

Chapter One

“Oh! Oh! Careful! You’re gonna scratch it,” I warned my best friend, Trina . I put down my end of the huge, cherry-stained oak desk and leaned forward to make sure the left corner was still in tact.

“Grace, for the love of God, shut up and just keep moving,” she snapped.

Under any other circumstances, her attitude would have caused a spat, but she was exhausted. We’d been hauling furniture up three flights of stairs since early this morning. My legs were about to give out, my lower back throbbed, and I smelled like I’d never heard of deodorant. Two hours ago, I would’ve given anything for a chilled bottle of Perrier, a steaming hot Jacuzzi and some Epsom salt; now I’d settle for the floor and a pillow. But we still had two sofas, a love seat and a curio to tackle.

“Don’t get cranky, now. Pleeaaaaassee,” I begged, trying to keep the mood light.

“Trust me,” answered Trina, still holding up her end of the desk, “*this* is not Cranky. But if you don’t pick up this oversized slab of wood and keep stepping, you’ll meet Cranky’s cousin, Peeved, real quick.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Trina’s always had a way with words, especially when she’s irritated. When we were kids, her brashness hurt my feelings, but as the years went by it became part of what I loved about her. Now I couldn’t imagine living without her in-your-face honesty.

“Okay, okay. Here we go, ready?” We managed to get the desk up the last set of stairs, through the door, and into the second bedroom before we both collapsed onto a couple of unopened boxes.

“It really is a gorgeous loft,” she managed between breathless pants.

I was so winded all I could do was nod. *It really is wonderful*, I thought as I surveyed the spacious area. I love this loft. I could have never afforded anything this extravagant in Detroit, especially not downtown. It’s practically all windows, with glossy hardwood floors that bounce sunlight all over the place. The kitchen has new appliances; there’s central air and the master bathroom has one of the most elegant hot tubs I’ve ever seen. The other bedroom, which is on the opposite end of the loft, has delicate looking French doors that lead to a balcony. It offers a great view of Beale Street. I decided to use the smaller room as an office. It lets in the most sun, and I write best when there’s lots of natural light.

“Explain to me again why you didn’t hire professional movers to do this?” Trina asked, while handing me a glass of ice water. I was so busy soaking in my new surroundings that I hadn’t even realized she’d gotten up for drinks.

“Because,” I answered, after taking a swig of water, “last time I moved, half of my stuff ended up missing, and the other half was so banged around it wasn’t even worth keeping. I figured it would be better to do the work myself. That way, I could save my money and my furniture.”

“Right. So, when you figured it would be better to do it yourself and save money, you were really thinking you would just enlist my services for free.”

“Something like that,” I answered with a sheepish smile. “Anyway, don’t act like you haven’t enjoyed this little bonding experience.”

“We could have bonded at the massage parlor over a couple of cappuccinos and mud bath,” she answered. “This, my sweet manipulative friend is not what I call bonding – this is what I call manual labor.”

“Don’t even start,” I warned, as I finished off the water and set the glass on the windowsill. “This was your idea. I wasn’t thinking about moving to Memphis until you came begging.”

“The nerve,” she gasped dramatically, trying her best to feign offense. “You know your eyes teared up and your bottom lip hit the floor the minute I told you that Darius wanted me to move with him to Tennessee.”

As usual, there was a ring of truth in both of our stories. Darius is Trina’s high school sweetheart. They’ve been on and off now for nearly nine years. Their relationship is complicated. I stopped trying to understand it a long time ago. Despite all of the rotten things that they’ve done to each other, she’s never happier than when they’re together. So when he landed a marketing job in Memphis, it was pretty much a given that Trina would follow. There wasn’t really anything tying her to Detroit, except me.

I really did cry when she decided to go with him. Ever since we were in middle school, Trina has been my source of strength. She’s the only person in my life who’s never let me down. The thought of living nearly eight hundred miles away from each other had us both sobbing at the rate of two boxes of Kleenex a day.

“This is so stupid,” she’d declared, wiping away a tear with the back of her hand. “I’m just going to tell Darius that I’m staying. I mean, who is he to expect me to just uproot myself and shuffle my life around because it’s best for him?”

As much as I wanted to be selfish and proceed in ripping Darius apart for wanting to be close to the woman he loves, I couldn’t, not because I gave a rat’s tail about Darius, but because I knew Trina would be miserable. She’s been waiting for years for some sign of long-term commitment from Darius, and he finally asked her to live with him. The only problem was he wanted her to live with him in Memphis.

“No, come on now, you’ve been waiting for this way too long. If you pass it up

now, he may never offer it again.”

“Yeah, but at what cost?” she asked. “I’m going to be the same person in Tennessee that I am here. Why, all of a sudden, am I good enough to live with him now that he’s moving?” She made a good point, but no amount of rationalizing would make her happy once he was gone. As much as I wanted her to stay, I would never put her in a position where she felt like she had to choose between Darius and me. It just wouldn’t be fair. And then it hit me –

“You know what? I could move to Memphis with you.”

“What?” she asked, looking at me as if I’d just offered to mop her kitchen floor with my tongue.

“Why are you looking at me like I’m crazy?” I asked. “Think about it. We could have so much fun. It’s not like I have to be in Detroit to write, and I have more than enough money saved.”

I could see it all starting to sink in, as the wrinkles on her forehead disappeared and a slight smile emerged.

“Oh my God, Grace, you’re moving to Tennessee with me!” she squealed, pummeling me to the floor.

There really wasn’t anything wrong with my life in Detroit, except that I was living with my mom and I was completely bored. I’d graduated from college and my writing career had taken flight when Taylor and Dotson, a major publishing house, signed my children’s book series *Simon and Eddie*. Writing was fun and I freelanced here and there, but something was missing. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I’m still not sure. I’m in the middle of what my mother has tritely dubbed, a “soul searching” phase.

“You’re trying to figure out who you are, Grace, and there’s nothing wrong with that. Just don’t use your search as an excuse to become lazy.”

That, to me, is a crock. I’m twenty-seven years old. I know exactly who I am. I’m a short, chunky, manless, almost over-the-hill, black chick who only has one true friend and a moderately successful children’s book series to show for her nearly three decades of living. It’s never been an issue of not knowing who I am, but rather not knowing where I belong.

I’m taking steps in the right direction, though.

I love Memphis. I’ve always heard myths about southern hospitality, but who would have thought it actually existed? I was born and raised up north, where everyone has a “you mind your own business and I’ll do the same” mentality. Having lived in Detroit for nearly fifteen years, where smiles are expressly reserved for important people, like your boss, your in-laws, and your neighborhood drug dealer, I had to polish up my manners quickly. At first it was kind of eerie seeing perfect strangers stopping to exchange pleasantries. But in these few short days, I’ve found myself smiling and greeting like I’ve lived here my whole life. The move was a good thing; I needed a new environment and more importantly, I needed to be near Trina. As much as I made it out to be a favor to her, we both know that I was suffocating in Detroit. At times, our friendship was the only thing that kept me going.

Over the past several years, it seemed like every aspect of my life had fallen to pieces. My only constants were Trina and my writing. I’d been looking for a chance to escape for some time. I just never expected that Darius would open the door that would allow both Trina and me enter new chapters of our lives.

“Earth to Grace,” Trina was waved her hand in my face. “Girl, you better snap out of it. We still have some major stuff to lug up here.”

“I know, here I come,” I answered, practically slinging myself off the box and into a standing position.

“Don’t quit now; if we’re lucky the curio and love seat will fit in the elevator. Gimme a sec, though, I gotta go to the little girls’ room.”

“That’s *so* much more information than I needed to know,”

I had started to unload a couple of the many boxes strewn across the floor when I heard a light rap at the door.

“It’s open,” I shouted. It was probably Darius coming to pick up his beloved. *Well that’s too bad, I thought. You’re just gonna have to wait. There’s no way I can carry the rest of that stuff up here by myself.*

A few seconds later there was another rap.

“Darius, just come on in, my hands are full,” I called over my shoulder. I heard the door open, followed by some heavy footsteps.

“Don’t bother getting comfortable,” I said, my back still to the door. “We’ve been slaving up and down those stairs all day, and we could use some brute strength right about now to get the rest of that stuff up here.” I continued stacking books and little knick-knacks onto the bookshelves. “She should be out any second.”

Just then, Trina emerged from the bathroom. “Oh, hi,” she said somewhat awkwardly. “Are you a friend of Gracie’s?”

I whirled around, completely confused. Standing sheepishly in the doorway was one of the finest looking men I’d ever seen. His chocolate skin was flawless – dark and rich like the color of cognac. His big brown eyes were surrounded with delicate long

lashes, and he had a wide stately nose that gave him an air of importance. His lips were striking. They were full, almost pouty and perfectly round. He had a killer smile with a perfectly placed dimple on each side of his face, and his small, orderly dreadlocks fell just past his shoulders and were neatly pulled back with a rubber band. He had a broad, nicely built torso and even through his tee shirt, I could tell that his arms were toned and muscular. His khaki shorts stopped just past his knees, revealing two of the biggest, sexiest calves I'd ever seen. He had to be at least six feet, three inches, which explained his massive tennis shoes and enormous hands.

"I'm so sorry," I said, dumping an armload of books into a nearby box. "You're not Darius."

"No," he answered, with a warm smile. "But if you're still looking for some brute strength, I think I can be of some assistance."

His voice was baritone deep, but kind. I noted that he didn't have the customary southern drawl.

"That's so nice of you." I walked over, brushing the dust off of my hands and onto my already filthy shorts. "I'm Grace."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Mike. Or Michael. Mike is fine," he stammered, as he reached out to shake my hand.

He's nervous. That's so cute.

"I live three floors above you."

"It's nice to meet you Mike, Michael, Mike," I teased. He made a feeble attempt to laugh. "This is my friend, Trina. She's just here helping me get situated."

“Hey, how’s it going?” she asked, with a small wave that resembled the wax-on, wax-off move in the *Karate Kid* movies.

He nodded. “Here,” he said, handing me something rectangular, neatly wrapped in aluminum foil. It was warm. “It’s banana nut bread.”

A gorgeous man who can bake? Wave the red flags, this is too good to be true.

“That is so sweet of you,” I said, coyly. “A brute who can bake? I’m impressed.”

“Oh, don’t be,” he responded with a wave of his hand. “My mother made it.”

“Oh,”

Ding! Ding! It is too good to be true. He’s still breast-feeding. There’s nothing more pitiful than a mama’s boy. “So you live with your mom?”

“No, actually, she lives down on the second floor. She saw you moving in – said you’ve both been working hard all day and decided to bake you a little something in case you got hungry.”

Okay, so he doesn’t live with her, but the fact that they live in the same building on different floors isn’t any less alarming.

“Well, when you get the chance, please thank her for me,” I said, reverting into formal mode. There was no point in flirting; this guy had obvious Peter Pan issues. I didn’t have the time or the energy to play tug-of-war with any man’s mama.

“I will definitely do that,” he replied.

“We’ve been moving in all day. I’m surprised we haven’t bumped into her,” I said, putting the bread down on the kitchen counter.

“Yeah, she lives in the front of the building. She just happened to see the moving truck parked around the corner when she was out walking her dog. She wanted to introduce herself, but said neither of you were anywhere to be found. You must have been using the service elevator around back.”

“The *what?*” Trina shrieked.

“The service elevator,” he repeated. We both stood there, speechless.

“Nobody told you about the service elevator?” he asked.

I shook my head, absolutely dumbfounded.

“Then how did you guys get all of this stuff up here?” he asked.

“The stairs,” Trina answered, through clenched teeth.

I could just feel her glares burning holes into the back of my head.

“Wow,” he said, smirking. “I don’t know if I should feel sorry for you or be impressed.”

“You can feel sorry for her,” Trina said. “Because I’m through.”

With that she stomped off towards the bathroom. If it weren’t for Mike’s presence, she probably would have tried to sock me. Of course, if it weren’t for Mike, Trina and I would be none the wiser about the service elevator, and I would still have my moving buddy. He must have been reading my mind.

“Don’t sweat it,” he said. “We can have whatever’s left up here in no time.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” I asked. “I think I can coax her back.”

Just then we heard the spray of the shower coming from the behind the bathroom door.

“Well, then,” I said. “Let’s get started.”



He wasn’t kidding. All of the remaining furniture easily fit into the service elevator. We had everything situated in the apartment in less than an hour.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I said looking up at Mike. *My God, he’s so handsome, and he hasn’t even broken a sweat.*

“It was nothing,” he shrugged.

“Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Water would be good, thanks.” I was washing two mugs that I’d wrestled from the bottom of a moving box when someone knocked on the door.

“Could you get that for me?” I asked.

It was Darius.

“Hey, Grace. You didn’t work my baby too hard, did you?” he asked.

“No comment,” I said.

“Better to plead the fifth than to lie, right?” Trina asked teasingly, as she emerged from my bedroom swallowed in my favorite pair of sweats and a wrinkled tee shirt.

“Hi, Sweetie.” She threw her arms around his neck and giving him a quick peck on the lips.

“Darius, this is my neighbor Mike. Mike, this is Darius, Trina’s boyfriend.”

“How’s it going man?” Darius asked, his arm still wrapped around Trina’s waist.

“Not bad,” Mike replied. There was a brief, awkward silence. Mike turned to me. “I’m gonna head on up.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I said.

“Yeah,” Darius agreed. “Trina and I are on our way out.”

“No, it’s late, and I know you’re tired,” he said heading toward the door. “But if you need any help putting things away or hooking stuff up, I can come by tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” I answered. “But I think I can manage from here.”

He nodded and walked out the door.

“You’re a quick one, aren’t you, Grace?” Darius asked with a wink. “You haven’t been here a week and you’ve already dug your claws into some poor, unsuspecting farm boy.”

“Don’t even go there,” I said, unwilling to listen to anything he had to say about my personal life. “I wouldn’t have even needed his help, if ‘Little-Miss-I’m-Through’ hadn’t up and quit on me.”

Trina shot me a don’t-make-me-hurt-you look and went to my room to get her things. By the time they left and I’d eaten, taken a shower and cleared things away

enough to make a bed on the floor, it was well past midnight. As I lay there trying to unwind, I surveyed my new home. The chill of anticipation traveled up and down my spine. This was the change I needed. I tried to map out a plan for the next day, but all I really had to do was return the U-haul truck I'd rented. The rest of the day was mine to spend as I wished – obligation-free. I felt like a load had been lifted from my shoulders. As my eyes grew heavy with sleep, I was confident I'd made the right decision to leave Detroit, and put my past behind me.