated, blinking with bafflement. "Sign?"

Nancy bobbed her head. "It's a sign you'll need that—really soon. So, hold onto it Grace."

Chapter Twelve

O' Reilly's was packed. The last time this place was this busy was when Anthony became chief at the station he worked at. Everyone started cheering as they walked in the door. Eddie had to smile and shake a lot of hands as they were ushered to the back of the bar.

The pool tables were covered and made into buffet tables. Tons of Italian food lined the long tables. Nothing better than this. Eddie spied what he wanted right away. Smoked hot pepper cheese. Plopping a piece in his mouth, he was grateful when his brother handed him a beer. They toasted and he swallowed the beer, hoping it'd put out the fire in his mouth.

His mother handed him a plate and he piled the food on. He'd been starving. In fact, Eddie couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. He'd blamed it on studying hard, working out and being busy. He sat at a small round table where his pop sat, already eating.

Glancing around, he figured his ma wouldn't make them pray for this dinner, although he wouldn't be surprised if their priest didn't take the microphone from the DJ.

Anthony and Ann were cuddling in a corner, whispering, smiling and sharing something. Gino and Dee were doing the same at the buffet. Gino had his hand on the small of her back and she'd look at him from time to time, smiling. Mike and Frankie were waiting in line. Her face lit up and he watched as she took Mike's hand and placed it on her round

belly. Mike looked fascinated, awed, and when he kissed Frankie, Eddie couldn't help but feel an odd pang.

He'd never noticed any of this before. He was sure they'd been doing this for years, but he just didn't see it. Not until Grace.

She'd turned his world upside down and he realized now, that he too had been his own damn curse. When it came to love, he'd been cursed. But it wasn't something anyone told him, he'd just figured that out on his own.

So, what you going to do about it? a nagging voice asked him.

His appetite suddenly went, just like it had for the last couple of weeks so he pushed his plate aside. He was surprised his ma didn't say anything about it. After all, he could tell. He'd had to up a notch on his belt so his pants wouldn't slip off his waist.

Aside from not eating much, he hadn't slept either. She invaded his dreams. They were so real, he hated waking up, because he knew Grace wouldn't be there, just the cool sheets. He even tried sleeping in the recliner and it was the same. He woke up needing her.

He hadn't even seen her the last couple of weeks. For all he knew, she had vacated her apartment. Of course, he wouldn't know, he hadn't been there much himself. He'd decided he needed to get over this or move. Shaking his head, he took a sip of his draft.

"Food not good?" Annie asked, joining them.

"Not hungry," Eddie simply said.

Ann leaned in. "I know *that* look."

"What look?"

"The can't eat—can't sleep—miserable look."

Eddie sighed. He couldn't deny it, that was exactly what he felt like, miserable. And there'd be no use in lying to Ann about it. Out of all his sister-in-laws she knew him best, and usually, like his mother, she knew

how to help. But he wondered if his pop would be encouraging. After all, Grace wasn't Catholic.

"If this is about Grace," his pop said, as if on cue, "then I suggest you listen to what Annie here has to say."

Eddie couldn't help it, he blinked. His pop liked Grace? "You sure about that?" he asked him, making sure he heard him right.

His pop raised an eyebrow. "I've never been surer of anything in my life. Listen to your old man a minute, will you?"

Eddie nodded, folding his hands on the table.

"Your mother and I really liked Grace," he started.

Eddie opened his mouth and Ann placed her hand on his chest. "I know, they have a funny way of showing it," she whispered.

"I'm not deaf, Annie," his father said loudly. "We're set in our ways, we can't help that, but we don't try to make things difficult on our kids, including you, Annie. It just happens."

Deep down, Eddie already knew that. He knew his parents wanted what was best for their children. He'd grown up in a loving, Italian home and he couldn't remember a day that he ever felt unloved.

His mother joined them and the first thing she said was, "Why aren't you eating?"

"He's lovesick," his pop told her. "The fever finally started, just like you said it would."

Eddie glanced back and forth between his parents and Ann. He couldn't believe this. "You knew?"

Franny nodded. "You ask your brothers, I knew with them too, only they weren't as stubborn as you are."

"Oh, give me a break," Ann said. "Anthony is bullheaded too. All the Mancilla men are."

His pop moved his chair away from the table. "With all this bashing about to take place, son, you're on your own." He stood, took his plate with him and left.

"Traitor," Eddie mumbled under his breath.

"So, what exactly happened?" Ann asked him. "Anthony said you wouldn't give him details."

Eddie had to smile. "So, that's why he was showing up at the station and constantly on my—"

Ann pointed her finger at him, jabbing him in the chest, cutting him off. "Anthony loves you and he worries about you, we all do. You've cut yourself off from all emotional things and the only thing that you've concentrated on was getting chief. So, now that you got it, how do you feel?" Ann asked. "And please, be honest, because we know you have a heart and soul."

Wow.

"Get real for once in your life," Ann continued to pressure him.

"Okay. Look, I'm miserable, you happy? I thought this would make me happy and it does, but something's missing. I need Grace in my life. Because she's goofy and I love that about her, because at the end of the day, after fighting fires, saving lives and everything that goes with it, I need to see her smile. It makes me want to be a better person and it makes everything right in the world again."

Whoa, did he just say all that? It was true though. Grace reminded him of the good things. Just this week, he'd pulled a young child from a car wreck and he really wanted to see Grace when he came home. He wanted to talk to her about it, because he knew she'd understand.

"It's always been Grace, hasn't it?" Ann asked him.

Eddie nodded slowly.

"Then whatcha' gonna do about it?"

Eddie shrugged. "I have no idea."

Ann and his ma moved their chairs closer to him. "We'll have to come up with a plan," his ma told him.



Grace sat in her living room stuffing stockings. She'd bought the tiny stockings, written their names in gold, red, silver, green and blue glitter and bought them some candy and a little ornament from her. Simple, but they'd love it and it'd be something to remember her by.

She'd made sure she had enough film in her camera for the pageant and party. She had her clothes picked out, ironed and hanging on her bedroom door.

Picking up the remote, she turned the TV on, then off again. She really wanted to see Eddie. But would she end up all night crying? Maybe it'd help her if she saw him on the news. After all, she hadn't seen him in two weeks.

Whatever happened, she'd deal with it. She piled the stockings into a small box and got up off the floor, turning on the television. She went into her kitchen, started the teakettle for some relaxing High Mesa Chai and then went into her bedroom to fetch her flannel pajamas. Wasn't anyone in here to impress, so she slid them on, still warm from the dryer.

The kettle whistled and she made herself a cup before padding into the living room.

She just had time to get comfy on the couch when it came on.

Her heart lurched. He looked so handsome, so proud standing up there, saying his oath. His voice drew a smile to her lips. Oh, how she

would've loved to have been there, standing with his family, dabbing her eyes with tissues. But he didn't want her there.

When he turned to face the crowd to answer questions, Grace saw the strain on his face. His eyes weren't as vibrant and he looked tired—drained and miserable. Was it possible he missed her as much as she missed him?

Her heart skipped a beat at the thought and her hands started shaking. And when he said he was going to O'Reilly's, she found herself jumping off the couch, almost spilling her mug of chai and running into her bedroom.

She had her pajamas off, blue jeans and a mauve fleece replacing them. She was at the door, throwing on her sneakers when she realized what she was doing. She couldn't do this, what if he didn't want her there? What if going there, she made an ass out of herself?

Taking her shoes back off, she slunk back down on the couch and flipped through the channels, sipping at her tea and feeling worse now than she did before. This was insane; she needed to do something about this. Pulling her shoes back on, she knew exactly what she had to do.

Grace poised her trembling hands on the brass doorknob to O'Reilly's. If he didn't want her here, she'd leave, but she had to find out once and for all if he was as miserable as she felt and with any luck, he'd hear her out.

I can't do this. She stepped back from the door. She peered into the fogged windows for the millionth time, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Her heart thundered in her ears as she shivered, standing on her tiptoes, the snow falling softly around her.

"Going to stand there all night?" a gruff male voice asked from behind her.

Almost losing her balance as she spun around, Grace met the eyes of Anthony Sr. “Hi,” she said with a little wave. “I was just leaving.”

“You just got here.”

Grace exhaled. “Yeah, well,” she pointed with her hand, “it’s awfully busy in there and—”

Shaking his head, he said, “And here, I thought the woman our Eddie would fall in love with would have nerves of steel.”

Grace inclined her head. Did he say love? “I’m brave.” She forced the words out, wanting him to get back to the love part.

“Good.” He grabbed her arm, gently pulling her with him.

“Wait,” Grace protested. “Okay, so I’m not that brave. I can’t go in there.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Grace chewed on her lip. It wasn’t just fear stopping her, it was common sense. If Eddie had wanted to see her in the last couple of weeks, he’d have done it. Eddie was the one with nerves of steel, he wasn’t afraid of anything, except for maybe her.

“I’m underdressed,” she told him, still trying to stall.

He looked her up and down. “I don’t think you are,” he said with a shrug.

She held up her hand. “Eddie doesn’t want me here.”

“Did he say that?”

“No.”

“Then, come on, come congratulate my boy.”

Knowing he wouldn’t take no for an answer, she let him drag her like a rag doll. Her heart hammered in her ears as the door came swinging open, the hot, humid air slapping her in the face, making her aware that seeing Eddie tonight was becoming more and more of a reality.

She hadn't thought any of this out at all. What did she plan on saying to him when she saw him? She struggled to get out of Anthony Sr.'s grip as Eddie walked toward them. He stopped mid-stride when he saw her. Grace shook her head vehemently, hoping Anthony Sr. would release her hand and let her run right back out the door. "I shouldn't be here," she hollered over the music and people talking.

His brow furrowed for a second. Grace thought he might give in and let her go and he did. When she turned around, her breath caught in her throat. Eddie.

He looked so damned handsome standing there, even with his tie loose around his neck. She felt tears welling up behind her lids as her heart sped up. She chewed on her bottom lip as her brain searched for the right thing to say to him. "Congratulations," she finally said, her voice wavering.

He looked surprised. She wasn't sure if it was because she was here, or if because she told him congratulations. She wished he'd say something. Anything at this point would be great, even if it was go to hell. Because that was how she felt.

"Thank you," he said. "What—what are you doing here?"

She could stand here and lie to him, tell him that Tory and Callie asked her to meet them here. Or she could be honest with him and herself, and tell him exactly why she came down here. "I wanted to..." She brought her thumb up to her mouth for a second, then pushed it off her lips, making her finger point and fall as she said, "You wouldn't believe that I was thirsty for a beer, would you?" she asked, hopeful that he'd at least crack a smile.

He shook his head as a slow song started playing on the jukebox. "Dance with me?" he asked, extending his hand to her.

Grace closed her eyes, fighting back the tears as she held her hand out, accepting his.

As he led her to the makeshift dance floor, it was if everyone knew, because they stepped aside for them to walk through. Swinging her around, still holding her hand, he pulled her to him, encircling her waist with his hands.

Grace closed her eyes and hoped she wasn't dreaming, because if this wasn't reality, she'd lose it. She had everything she wanted right here in her arms and as she stretched to wrap her hands around his neck, she opened her eyes, looking up into his. Something in his eyes told her they were going to be all right.

"I'm sorry," she told him, her eyes never leaving his.

"Me too."

"I—"

Eddie placed his finger over her mouth. "Just dance with me," he said with a gentle smile.

"All right," she said, returning his smile. "I'll give you this dance, just this one time," she said with a wink.

"We'll see about that," he said, then twirled her around on the dance floor.

Eddie brought her to him again, embracing her and never wanting to be alone with her more than right at this moment. When he'd seen his pop dragging her through the bar, he knew. He thought he'd caught a glimpse of her in the window as he attempted to escape from his party, not wanting to be here anymore, not enjoying himself.

He'd promised himself that he'd find Grace tonight if it were the last thing he did and here she was. A sight for his sore eyes and lonesome heart. He never realized how much she'd gotten under his skin and into his heart.

He lowered his head. "I can't take it," he whispered into her ear. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Grace nodded back at him without speaking. With his hand tightly holding hers, he stopped dancing. He gave her a tiny push and twirled her one last time on the dance floor. She broke into a wide, open smile and he brought her back to him.

He released her long enough to grab her hand and spin her around to lead her out the back door. Everything he wanted was finally in his hands for once in his life. He had the career and woman of his dreams. Pride swelled within him as they walked past the smiling faces of his friends and family. For the first time in his life he did something right. He might have to spend the rest of his life atoning for some of his mistakes, but right now, it felt real. They continued weaving through the crowd past the infamous closet, ignoring the applause coming from what could only be his family.

With Grace following him in her car, he had some time to think about what he wanted to say to her exactly. He was grateful she couldn't see his hands trembling on the steering wheel. He'd rehearsed variations of what he'd say when he had the chance, almost as much as he had his acceptance speech he never did give at the bar. *Oh well*, he thought with a snicker, *they'll get over it*.

The tradition had always been to get the new chief so drunk his acceptance speech came out slurred and babbled. They'd just have to wait for the next chief to pass through the doors.

No, he had other plans, he thought as they pulled into the parking lot of their apartment building. He shut off the engine and waited a second before getting out. Grace had pulled in on down the lot, so he met her at her car by the time she was getting out of it.

“Hi,” she said nervously. “I keep thinking I took you away from the most important night in your life.”

He shook his head slowly. “You didn’t.” He took her hand in his and together they walked to the entrance of the apartment building. He could see Grace looking up at him, a goofy look on her face.

They got onto the elevator and Eddie wished it were just a little bit faster. When the doors opened, they stepped out and started toward their apartments. Stopping in the middle of the hallway with either apartment on either side of them, Eddie released her hand.

“I, uh, I have to get something in my apartment.”

Grace scrunched her features. “Okay.”

“So, is it okay if I come over in a couple of minutes?”

“Sure.”

He nodded, then removed his keys from his pocket, unlocked his door and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

Grace watched the closed door for a second, before following suit. She wondered what he had to get. Maybe he just wanted to change—maybe he’d changed his mind.

She closed her door and scanned her apartment. She’d left all the supplies for the stockings lying on the floor, so she hurried and cleaned it all up and hid her dirty clothes in the closet in the bedroom.

Pacing in her apartment twenty minutes later, she figured he’d changed his mind. She was trying to talk herself into going over to his apartment, not giving him an easy way out like Brad had seemed to give him. No. What she needed to do was march right on over there and tell him that they were meant to be.

Stomping to the door, she swung it open just as Eddie raised his hand to knock.

“Hi,” she said breathlessly.

“Hello,” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

He’d changed into lounge pants and T-shirt. “I had to get these,” he said, holding out gauze, tape and ointment.

“Did you hurt yourself?” she asked as he walked through the door and she closed it behind him.

“No. I got a tattoo.”

“You did? Where?”

“On my shoulder and it’s kind of hard for me to reach it, so I thought while we talked, you could clean it up and put this on it for me?” he asked, looking hopeful.

She’d take any excuse she could to touch this man. “Sure, how about you sit in front of the couch?”

“Couch works.”

She followed him into the room and waited until he sat. She straddled him from behind and helped him lift his shirt.

Carefully removing the tape and bandage, she was in awe over the intricate fire design tattooed on his left shoulder. “This is really nice,” she said as she took a clean piece of gauze out of the package. “Shouldn’t I get the old junk off here first?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Grace got up long enough to go into her bathroom to get a wet soapy washcloth and a plain wet one. She returned with both of the cloths and went to work cleaning his shoulder. Her fingers splaying over hot, skin.

She held her breath as she gently rubbed the ointment on his shoulder, then placed the gauze on it and taped it. Reluctantly, she dropped his T-shirt back down. “All done.”

“Thanks,” he said with his back still to her.

When he got up, he didn't sit down beside her like she hoped he would. Instead he stood there, looking like he didn't know where to start, so she decided to jump in there.

"I'm sorry I didn't explain who Brad was. If it's any consolation, he was the reason for the whole boyfriend bonfire." When Eddie didn't say anything, didn't smile, she continued.

"Everyone kept telling me that I needed to take charge, to take responsibility for myself and when he was here and he ruined our evening, I figured this was one time where I didn't need you to save me. I just wanted to save myself and I shut you out and I'm so sorry I did that."

"There you go again," he said as he smiled. "You already apologized, Gracie."

She almost said she was sorry, again.

"My big argument the last couple of weeks has been that I've never felt alone, Grace," Eddie said as he walked to her sliding glass doors. "I thought I was happy on my own, that nothing was missing from my life, except for chief. But a funny thing happened." He turned to face her. "I guess I didn't see that everything I thought I didn't need, I did. None of this ever crossed my mind, until you."

"You opened up my eyes and for the last couple of weeks; all I could think about was *you*."

Grace's heart swelled. She wanted to jump off the couch and into his arms, but she could tell that he still needed to talk to her, to tell her how he felt.

"I mean," he said, taking a step closer to her, "I think it's always been you. I used to complain to my brothers about saving you from failing, saving you from a botched experiment, cutting a damned frog by myself and jotting down all the notes because you couldn't do it, but the truth

was, I don't know, I can't imagine life being the same if I hadn't did all those things. I like saving you. In fact, I was ready to save you from me."

"From you?" Grace asked, standing.

"Yes, from me. I was too damned stupid to see, to know, to listen to my heart and I was actually going to propose that you sit around and wait for me."

Okay, that irritated her a little bit. "Wait for you how?"

He took another step toward her. "I couldn't offer myself to you, not fully, or at least, I thought I couldn't. I thought chief was the most important thing to me. I thought making it would be enough to sustain me. To keep me happy for the rest of my life, that love and all its trimmings were for other people. And then, something happened. I got chief," he said with a smile. "But it wasn't enough. I felt like something was still missing from my life." He took her hands in his. "It was you, Gracie. I love you, Grace, and I can't deny it anymore."

Grace felt her knees buckle. Had she heard him right? Did he just say that he loved her? "What—what did you say?"

"I..." He took another step closer to her. He looked so nervous, yet his smile was so earth shattering, the tears of happiness she shed wouldn't stop coming. Relief washed over her. "That I love you, Grace."

A siren wailed outside, a sign, she thought. "I love you too," she told him quietly, trying not to let a sob escape. "I can be the real me, when I'm with you."

He pulled her into an embrace. He kissed her, long and hungry, and Grace felt home. This was how it was supposed to feel, supposed to be. She could say crazy things, do crazy things and he'd still love her, for her. She felt like Superwoman in his arms.

He brought his head up and smiled. "There's just one more thing we need to do."

“Oh?” Grace asked.

“Got some of that string left?”

“String?”

“Yeah, string, we need to see if I’m cursed.”

Grace covered her hand with her mouth, giggling. “You’re not cursed,” she told him.

“I beg to differ, unless you have a voodoo doll in here somewhere.”

Laughter came in full force now. “A voodoo doll?” she choked. “Why would I have one of those?”

“Weird stuff has been happening to me.”

Grace swatted at him. “Oh, shut up, you aren’t cursed.”

“But I am.”

“You really want to do this?”

“I really want to do this.”

Grace rolled her eyes as she giggled. She couldn’t believe he wanted to do this test. “Follow me, big guy.” She headed toward her bedroom.

Once they were in her room, she pointed toward her bed. “Lay down on your stomach.”

She pulled the spool of string from a bag in the closet and stopped. The conversation with Nancy in the laundry room hit her—hard. She’d told her she was going to need the string. She opened her mouth to tell Eddie, but then something told her not to say anything, not yet.

Reaching into her jeans pocket, she withdrew the string she’d found in the laundry. It looked long enough to do the job.

Going over to the bed, she tied the string around his big toe and worked it up the length of his body. With it tied, it was the perfect length. *Imagine that*, she thought as she removed the string from him. “Okay,” she said.

Eddie sat up on the bed and she handed him the string. "You need to wrap that from the tip of your toe to your heel seven times."

"Seven, huh?" he asked, fidgeting with the string. "Then what?"

"If there's string left over, you're not cursed, but if the string comes up short, you are."

"What do you think is going to happen?"

Grace laughed. "I think you're just fine."

"But what if I'm not?"

Grace sighed. Not a sad one, but a happy one. "Well," she said. "The minute my curse was broken, you appeared."

Eddie's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Think about it," she told him. "I burnt the string, the string that came up short on me. Yes, I almost burned my apartment down in the process, but the minute that string was gone, you came and rescued me."

"Hmm." He planted a kiss on the top of her head. "Well, let's see," he said, holding onto the string. "Wait, I can't do this, you do it."

He drew his legs up, almost Indian style, holding his big ol' foot out to her. When she made a face, he said, "I took a shower, they don't stink."

He fed her a little bit of string at a time as she wound it on his foot, one, two, three, four, five, six—she gasped. Not because he was cursed, not because there wasn't going to be enough string. No.

She gasped and the tears started coming again because at the end of the string, tied to it, was a beautiful, heart-shaped diamond.

"Grace," Eddie said, tears in his own eyes. "I give you my heart, mind, body and soul. You're not the only one whose curse was lifted that night you preformed this ritual. I love you, baby, and I need you."

"Oh," was the only thing she could say as a sob escaped her lips.

"You don't have to answer me tonight—I just want you to know—"

“Yes,” she cried, falling into his arms, her hands reaching up to cradle his face. “Yes,” she said again and kissed him.

Neither of them cared that they were tangled up in the string as Eddie fell back on the bed. As long as it kept them tied together, there’d be no more curses.

Heather Rae Scott

It all started with an imaginary friend named Sam... Heather Rae Scott hasn't stopped talking to the people in her head, yet.

Her family doesn't seem to mind. She shares her home with her fiancé and her children—an artistic teenage boy who shares her gift of gab, a pre-teen princess with a flair for dramatics and a seven-year old Cal Ripkin wanna-be.

She loves to hear from readers. You can contact her and see what she isn't doing while penning humorous romances by visiting: <http://www.heatherraescott.com>. You can also write to Heather at: heather@heatherraescott.com

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