

Tempting Grace

Prologue

Three years earlier

Grace looked in her rearview mirror and clutched the steering wheel tighter. The eighteen-wheeler was coming on her too fast. Damn it. She should have taken her sister's advice and stayed at the dinner party until it stopped snowing or at least slowed down a bit. She hated driving on icy roads, especially at night. The snow made visibility extremely poor, and the truck behind her seemed intent on driving her right off the road. She could kick herself for offering to work tomorrow, Christmas Eve. She would be getting paid double-time, though, and she needed the extra cash for books. College, she was learning, wasn't cheap.

Still, when she'd left her sister's house, she hadn't expected to deal with a road-raging truck driver. He blew his horn again, and she wanted to scream. She was already in the slow lane. What more did the asshole want? Her anger got the better of her and she blew her horn. She breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed him merging into the other lane.

"Couldn't have done that seven miles back, though, could you, jerk?" she mumbled as he came up alongside her.

She noticed the big rig out of her peripheral vision. Suddenly he beeped his horn again, and Grace forced herself to keep her eyes on the road. This was going beyond normal road rage. She suddenly felt as if she'd been tossed into a bad horror movie. She reached over and turned up her radio, attempting to shut out her fears of being on the road alone with a psycho wielding a really big truck as a weapon. Just as the cheerful notes of a Christmas classic filled the interior of the car, the truck driver swerved. Time seemed to stand still as she watched the scene unfold around her. The fear of being crunched under tons of metal had her slamming her foot into the brake pedal. Her car spun out of control. The sounds of breaking glass and metal connecting with metal mingled with the cheerful notes of the song still coming from the speakers. The last thing she heard before the world went black was Bing singing about a white Christmas.

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"She should have waited. I told her to wait."

Grace heard the worry in her sister's voice and she wanted to reassure her, but she didn't quite understand what had her so upset to start with. It was almost like she was crying, but why?

"We know, Faith. She'll be okay."

Merrick? Why was Merrick in her dorm room? Come to think of it, why was her sister in her dorm room? And why the hell couldn't she seem to get her eyelids to open?

“I should have made her stay,” Faith wailed. “This is all my fault. I insisted she come to the dinner party. She’s been studying so hard, and I thought the break would do her good. This is my fault.”

“No, it isn’t, now stop that or I’ll paddle your ass,” Merrick growled. “This is because of a drunk truck driver. No one else is to blame.”

“Merrick’s right, dear. Grace is a strong girl, she’ll be okay,” her mother said, her voice as soothing as ever. “Though I could kick myself for letting her drive that old Nova. I should’ve insisted on a car with airbags.”

Then Grace remembered. Oh, God, the truck, the icy roads. She remembered it all. Grace concentrated harder on opening her eyes. Finally the blurry outlines of her mother, sister and Merrick came into view. She blinked a few times and tried her voice. “Hey,” she muttered, though it sounded like someone had scraped her throat with sandpaper. Crap, it hurt worse than the time she’d had Mono.

“She’s coming around,” her mother announced. “Someone get the doctor.”

“Where am I?” Grace wheezed.

“It’ll be okay, kiddo,” her sister said, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You’re in the hospital. There was a car accident.”

Grace licked her lips and tried to move, but her entire body was one big ache. “There was a truck,” she said to the room at large. “He wouldn’t stay off my tail.”

“We know,” Merrick gritted out. “The asshole lived, but he’s in critical condition. He tested two times the legal limit for alcohol. He was drunk as hell. I don’t think he’s going to be driving again anytime soon.”

She wiggled her toes and was actually grateful they hurt. “My left leg feels like someone tried to massage it with a sledgehammer, and my stomach is on fire.”

“You suffered a few broken bones, sweetie,” her mother explained. “And there was some trauma to your abdomen, but you’ll be okay now. Everything will be okay, you’ll see. I love you.”

“I had my seatbelt on,” she said, as if anyone cared about that now.

“Of course you did,” her mother said. “You’re a smart girl, Grace, always have been.”

The door opened and her dad stepped in, doctor in tow. Her dad looked as if he’d aged ten years. She tried to smile, to reassure him she was okay, but it hurt too much.

“You just lie still, baby,” he said as he came to the side of the bed and took her hand. She relaxed instantly. Her dad could always take her pain away. When she was a kid, she used to think her dad was some kind of magician. She still wasn’t so sure he wasn’t.

She watched as the doctor checked her heart rate then began to palpitate her abdomen. She winced when he pushed on the area below the left side of ribs. He frowned and stepped back. “I want to run a few tests.”

“What sort of tests?” her mother asked as she clutched onto her dad’s hand. His arm came around her shoulders and he pulled her close. Faith stood on the other side, next to Merrick. Everyone in the room looked worried. Grace just wanted to go back to sleep. God, she was tired.

“They gave you some meds, that’s why you’re so groggy.” Merrick answered her unspoken question.

“Must be some good stuff. I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

‘You’ve already been out for two days straight.’

“No way.” Merrick nodded, his expression serious. Grace sighed. “I totally screwed up Christmas, huh?”

Merrick chuckled. “We forgive you, brat.”

Grace wanted to come back with something smart-alecky, but her voice wouldn’t work. Her eyelids drifted closed, and suddenly she just didn’t care about tests and crazy truck drivers. All she wanted to do was sleep.

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“Are you telling me I’ll never be able to have kids? Isn’t there some sort of surgery or something?”

The doctor shook his head, his face kind and gentle. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. The tear in your uterus will just make you a higher risk for miscarriage. With proper care there’s every possibility for you to have plenty of healthy children.”

Grace slumped against the back of the bed. “No airbags. I shouldn’t have insisted on that stupid car. At the time it seemed cooler than some dumb, four-door sedan.”

“True the airbags would have prevented this type of injury, but the truth is that muscle car probably saved your life, Grace. Cars were built a lot more solid back in the seventies. That tank of a car you were driving protected you.”

She was glad to hear that, at least, though she thought the doctor was probably just trying to make her feel like less of an idiot. She’d been in the hospital for a week while the doctors ran

their tests and took way too many vials of blood and basically drove her up the freaking wall. She thought all the hoopla was just nonsense. She felt fine, other than some muscle ache and the annoying cast on her leg. Then again, she never expected to hear the news that the trauma she'd suffered to her abdomen would somehow be permanent. Bruises, nothing more. Those hopes were dashed now. The news left her numb. She hadn't really thought a lot about having kids, what nineteen-year-old college freshman did? Still she hadn't expected the good doc to tell her about a tear in her uterus. Sometimes life had a way of really sucking.

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Two Years Later

"You sure you won't play at least one more game? I'll be easy on you."

Blade laughed and swiped at the sweat on his brow. "That competitive streak is going to get you in a world of trouble one of these days, Jackson."

Grace watched her cousin and one of Merrick's employees play a game of HORSE. She'd never seen anyone smoke Blade in basketball before. She eyed the newcomer, noting the tall frame and muscular body clad in nothing but a pair of khaki shorts. He'd taken off his shirt and currently used it as a sweat rag. He looked delicious. She wouldn't mind being the sweat rag. Sliding over his chest and rock hard abs would be a delight.

"My competitive streak is nothing compared to yours. We both know I never would have gotten you to agree to three games if you hadn't wanted to beat me so much."

Blade guzzled his bottled water and swiped his hand over his mouth. "I figure someone needs to put you in your place. Might as well be me."

"Yeah, too bad it didn't work for you." Jackson dribbled the ball a few times before throwing it in the vicinity of the basket.

Grace concentrated was on the way Jackson sucked down his own bottle of water. Geez, even that normal act seemed sexy as hell. Then it hit her. Literally. She'd been balanced on the edge of the rail of the porch. The momentum behind the ball knocked her off her precarious perch, and she fell right on her ass. Had she been paying any attention to the ball, she would have noticed it coming straight at her.

"Shit," she mumbled.

Blade and Jackson both rushed to her side. Blade helped her up, concern on his face. "You okay, brat?"

She didn't want to look at Jackson. She already felt like the biggest fool. "Fine, just bruised my ego a bit, I think."

"Sorry about that," Jackson said. "I wasn't paying attention."

She made a point of brushing off her jean shorts. “No big. I’ve taken worse playing football with this slug.” She pointed to Blade.

When she finally allowed herself to glance over at Jackson, she knew two things. One, he was way more of a hunk close up. Two, he was going to be really hard to ignore now that she’d gotten a good healthy look at him.

Jackson held out his hand. “Jackson Hill. I work for Merrick.”

Grace took it and smiled. “I know who you are. I’m Grace Vaughn, the annoying younger cousin.”

“And I’m out of here,” Blade grumbled. “I need to find some air conditioning.”

“You’re getting old and soft. Better watch it, I think I see a pot belly in your future,” she teased Blade, though it was the furthest thing from the truth. Blade was all muscle. She secretly thought fat cells were merely too afraid to venture anywhere near him.

“You like to play with fire, don’t you, Gracie?”

Oh, hell, he had a really nice voice. Deep, mysterious, full of wicked promise. “It’s Grace, and Blade’s a big boy, he can handle some razzing.”

“I agree,” he murmured. He fell silent, staring at her as if imagining things. Naughty things. Grace had the urge to yank at the hem of her black tank top to cover her exposed abdomen. The tank and shorts had seemed like a good idea for a hot July family get together. The way Jackson licked his lips and kept glancing at her belly and legs made her wish she’d worn a sweatshirt and jeans.

“I’ve never seen you at one of the Vaughn picnics,” she said in an attempt at normalcy. “Why is that?”

He sat on the edge of the porch and crossed his arms over his chest. “I wasn’t invited until now. Merrick and I have gotten to be pretty good friends, though.”

“Golf?”

He chuckled, which was oh-so-yummy. “Yeah. Merrick and I both love it.”

“Male bonding, how cute,” she said, hoping to shake his calm demeanor.

He looked over at the basketball sitting on the porch floor, bent and picked it up. “Do you like to play, Gracie?”

She refused to enjoy the way he said her name. No one called her Gracie. She’d always hated it. Jackson made it sound sinful. “I play some, yeah.”

“Feel up to playing a game with me?”

The double-entendre wasn't lost on her or her libido. “Your timing is off. I was about to leave when you smacked me in the face with that thing.”

He suddenly stood and cupped her chin. When he turned her head to the left and right, Grace was too stunned to move. Apparently satisfied, he smiled.

“You're too pretty to be bruised.”

“Thanks,” she said. Escape. She had to escape. The man was lethal and way out of her league. She liked simple guys. Guys she could easily handle. Jackson was neither. She started around him. “It was nice meeting you,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Maybe one of these days you'll play with me, Gracie.”

His words caught her, and she froze. It took all her strength to get her feet moving again. She didn't think she breathed until she sat behind the wheel. Grace looked down at her hands and they actually shook. “He's just a guy, quit acting like such a girl,” she chastised herself.

It was a good five minutes before she could pull the keys out of her pocket and start the car. His words played over and over in her head.

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