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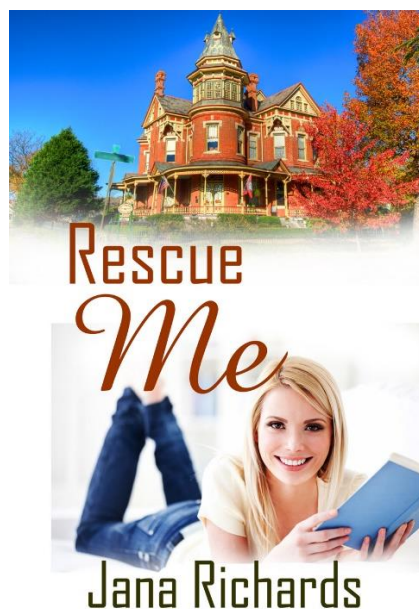
Victorian Mansion duet, book 1

Chelsea Andrews can't decide who's more dangerous—the creep on the Toronto city bus, or the handsome stranger who rescues her. Was he acting as he claimed, or is he that weird in real life? She doesn't stick around to find out. Fate intervenes when her rescuer, out of work actor Matt Malone, sublets the apartment next door. Chelsea soon discovers the most dangerous thing about her charming new neighbor is the damage he's inflicting on her heart.

Or is it? Soon after Matt moves in, strange romantic notes begin showing up at the art gallery where Chelsea works. Then she's followed home from the bus stop late one night, and her apartment is broken into. Despite her growing feelings for Matt, all the evidence points to him as the culprit.

Matt is at a crossroads. His acting career is stalled, and all his siblings are getting married and having babies while his love life is non-existent. Something has to change. Things begin to look up for Matt when he moves next door to Chelsea. He's totally captivated by the beautiful blonde and wants to take their relationship to the next level. But when he discovers what Chelsea suspects about him, his plans are put in jeopardy. And how can he protect her from the real stalker?

Is Matt the kind, funny, sincere man Chelsea is falling in love with, or some kind of letter-writing stalker? She must decide whether he is a dream come true or her worst nightmare.



Chapter One

Who said Princesses don't use public transit?

Matt Malone's gaze landed on the pretty blonde the minute he stepped on the bus. Something about the way she held her head struck him as regal. He thought about saying hello, and maybe sitting in the seat next to her. But then she lifted her gaze and stared at him with an icy "Don't talk to me" expression in her green eyes. It was obvious she wanted nothing to do with him.

Just as well. This Princess was a cool one and he wasn't wearing his thermal underwear.

He moved past the Ice Princess and grabbed a seat a few rows down. The city sped by in a blur of neon and flashing traffic lights. Cars filled the streets, and several people strolled along the sidewalks. Even at midnight, Toronto hummed with life.

Matt sighed and turned away, feeling out of tune with the city tonight. He had bigger problems than being rejected by the Ice Princess. His rent was going up and if he didn't find a cheaper place soon, he'd be forced to move back in with his parents. He suppressed a shudder. Damn, it, he was nearly thirty years old, too old to live with Mommy and Daddy. He could hear the razing from his siblings already; *Matt's such a failure as an actor, he can't even support himself. What a loser!* With a sigh, he grabbed his phone and perused online 'For Rent' ads.

The bus rumbled to a halt at the next stop and he looked up as a wild-eyed man stepped on board. Matt sat straighter, his senses on full alert. Something was off with this guy. His gut warned him of some sort of instability, perhaps drug addiction or mental illness.

The man glanced around the bus, his furtive gaze darting from one occupant to the next before settling on the Ice Princess. Matt's blood ran cold when he saw the feral curling of his lips and the lascivious gleam in his eyes. So, not only unstable, some kind of pervert as well. The Ice Princess was in big trouble.

The Perv sat directly in front of her, then turned and stared at her, the scary smile still on his face. The Ice Princess did her best to ignore him, alternating between studying her magazine and staring out the window. But the Perv didn't budge. If someone didn't step in soon, he'd likely graduate to touching and beyond. Matt's gut twisted. He had two sisters, and the

thought of either of them in this situation made him sick. He hoped that if they were ever in trouble, someone would help.

Matt looked around the bus. A couple of teenagers were engaged in a lip-lock near the back. An elderly man determinedly ignored what was going on in front of him. The bus driver stared straight ahead, not sparing a glance for his passengers. Matt sighed. Apparently, he was the only one who gave a damn. A plan began to formulate in his head.

He was about to put his plan in motion when the Ice Princess picked up her things and moved to a seat on the opposite side of the bus. Matt relaxed. Hopefully, the Perv would get the hint and leave her alone. Instead, he followed her, taking up a position in the seat in front of her and continuing to stare, his smile a little wider now, and a little wilder. Matt prayed the Ice Princess wouldn't leave the bus, because as sure as God made little green apples, the Perv would follow her. He didn't want to think about what might happen then.

The Ice Princess needed help. It was up to him to play the hero.

And him without his cape and tights.

Matt went over his plan one more time. *Yes, that's how I'll handle it. It takes a pervert to recognize a pervert.*

He could do it; he was, after all, an actor. An out-of-work, barely able to scrape by on the two voice-over commercials in the last six months actor, but an actor none the less. He ruffled his hair, going for the I'm-really-strange-and-I-haven't-combed-my-hair-in-a-week look. Then he skipped down the aisle and slid into the seat beside the Perv.

"Hi Mister. My name's Norman, Norman Bates. What's your name?"

The Perv curled his lip in distaste but said nothing. Matt focused on him, alert to any sudden moves, or any sudden appearance of a weapon. If he handled this wrong, the Ice Princess wouldn't be the only one who got hurt.

"Beautiful night in the city, isn't it? I love Toronto, do you love Toronto? My favorite city, my favorite city." Matt rocked back and forth in his seat and tried for a vacant look. The Perv relaxed, dismissing him as a harmless idiot. Matt smiled to himself. The less wary he was the better.

"Do you like TV? I love TV. My mommy lets me watch all I like. I like Sesame Street and Dora the Explorer." Matt broke into his best lunatic rendition of the Sesame Street theme song. The Perv stared at him. At least he'd diverted his attention away from the Ice Princess.

"My favorite show in the whole wide world is 'The Simpsons'. I love 'The Simpsons'. Do you love 'The Simpsons'? Homer is so funny." Matt's maniacal laughter echoed through the bus. The Perv slid as far away from him as he could. Where was the Academy Awards committee when he did his best work?

Now to move in for the kill. He edged closer to the Perv, laying a hand on his knee.

"Will you be my friend? My *special* friend? My mommy says I can bring home playmates any time I like. I like to bring home someone to play with." He gave the Perv another smile, one he hoped conveyed the message that he wasn't quite as harmless as he looked.

The Perv got the message loud and clear. He pulled the cord to signal the bus driver to stop and leapt over Matt in his haste to get away. The bus pulled over and came to a stop. In case the Perv had second thoughts about leaving the bus, Matt rose to his feet and let out a plaintive wail.

"Wait! Don't you want to play with me anymore?"

The Perv pushed open the doors and ran down the street, disappearing into the night. Matt smiled in satisfaction. Too bad they hadn't seen that bit of acting at his last audition.

He turned his attention to the Ice Princess, who sat rigid in her seat, staring at him with huge green eyes that told him she'd sooner have taken her chances with the Perv. Perhaps he'd played the lunatic a little too convincingly.

"I'm sorry, Miss. I didn't mean to frighten you. I saw the way that guy was staring at you and I knew I had to do something". He gave her his patented Matt Malone smile, the one he'd used on many occasions, both personal and professional, to melt a woman's heart. In return, the Ice Princess gave him the same frigid glare she'd bestowed on him earlier.

But despite her cool demeanor, Matt sensed her fear. A wave of protectiveness flooded over him. He was the knight in shining armor to the Ice Princess's damsel in distress.

"Really, I'm one of the good guys. Ask anybody."

Her eyebrows rose. "So, are you telling me you were pretending to be demented?"

"I was acting."

"Whatever. If you were so anxious to help, why didn't you throw him off the bus?"

"Violence isn't my style. I'm a lover, not a fighter."

The Ice Princess's already fair skin paled alarmingly. She stared at him as if he'd sprouted horns. Perhaps he'd chosen his words unwisely. Now she was convinced he was a pervert, too.

"Let me rephrase that. I feel it's better to let words settle a problem rather than fists."

She gripped her purse and briefcase with white-knuckled determination, looking unconvinced by his little speech. Matt watched her eyes, sure she was calculating the distance to the exit. Slowly, she scooted across her seat, preparing to make a run for it.

"Thank you for helping me. I appreciate your concern." She rose and pulled the cord. Matt rose as well.

"You're sure you'll be all right? I could walk you to your house, make sure the Perv isn't waiting for you."

"No!"

He saw the panic in her eyes and sat back down.

"No," she repeated, with an obvious effort to remain calm. "Thank you. I'll be fine."

She moved to the front exit and waited for the bus to come to a stop. When the doors opened, she hesitated and looked directly at him. For a second, he saw vulnerability and a trace of uncertainty in her eyes. Without thinking, he stood and walked toward her. Panic flared in her eyes once more. She hurried down the steps and out the door. As the bus pulled away from the curb, Matt watched the small figure recede in the distance and the dark.

He hadn't even gotten her name.

Chelsea Andrews placed the last carefully folded sweater into her friend's suitcase and closed the lid. She looked around Darcy's partially vacated apartment and a wave of loneliness swamped her. Darcy was more than her neighbor. She was her best friend, really the only good friend she'd made since moving to Toronto six months ago. Now Darcy was moving to Tokyo

for a year to teach English. She hadn't left yet, and Chelsea already missed her.

"I think that pretty much does it. My clothes are packed, my affairs are in order, and you're looking after my plants. I'm ready to hit the road!"

Chelsea smiled. Darcy had made it her mission to educate the kid from Alberta on the ways of the big city. Not that Chelsea had been living in the sticks. Since she'd graduated from her small-town high school eight years ago, she'd been living in Calgary, where she'd gone to university and then worked in a small art gallery. There were those who would argue that Calgary was as cosmopolitan as Toronto.

She hugged Darcy. "What am I going to do without you for a whole year?"

"You'll be fine. I promise." Darcy stepped out of her embrace to give her a stern look. "As long as you don't hide out in your apartment for the next year."

Chelsea sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm happy for you, Darcy, and I know how much you're looking forward to your adventure in Japan, but I'm really going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you, too, but I think getting out on your own will be good for you. You need to spread your wings, meet new people."

"Easy for you to say. Some of us are more socially challenged."

"Nonsense." Darcy waved her hand in dismissal. "You're a beautiful, witty, intelligent woman. You should have a parade of men waiting outside your door."

Chelsea snorted. "A parade? I've never had so much as a one-man band outside my door."

"Well, it's time for a change. You've found something wrong with every guy I've introduced to you in the last six months. Tim was too short, Michael was too tall, Jeff talked too much, and Perry stifled you, whatever that means."

Chelsea shuddered at the memory of the youth minister from the church their landlady, Mrs. Ross, attended. The resemblance between Perry and her father, in career choice, physical attributes and personality traits, was so similar as to be eerie. He was handsome, charming and charismatic, like her father. He even flirted with the pretty waitress at the restaurant on their one and only date the way she'd seen her father do. And like her father, she was sure he couldn't be trusted.

"You squander your opportunities. What about that guy who rescued you from the creep on the bus a couple of weeks ago? The guy's a genuine hero and you didn't even get his name."

"The guy's a genuine lunatic. I'm beginning to wish I hadn't told you about him."

Darcy had been convinced her unconventional rescuer had saved her life, or at least kept her from harm, and had chastised her for not getting his real name. The night of the incident, Chelsea had been too scared, and too confused to think straight. But what she hadn't told Darcy was that she hadn't forgotten a thing about her rescuer. She remembered the intensity of his gaze, the blue of his eyes so clear they reminded her of the prairie skies of Alberta. She remembered the sensuous curve of his mouth as he smiled at her, although she had no idea whether it was an insane smile or a reassuring one. She remembered his thick, sandy-colored hair standing up on end. She'd always remember him.

She straightened her shoulders, mentally shrugging off her rescuer's image. The guy was probably certifiable, a regular menace to society. Besides, she was a big girl now. She was a capable, intelligent woman who could take care of herself. That was part of the reason she'd come to Toronto. To prove herself.

Fortunately, Darcy let the subject drop. She inspected her apartment, checking cupboards and closets for forgotten items.

"I think that pretty much does it. Everything that's left is for the use of the new sublet." She checked her watch. "He should be here any minute."

Chelsea frowned. "He? You never mentioned the person you found to sublet your apartment was a he."

"Didn't I?"

"No. Somehow that seems to have slipped your mind."

Darcy gave a negligent shrug. "You know how forgetful I am. Anyway, there's nothing scary about this guy. He looks like the boy next door, only sexier."

"I don't know, Darcy—"

"Relax, Chels. I checked out his references and they were impeccable. I even spoke to his mother. According to her, he's a prince of a guy. You gotta like a guy who uses his mother as one of his references."

"Sounds kind of weird to me."

"Quit worrying. I introduced him to our landlady and she thought he was great, too."

"Mrs. Ross thinks everybody is great."

"And you're suspicious of everyone. I thought people from small towns were supposed to be so trusting."

"Don't believe everything you hear."

Darcy shook her head and laughed. "Is that your personal philosophy? Don't believe anything you hear and above all, trust no one?"

Chelsea grimaced, her heart stinging at her friend's assessment. "That makes me sound so cold, doesn't it?"

"No, of course not—"

The sound of the doorbell ringing downstairs interrupted Darcy, and Chelsea breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't want to get into a discussion about where her lack of trust came from.

"That's him! I'll run downstairs and let him in."

Darcy hurried out of the apartment. Through the open door, Chelsea heard her friend greet the new sublet. He asked her about Japan as they ascended the stairs. A shiver slid through her. It was small talk, meaningless banter with a stranger. But there was something familiar in the man's voice...

A minute later, Darcy walked through the door with the new sublet right behind her. When Chelsea saw the man's face, heat rushed through every pore of her skin. Her mouth dropped open and she was powerless to close it. His blue eyes widened in surprise, then warmed with pleasure the instant he recognized her. His mouth curved in a smile.

Darcy glanced from one to the other. "Do you two know each other, or is this a past-life kind of thing?"

"We met once before." He extended his hand to Chelsea and she automatically took it. "It's good to see you again, Princess."

Chelsea at last found her voice. "Norman Bates. Fancy meeting you here."

Matt couldn't stop looking at her. And he couldn't stop smiling. Finding her again so unexpectedly was like a gift from the gods. The face that had

haunted his dreams for the last two weeks stared back at him with the coolness he remembered from the bus. He normally didn't have any trouble charming women. In fact, charming women was one of his strong suits, but the Princess appeared immune. Maybe that's why she'd gotten under his skin. She was a challenge; she made him work harder for her attention than most women.

"You're even more beautiful than I remembered."

He blurted out the words without thinking and she frowned as she dropped his hand. He meant the compliment sincerely, but for some reason, they came out sounding stupid and phony. But then a blush stained her cheeks, and she lowered her gaze. Maybe she wasn't as unaffected as she wanted him to believe.

"Okay, you guys. Give." Darcy folded her arms across her chest. "What's going on?"

"Sorry." Matt forced himself to look away from the Princess. "We met on the bus a couple of weeks ago. There was this guy harassing her—"

"You're Chelsea's rescuer?" Darcy interrupted, her eyes wide with surprise. "This is unbelievable! What an amazing coincidence!"

Matt looked at the Princess again. *Chelsea*. Now he had a name to go with the face.

Chelsea grabbed Darcy's arm. "You can't sublet your apartment to this guy. We don't know anything about him, other than he's a nut-case. I don't even know his real name."

"Oh, sorry, Chels. Chelsea Andrews, meet Matthew Malone. Matt, this is Chelsea. She lives across the hall. Chelsea, I don't want you to worry. Like I told you, Mrs. Ross and I checked out Matt's references and they were impeccable."

Matt gave Chelsea his best boy scout smile. She frowned at him in return.

"But that night on the bus—"

"I was acting. It's what I do. I'm an actor." He ventured one step closer and was relieved when she didn't back away. "I had to do something a little...unorthodox to scare off The Perv."

She studied him intently, her anxieties written clearly on her face. Matt imagined she was torn between thanking him for coming to her aid that

night and running screaming from the room. At last she sighed and turned to Darcy.

“Okay, but I want his mother’s phone number. If he turns out to be a nut, I’m calling her to come and get him.”

Darcy laughed. “Okay, Ms. Suspicious. It’s a deal. But I’ll leave for Japan tomorrow knowing I left you in good hands.”

When Chelsea’s cheeks turned pink again, Matt grinned. In his hands was exactly where he hoped for her to be.

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TAKE A CHANCE ON ME

Victorian Mansion duet, book two

Teacher Darcy Ferris loves travel almost as much as she loves her Toronto neighborhood. But no matter how far she roams, she always returns to the genteelly shabby Victorian mansion where she grew up, the last place her father lived. Darcy's world is turned upside-down when the Victorian is slated for demolition.

Since the death of architect Nick Cummings' mother, his father has retreated from his real estate development business, and from life. In a desperate attempt to interest him in something once more, Nick buys a beat-up Victorian mansion and draws up plans to replace it with a Victorian-inspired condo. He hopes his father's old spark will return if he helps him build the new condo. But he doesn't expect such opposition from his new tenant, Darcy Ferris. Nor does he expect to fall in love with her.

Nick and Darcy must come to terms with the past before they can forge a future together. And they'll need to take the biggest chance of all – on love.



Chapter One

"Hurry up, Stanley. I've got to get to work."

Darcy Ferris tugged on the pug's leash, but the dog ignored her and continued to sniff at a spot next to the sidewalk as if it held the secrets of the universe. The highlight of Stanley's day was a leisurely walk around Leslieville, the Toronto neighborhood the two of them called home, and he wasn't about to be rushed.

Darcy sighed and checked her watch. "You know, I could pick you up and carry you home. Some dog sitters would do that."

Stanley looked at her, wagged his curly tail, and went right back to sniffing, as if he knew cutting his walk short was an empty threat. Stanley was Gramma's pride and joy, and since Darcy would do anything for her grandmother, that meant she would do anything for her grandmother's dog. Besides, twenty-five pounds of pudgy pug was too heavy to carry any distance.

Darcy sighed again and accepted the inevitable. She might as well enjoy the beautiful June afternoon. If she was late, she could always take a cab to work instead of the bus.

"I can hardly wait till Gramma's cast comes off and she can walk you herself," Darcy mumbled. She tugged on the leash once more, finally getting Stanley's attention. He fell into step beside her.

Darcy had loved this neighborhood since childhood. Leslieville had a small-town village feel, with tree-lined streets, quaint shops, and cozy older homes. As they walked, Darcy listened to the birds singing in the trees, their exuberance cheering her. The quiet calmness made it hard to believe how close the neighborhood was to the bustling heart of downtown Toronto. Leslieville had everything she needed, everything she wanted. It was home.

If that was the case, she asked herself for the thousandth time, why do I keep leaving? As usual she had no answer.

They walked past shops to Greenwood Park, an oasis in the center of the neighborhood. Darcy led Stanley to the dog drinking fountain where he greedily quenched his thirst. She unfastened his leash so he could run free in the dog-friendly park, but a Great Dane came too close for Stanley's comfort, and he scurried back to her side, tail between his legs.

Darcy laughed as she reattached his leash to his harness. "Come on, Mr. Chicken."

After a circle around the play equipment, where excited children celebrated the end of the school year, they headed for home.

On her street, two houses away from her own house, the pug stopped to sniff around the base of a tree. Darcy glanced at the derelict house behind the tree, her heart heavy. She touched the rickety gate that hung on rusty hinges. Only a hint of her grandmother's favorite shade of blue remained on the weathered boards. It had been Darcy's job to paint the gate every summer, and every summer they'd argued over the color. Darcy wanted to paint it bright white, but Gramma insisted on blue. She'd taken such pride in her home.

And now look at it. In ten years, it had gone from a cherished home to an eyesore. The once trim hedge was overgrown and the small front yard sported weeds nearly as tall as Darcy. The front porch floor looked as if it were sinking into the ground, and the front door and main floor windows had been boarded up. Gramma had sold the house ten years ago after Darcy moved out on her own. The old house had simply become too much for her to care for. A few years later, a pipe burst in the basement and the resulting flood had caused extensive foundation damage. The owner didn't properly repair the damage, and part of the basement caved in, forcing the city to condemn the house. No one had been able to live in it for the last two years. The neglect angered Darcy even as it saddened her.

She tugged on Stanley's leash. "Come on, buddy. Time to go home."

At the Victorian mansion where she rented her one-bedroom apartment, her landlady, Mrs. Ross, stood on the front porch with a tall, attractive man. He turned his head and stunning blue eyes met her gaze. Her breath caught in her throat and she felt light-headed and weak in the knees. Darcy had the oddest sensation that she understood all his hopes and dreams, understood *him*, even though she'd never met him before. It was as if she could look into his soul to see the man he was. The weirdest thing was that she sensed he could do the same.

How odd. She blinked a couple of times and forced herself to look away. Her hands shook as they gripped Stanley's leash. Good grief, she was acting as if she'd never seen a good-looking man before.

Mrs. Ross smiled at her. "There you are, Darcy. I want to introduce you to Nick Cummings. He's going to be living here."

Living here? Darcy tamped down a spark of excitement. She climbed the front porch stairs and for once Stanley followed her willingly, scrambling up

the wooden stairs on his sturdy legs. He immediately sniffed Nick's shoes. Nick appeared uncomfortable with Stanley's explorations and stepped back.

"Cute dog." He glanced nervously at Stanley,

Was he afraid of dogs? She reminded herself that not everyone loved dogs. Her grandmother, Jenny Ferris, believed firmly that anyone who didn't like dogs wasn't worth knowing. Darcy's initial excitement at meeting Nick slipped a notch.

She tried to reassure him. "Don't worry, Stanley's very friendly. And he's only living here temporary while I'm dog sitting for my grandmother."

The pug appeared unusually fascinated with Nick's shoes, giving the leather a couple of licks. She pulled on his leash.

"Stanley, sit." As usual, he ignored her.

This close to Nick, she could see that his eyes were the same shade of blue her grandmother's gate had been. That had to be a good omen. She extended her hand. "I'm Darcy Ferris. Which apartment are you moving into, the vacant one on the second floor or the attic apartment?"

"The one on the second floor." Nick shook her hand and smiled, displaying even, white teeth. His dark hair fell rakishly across his forehead.

"We'll be neighbors then. I'm across the hall."

"Nick's an architect," Mrs. Ross supplied. "He owns his own firm."

"Actually, my father owns the firm. And it's a real estate company, not an architectural firm."

Mrs. Ross frowned. "But I thought you were an architect."

"I am. I'm managing my dad's business while he's...recovering."

Darcy wondered what Nick's father was recovering from, but it was hardly a question a person asked at first meeting. "I'm sure you're going to enjoy living here."

"Darcy, there's something you should know." Mrs. Ross was uncharacteristically serious. "Nick has bought the Victorian. He made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

Darcy focused on Mrs. Ross. Her landlady had been a fixture in the neighborhood for twenty years. Darcy had known her since she was

fourteen, the year she moved in with her grandmother two doors down. "You sold the house? Where will you live? What are you going to do?"

"I've been thinking about selling for a while. The old place is getting to be too much for me to look after. My sister bought a condo in Florida and invited me to move in with her, and now that David—David's my grandson," she said, turning briefly to Nick. "Anyway, now that David's away at university and doing well, there's nothing keeping me here any longer. Nick's offer came at the perfect time. I'm looking forward to snow-free winters."

"I'm happy for you, Mrs. R." Still, the idea of anyone but Mrs. Ross owning the Victorian was unsettling. She squeezed the older woman's hand before turning back to Nick. "So, I guess you're my new landlord as well as my neighbor. What plans do you have for the house?"

The quick flash of guilt in his eyes startled her. He averted his gaze and cleared his throat. "What do you mean?"

Answering her question with a question felt evasive to Darcy. Was he hiding something regarding the house? Despite the awareness she'd experienced the moment she first saw him, she really knew nothing about Nick Cummings.

"Are you planning any upgrades to the house? Is my rent going up? Are you going to rent the vacant apartment on the third floor? Will you allow me to sublet my apartment when I leave for Thailand later this summer?"

He took a step back, holding his hands up in a stopping gesture. Darcy wasn't about to let him off the hook. She opened her mouth to fire another question at him, but Mrs. Ross laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"Let the man get moved in before you bombard him." She turned to Nick. "We talked about Darcy's trip, remember? She's a teacher. Every time she heads off on one of her overseas teaching assignments she sublets her apartment. Darcy always finds someone nice, and we've never had any problems. She's a very special tenant. She grew up in this house, you know."

"You grew up here? In this house?" Nick sounded surprised.

"I lived here with my mom and dad until I was eight. It was a single-family home in those days." Her mother had always said the mansion was far too big for only three people, but her father had loved it, so Darcy had, too.

"I bought it twenty years ago and turned it into four apartments, including my own," Mrs. Ross said.

"I see." Nick turned to Darcy, but his eyes didn't quite meet hers. "I don't have any plans to raise your rent. But as far as subletting your apartment, I prefer to find tenants myself."

The fact he couldn't look her in the eye worried Darcy. "But I'd still be able to come back here after my teaching assignment is over. I'd still be able to leave my furniture, right?"

"We'll have to see."

Alarm bells went off in Darcy's head. "What exactly does 'we'll have to see' mean?"

Before he could answer, a throaty growl drew her attention. As she looked down, Stanley lifted his leg and peed on Nick's leg.

"No! Bad dog!"

Mortified, she jerked on the leash and pulled him away. "Oh, my gosh, I'm sorry. I'll pay for dry cleaning, of course."

Nick shook his leg. Pee dripped off the toe of his leather shoe.

Stanley barked, his body wriggling with fury as he struggled to get at Nick. Darcy's face heated in embarrassment. "I don't know what's got into him. I'm so sorry."

"I'd better go in." He moved toward the door but kept his eyes on Stanley. The pug snarled and barked.

As soon as Nick slipped inside and closed the door, Stanley quieted.

"My goodness, what was that about?" Mrs. Ross asked.

"I have no idea." Darcy eyed the puddle of pee on the porch floor. "I'm sorry about the mess. I'll put Stanley in his kennel and clean this up right away."

She stepped inside the house with Stanley, and he scrambled up the stairs to their apartment. Could a dog have a split personality? For a few moments, Stanley had channelled an angry Rottweiler.

After coaxing the dog into his kennel with a cookie, Darcy grabbed some paper towels and ran downstairs to wipe up the puddle on the porch floor. In all the time she'd known Stanley, she'd never seen him show any aggression

toward anyone. Why would he suddenly exhibit such behavior toward Nick Cummings?

Had Stanley picked up on her suspicion that Nick was hiding something?

She cleaned up the mess and threw the soggy paper towels into the garbage can at the side of the house. When she returned to the porch, Nick was coming out the front door. Darcy's face heated in embarrassment once again. "I'm so sorry. Like I said, I'll pay for your dry-cleaning."

He waved his hand. "Really, it's not necessary. I threw the pants in the washing machine. They'll be fine."

"But your shoes..." Darcy cringed as she remembered the dog pee sliding down his expensive-looking leather shoe. She'd likely have to work an extra shift at Malone's to replace them.

"I wiped them off and they're like new. Better than new. Did you know that in the Middle Ages people used urine to tan leather? Stunk to high heaven but the leather was very supple. The tanners couldn't live anywhere near a town because of the stench."

Darcy grinned, and some of the tension left her body. "You're making that up."

"No, I swear." He placed his hand over his heart. "Scout's honor."

She laughed, as he'd obviously intended her to. Some people would have been angry about Stanley's craziness, but Nick was being very decent about it. He had the loveliest smile, and the most beautiful eyes. A woman could get lost in those eyes...

Blinking, she looked away. She had no idea if she could trust Nick. He hadn't yet clarified whether she'd have an apartment to come home to once she got back from Thailand. Nor had he said what he had planned for the Victorian. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to grill him about her concerns or she'd be late for work.

"I'll try to keep Stanley out of your way from now on." She deliberately stepped away from Nick. "I have to run. Gotta get ready for work."

"I thought Mrs. Ross said you were a teacher. Isn't school out for the summer?"

"It is. Today was the last day of school and I set my fourth graders free. I'm off to my second job. I wait tables at Malone's Irish Pub on the Danforth."

She opened the door, anxious to make her escape. "I'll see you around, Nick. Bye."

"Bye, Darcy."

She hurried into the house and up the stairs, unsettled by her momentary tumble into Nick's orbit.

But what worried her more was the gut feeling that Nick Cummings was hiding something. Something that was going to affect her.

Nick retrieved the last box from his car and hauled it up the stairs to his apartment. He set the box on the kitchen table and looked around, appreciating the original ornate crown mouldings and the wide baseboards that adorned the room. What he didn't appreciate so much was the peeling wallpaper and the crack in the plastered ceiling. *Home sweet crumbling home*. At least temporarily.

With a sigh, he tackled the boxes, unpacking the things he'd use immediately and stacking the boxes containing items he didn't need right now in a corner of the apartment. Once the Victorian was demolished, he'd have to find somewhere else to live. He'd already sold his condo to raise part of the money to fund this project.

He supposed he could stay with his dad for a while. Nick groaned at the prospect of sleeping in his childhood bedroom again. Even though he'd begun this project for his dad, he hoped he never got *that* desperate.

It saddened Nick to know the old Victorian mansion wouldn't be around much longer, and that he'd be responsible for its demise. He glanced up at the twelve-foot ceilings with regret. Victorian architecture had always been his favorite. He appreciated the steeply pitched roofs, the ornate gables, the colorful exteriors. He loved the exuberance of Victorian architecture. There was nothing shy about a house built in the Victorian style. It shouted, "Hey! Look at me! I'm something special!"

In a neighborhood of semi-detached and smaller single-family homes, the Victorian mansion stood out. Larger and more elegant, as were the two neighboring houses he'd purchased, he wondered who'd built it. As an architect, he admired the generous proportions and the quirkiness of the old house. But the inspection report stated the house needed major repairs, including a new roof and upgrades to the plumbing. The inspector also

suspected the whole house needed to be rewired. Mrs. Ross had probably let things slide knowing she'd be selling the place.

For a few moments, Nick let himself dream about restoring the house and living in it himself. He'd play up the high ceilings and the fabulous mouldings. You couldn't get crown mouldings and baseboards like that anymore, not without paying a fortune to a master carpenter to create them. He'd turn the place back into a single-family home, bring it back to its former glory—

Stop.

That wasn't going to happen. Nick had bought this property, and the two neighboring houses, so he could help his dad. He'd designed a multi-family building that fit seamlessly with the existing architecture on the street. One of the houses was ready to collapse on its own. He was simply putting it out of its misery.

He had nothing to apologize for. He was doing the neighborhood a favor by getting rid of the decay and creating a building everyone could be proud of.

So, why did he feel the need to tell Darcy Ferris he was sorry?

Maybe because he'd been so drawn to her from the moment he'd first seen her. He'd never experienced anything like it before—instant attraction, total captivation. But it was more than that. He *got* her, understood her right down to her marrow. She was warm and sweet and caring.

Had she experienced the same weird sensation? If she had, she certainly got over it quickly. She'd sensed he wasn't telling her the whole truth.

He hated not being honest with her, but he'd been thrown off guard by learning she'd lived there as a child. Obviously, she was nostalgic about the house, but until all his plans were in place, there was no need to upset her by telling her the Victorian was going to be demolished.

The thought of tearing down this house and the two others made his chest ache.

Damn.

He put the thought out of his mind as he pulled out his cell phone and punched in his father's number.

"Hello?" Jason Cummings sounded winded.

"Sorry I made you run, Dad. How are you?"

"You ask me that every day, and every day I tell you the same thing. I'm about the same as I was yesterday and the day before that. Nothing changes here."

Nick fervently wished something would change. Since his mother's death nine months ago, his dad had shown little interest in anything.

"I moved into my apartment in Leslieville. I'm waiting for demolition permits for the three buildings. Once they're torn down, I can get to work on the condo complex. Did you have a chance to look over the plans I sent you?"

Nick was desperate to interest Jason in something. When his mom got sick two years ago, his dad put his real estate projects on hold or sold them to other developers so he could devote all his time and energy to Nick's mother Kate. Jason had done everything he could to keep Kate alive, and after she died, he retreated from life. It was his withdrawal that had prompted Nick to leave his job working with an architectural firm in downtown Toronto and take over the running of his dad's real estate business. Real estate development wasn't his thing, but he figured Jason needed a project, something to keep him busy and engaged with people. So, he'd come up with the condo project. Nick was now the proud owner of three run-down houses in Leslieville. And an enormous debt. Unfortunately, Jason had shown little interest in being part of the project.

"I looked."

"And?" Nick paced the floor of his apartment.

"It's a nice building."

"That's it? Nice? I was hoping for more input than that."

"Well, it *is* nice. I like that you made it four stories. It won't be so high that it will stick out in the neighborhood. The style fits in quite nicely. It's got a Victorian vibe."

"That's what I was going for. I was worried about adding an elevator. It will add significantly to the cost. Do you think it's worth it?" Nick already knew the answer to this question, but he was desperate to get some sort of response from his dad.

"It's a big expense for sure, but it's worth it. It'll make the whole building more desirable. Who wants to schlep groceries up four flights of stairs?"

"I'm glad you think it's a good idea."

Conversation ground to a halt. Nick scrambled for something to say, but this was nothing new. He'd always been closer to his mother than his dad. He'd never run out of things to talk about with her. Though Nick loved his dad, he'd never understood him the way he'd understood his mother. But Jason seemed to approve of his plans for the condo complex, so that was something.

Nick tipped his head back and stared at the crack in the beautiful ceiling. God, he missed his mom.

"I really wish you'd come on board with me on this project, Dad. I could use your expertise."

He heard his dad sigh. "I don't know, son. Real estate development seems so pointless now."

"You built homes for a lot of people, Dad. That's not pointless."

"I suppose not." He sighed again.

"I need you on this project, Dad." Desperation clawed at his throat. "I know it's been hard without Mom—"

"Hard? Hard doesn't begin to cover it, Nick."

Nick squeezed his eyes shut. The pain of losing his mother was still raw, but he hadn't allowed himself to grieve. He'd been too focused on his dad.

He tried again. "You wouldn't have to come into the office full-time. Maybe a day or two a week to start. I'll need you in my corner if I'm going to have a chance of getting this project done right."

The silence stretched to the point where Nick wasn't sure Jason was listening. "Dad? Are you still there?"

"I'm here, Nick." Jason cleared his throat. "Okay, I'll come into the office next week. I've been neglecting my duties for too long. I owe it to you and the rest of the staff to do my share."

Nick sagged in relief and dropped onto the sofa. "Thanks Dad. I really appreciate it. I'll see you next week."

He ended the call and tossed his phone onto a sofa cushion. Maybe his dad was finally turning a corner. He hoped this project would interest him enough to bring back his old spark.

If not, he didn't know what to do next.

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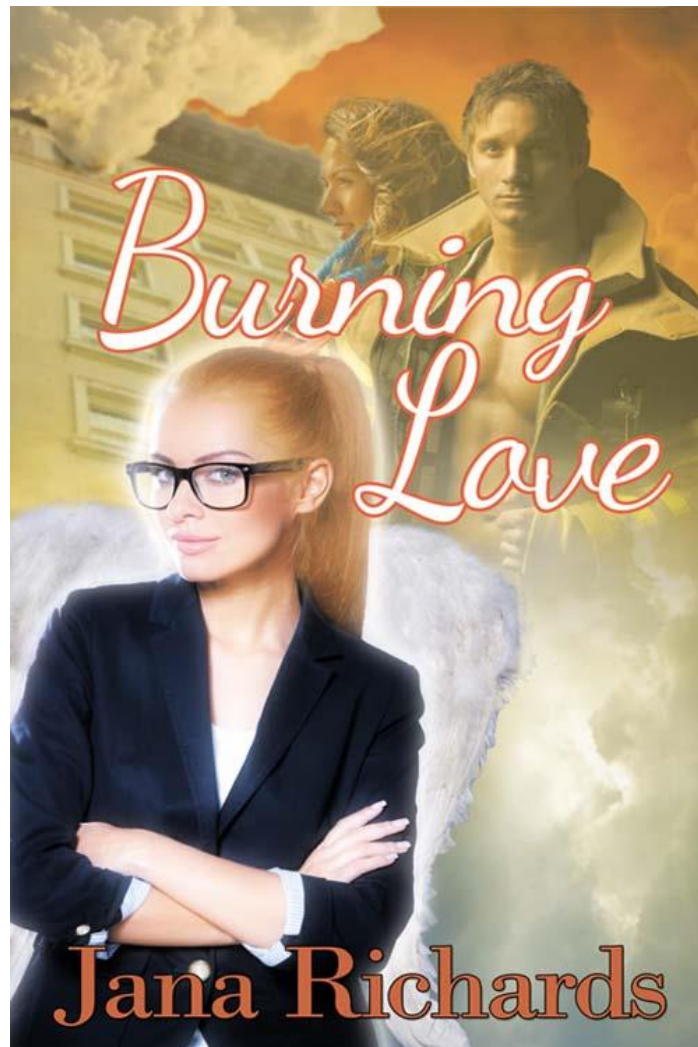
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Burning Love

After causing three cooking fires in her apartment, Iris Jensen finds herself evicted and homeless. She lands on Riley Benson's doorstep, looking to rent a room in the beautiful old home he's restoring. It's only for six weeks until Iris leaves Portland, Oregon for her new job on a cruise ship. Firefighter Riley knows firsthand what a bad tenant she can be. But he needs money to finish the work on the house he loves. And something about Iris pulls at his heart...

Meanwhile, in Heaven, two angels watch over the young lovers. Angelica and Hildegard work in Heaven's Relationship Division, where angels match mortals with their soul mates. The angels believe so strongly in Iris and Riley's love that they break Heaven's rules to help them. Can the angels convince them their love will last a lifetime?



Chapter One

Chapter One Riley Benson's fire truck screeched to a stop in front of an old brick apartment building as smoke belched from a third story window. All was chaos on the normally quiet street in Portland's Pearl District. Firefighters poured water onto the roof of the building from the aerial platform of a ladder truck already on site. Police cars and ambulances flanked both sides of the street, their flashing lights illuminating the night. The air reeked of diesel exhaust and acrid smoke. After five years as a firefighter, the familiar smell sent adrenalin rushing through Riley's veins.

He jumped from the truck when it came to a stop and began unrolling hose. Police attempted to keep onlookers a safe distance away. Residents of the apartment building milled around in various states of undress. Riley caught snippets of angry rumblings from the crowd.

"I'll bet it's that girl from the third floor again. She did this!"

"That woman is dangerous!"

Before Riley could wonder what they were talking about, a woman's shrill scream sounded over all the other noise.

"Someone's still in the building! I saw a woman at the window!"

Another person shouted, "Yes, I saw her too! In the stairwell, on the second floor."

"There she is! She's heading up the stairs!"

"She must be crazy! Why would she run back into a burning building?"

Captain Andrews shouted instructions. "Benson, Carruthers, Smith. Find the woman and get her out."

Riley dropped the hose and ran toward the building's entrance, pulling his breathing apparatus over his face as he scrambled over hoses. Though this fire was mostly smoke and largely under control, that didn't mean it wasn't still dangerous. He led the way as the three firefighters formed a single line and made their way up the stairs. The smoke grew thicker the higher they climbed until Riley could barely see in front of his face.

"Frank, Jim!" Riley called on his radio. "You still with me?"

Riley felt a hand on his leg. "Right behind you."

"Bringing up the rear, Riley."

Reassured, Riley pushed on. A moment later he heard coughing and dropped to his knees, feeling along the wall until he found the woman. He slipped an arm beneath her and hoisted her over his shoulder in the fireman's carry.

"I've got her," he said over the radio. "Let's get out of here."

The woman pummeled his back with her small fists. "No, no! I have to go back! Please, let me go!"

A fit of coughing cut off her words. The firefighters rushed down the stairs and out of the building. As Riley carried the woman across the lawn to a waiting ambulance, a bald man with a paunch wearing boxers and an undershirt pointed an accusing finger at them.

"It's her! It's the girl who started the fire the last time!"

"She should be evicted!"

"We're not safe as long as she lives here," someone else shouted. Riley hurried to the ambulance and set the woman down just inside the open doors. Was it true? Had she caused a previous fire?

Dave, the EMT, tried to administer oxygen to the woman, but she pushed aside the mask and jumped from the ambulance, ready to make her escape. "Iris, it's me, Dave. You have to let me help you."

"No, no. Please!" She shoved away the mask once more.

"Riley, give me a hand here, will you?"

"Sure. You know her?"

Dave grinned. "We've met before. Iris here is a pretty rotten cook. When she burns a meal she really burns a meal. I've been a guest at her little midnight soirées on previous occasions."

So it was true. Was she some kind of firebug, one of those crazy people who got their thrills by deliberately setting fires?

Riley grasped both of her hands in one of his and wrapped one arm around her waist while Dave placed the mask over her mouth and nose. He tried to ignore the feel of her soft, warm body pressed tightly against his. She struggled to free herself, but it was a lost cause. She couldn't have been more than five-three and maybe a hundred and fifteen pounds. Despite her small stature, her curves were generous. Her breasts strained against the thin material of her T-shirt, her nipples pebbling to hard peaks in the cool

night air. Riley could imagine one breast fitting perfectly in the palm of his hand...

Whoa! Where the hell had that come from?

He abruptly loosened his hold and Iris took the opportunity to wrench one arm free and push away the mask. "My cat. I have to find her. She's all I have. Please!"

Finally Riley understood. He looked into her face. Her bright blue eyes stood out starkly against her smoke-blackened face, pleading with him to understand. Tears forged little rivulets of mud down her cheeks. In her eyes he read panic and genuine fear. Anyone who loved her cat as much as Iris obviously did would never deliberately start a fire that might endanger her beloved pet. He had a dog and understood completely. No way had Iris started this fire on purpose.

"What's your cat's name?"

"Whiskers," she rasped before a fit of coughing stopped her.

"I'll find her."

At his nod, Dave placed the mask over her mouth and nose again. This time Iris didn't fight him. She sat quietly and closed her eyes as if all the fight had drained from her body.

Riley turned and headed back to the apartment building. He spoke to his captain.

"Cap, I'm going back in. The girl says her cat is still in there."

"Pets often go into hiding during a fire," Captain Andrews said. He shook his head. "This is the third fire we've responded to at Iris Jennings' apartment this year. It's a miracle no one has been seriously injured."

Riley glanced back at Iris and nodded glumly. He couldn't let a pair of pretty blue eyes distract him from doing his job, and right now that job was to find her cat.

As he checked his air pack on the front step of the building, he heard a faint mewling. Riley removed his helmet and listened, straining to hear the cat over the noise of the emergency vehicles. After a moment he heard the mewling again and followed the sounds around the side of the building into some shrubs.

"Whiskers? Is that you? C'mere, Whiskers."

A small gray cat with a white face and paws stepped tentatively from behind her hiding place in the bushes. Riley reached a gloved hand toward her, and she rubbed her face against it and purred, as if grateful for rescue. Riley scooped her up and carried her back to the ambulance, hoping the cat belonged to Iris. He didn't want to examine too closely his need to ease her distress.

Iris sat just inside the ambulance, her head bowed and her shoulders slumped in utter despair. The oxygen mask was gone. She looked small and helpless as she clutched the thin blue blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Riley fought the urge to wrap her in his arms and keep her safe. He cleared his suddenly dry throat, shaken by his thoughts.

"Is this Whiskers?"

Iris lifted her head, her gaze colliding with his. When she saw the cat in his arms her despair dissipated, forgotten along with the blanket as she jumped from the ambulance.

"Oh, Whiskers!" She reached for the cat and cuddled it in her arms. "I thought I'd lost you." Fresh tears poured from her eyes, making her cheeks even muddier. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. I think she got out of the apartment faster than you did. I found her outside."

Iris laughed and hugged the cat close. "It's a good thing you're smarter than me."

Riley watched Iris whisper reassurances to Whiskers, her clear blue eyes sparkling with tears. Aside from her amazing eyes, there was nothing remarkable about her. Black soot covered her from head to toe, and she smelled strongly of smoke. So why did he feel this pull toward her?

Get a grip, Benson.

He turned to Dave. "Does Iris need to go to the hospital?"

"I'd like to have her checked more closely at the hospital, maybe have her stay overnight for observation."

"No, I'm fine, really," Iris protested. "No permanent damage. I don't need to go to the hospital."

"You inhaled a lot of smoke, Iris," Riley said. "You should listen to Dave."

"I'm fine. See? I'm not even coughing anymore."

"Smoke inhalation can be tricky—"

"No! I'm not going to the hospital."

Dave glanced at Riley and sighed. "All right, but I strongly advise you to visit your doctor as soon as possible."

Iris nodded, rubbing her cheek against Whiskers' fur. Riley suspected the reason she didn't want to go to the hospital was because of the cat. Now that Iris's apartment was uninhabitable, Whiskers was as homeless as she was. What would she do with the cat if she were stuck in the hospital?

A Cadillac squealed to a halt next to the ambulance, and a short bald man hopped out. Riley recognized him immediately and his jaw clenched in anger. Joe Gardiner, landlord, real estate developer, and first class money-grubbing louse. Riley knew from bitter experience what Gardiner was capable of.

"What the hell is going on here?" Gardiner bellowed. A second later he spied Iris. "You! I should have known you'd be responsible for this!"

He made his way toward her, vengeance in his eyes. Riley stepped in front of him, blocking his access to Iris.

"Are you trying to ruin me? We just finished the repairs from the last fire."

Iris held her cat close. "It was an accident. I'm sorry."

"Once is an accident. Three times is arson!" Gardiner tried to go around Riley but he stepped in front of him once more. "I want you out! Now! You'll never rent one of my properties again, and I'll make damn sure no one else rents to you either."

"I'm so sorry," Iris said. "I don't know what happened. I turned on my stove to make a grilled cheese sandwich, and the next thing I knew my apartment was full of smoke. It was an accident, I swear."

"You'll never have another accident in one of my buildings. Consider yourself evicted, effective immediately."

"My things—"

"You'll find what's left of them out on the front lawn tomorrow."

Iris lifted her chin a fraction. Gathering her cat close, she walked away from the apartment building to a chorus of boos and hisses from her angry neighbors. Riley ran after her.

"Iris, wait. Do you have someplace to stay? The department can help you if you need it."

She didn't look at him. "I'll be fine. My friend lives just around the corner. Whiskers and I can stay with her."

"Are you sure? Do you need a ride?"

Iris's chin quivered as she struggled to hold back tears, giving him a glimpse of the vulnerability that lay just under the surface of her bravado. Without thinking, he reached out to touch her. Her skin felt warm and alive under his hand, and his heart gave an involuntary leap. She glanced at his hand on her arm and then lifted her gaze to meet his, a determined smile on her lips.

"You're very kind, but I'm fine. Thank you."

Riley dropped his hand and watched her disappear into the night with her back straight and her head held high. His chest tightened at the sight of Iris walking alone down the street. Did she really have a friend around the corner willing to take her in? Would she be okay?

Enough! Iris Jennings was not his responsibility. Her carelessness likely caused this fire and probably two others. He was damn lucky he didn't live anywhere near her.

Meanwhile, in a far, far away place...

"Angelica, now what have you done? I told you not to open the Earth window!"

Angelica watched with Hildegard as firefighters hosed downed a smoke-blackened apartment suite on other side of the window. She frowned. This hadn't gone quite as well as she'd hoped.

"What in the name of St. Peter were you doing? I only left you alone for ten minutes!"

"I was matching a couple of soul mates," Angelica said, forcing cheerfulness into her voice. "After all, that's what we do here in Relationship Division, isn't it?"

"Wrong," Hildegard said, crossing her arms. "It's what I do here in Relationship Division. You're supposed to be dusting my office, not creating havoc on Earth."

Angelica stamped one small foot, all pretense of cheerfulness gone. "I've been here in Heaven for ages. I'm supposed to be an angel-in-training, but nobody will train me to do anything important!"

"With good reason! You could have killed somebody with that fire."

"I had the fire under complete control the whole time," Angelica said. As soon as the lie slipped from her mouth, her truth bracelet lit up like a firecracker, its shrill siren assaulting her ears. *Stupid truth bracelet*. Every angel-in-training wore one, but hers got more of a workout than most.

"Okay, so maybe the fire was a little bit out of control," she admitted. The truth bracelet silenced at once. "But I did everything else by the book. Honestly."

Hildegard marched to the filing cabinet and pulled out a folder bulging with papers. Angelica groaned. Not the file again. Was that thing going to follow her around Heaven for the rest of the afterlife?

Hildegard flipped through the papers. "You've been found unsuitable for every job you've been given in Heaven." She pulled a sheaf of papers from the file. "Look at this. When you were assigned to Messenger Division you mixed up a couple of communications. A ninety-year-old great-grandmother was told she was going to have a baby."

"It was an accident. I put the wrong message in the envelope addressed to the great-grandmother." The incident had ended her career in Messenger Division. It had been a bad day for her and she suspected it hadn't been so good for the great-grandmother either.

"Then there was the debacle in the Avenger Division," Hildegard continued.

Angelica closed her eyes in misery. "Do we have to rehash this again? Can't we just let bygones be bygones?"

From the set of Hildegard's jaw, Angelica guessed the answer to that question was no. Hildegard was as by-the-book an angel as she'd met in Heaven. Everything about her screamed businesslike efficiency, from her sensible black loafers and brown tweed suit, to her steel rimmed glasses and severely pulled back hairstyle. Only the elegant lines of her beautiful wings softened her look.

Hildegard scowled. "You nearly sent the entire Avenger squad to exact retribution on a poor old corn farmer in Iowa instead of a drug lord in New York City." "Okay, so I got the names mixed up. Johnson, Johnston. Anyone could have made that mistake."

"And yet no one but you ever has." Hildegard flipped through the pages. "Ah, my personal favorite. Divine Intervention Division. They're still trying to put their computer system back together. How did you manage to foul up an entire database? You were only there one day."

"I work fast, I guess." Angelica had no idea what happened. She'd accessed the database to do a simple search for one of the senior angels and somehow she'd managed to disable the whole system.

"What are we going to do with you, Angelica? Aside from being totally inept, you're always late for everything."

"It takes time to put this look together." Angelica gave her blonde curls a little shake, making them bounce. "Do you know how long it takes to get my hair just right? And selecting the perfect outfit can't be rushed."

Angelica smoothed the silk of her Versace gown. One of the best perks in Heaven was having access to the fashions of dearly departed designers.

"Some of the division heads are saying you should be placed in Service Division."

"What! No, not Service Division! I can't spend eternity cleaning and cooking for other angels." She held out her newly manicured hands to Hildegard. "Do these look like the hands of an angel destined for a life in service?"

"You are far too vain for your own good." Hildegard shuffled through the file. "Your Heaven entrance exams said you tested off the charts for vanity. But according to St. Peter you do have some redeeming qualities. You scored well for empathy and kindness."

Angelica beamed. "Thank you."

"You also scored extremely high on the stubbornness scale."

"Oh. Is that bad?"

"Sometimes. But sometimes stubbornness means you'll stick with a project to the end."

"Does that mean I can stay here with you in Relationship Division?" Angelica clapped her hands in glee. "It's going to be so much fun working here."

"I didn't say that. Don't start picking out the curtains for your new office just yet."

Hildegard closed the file and placed it back in the cabinet. She glanced at the Earth window once more.

"Wait a minute. Isn't that Iris Jennings? I was working on her file before I got called away to a meeting. What have you done?"

"I told you," Angelica said, mustering her tattered confidence. "I was matching her with her soul mate."

Hildegard hit the rewind button and watched as the whole scene unfolded, from the start of the fire to Iris's solitary walk in the dark.

"You nearly burned down the building and put everyone in danger. Not to mention Whiskers the cat!" Hildegard shook her head in disbelief. "If anything had happened to Whiskers it would have been unforgivable."

"But everything turned out okay. Everybody, including Whiskers, is fine. I had to resort to drastic measures so Iris could meet her soul mate."

"I've already matched her with her soul mate!" Hildegard said, her voice rising in irritation. She snapped her fingers and an extremely attractive male mortal with dark curly hair and laughing brown eyes grinned at them from the other side of the window. "This is Antonio from Milan. Iris is heading to Greece in six weeks to work on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean. Antonio will be working on the same ship. They're going to fall in love immediately and forever. End of story, happily ever after."

"No, it's not happily ever after," Angelica insisted. "I saw Iris's file sitting on your desk and I peeked inside. Antonio's not right for her." She had felt it the moment she'd looked into Iris's eyes.

"I matched them on a hundred points of compatibility, like I do all my matches. It's all very scientific," Hildegard said defensively. She picked up Iris's file. "Look. They're perfect for each other. Both of them love travel and adventure. She'd be bored comatose if I matched her with a homebody."

"No, you're wrong," Angelica said. She snapped her fingers and brought Iris back to the window. The girl's anxiety and loneliness reached out to her and grabbed her by the throat. "I can feel it. She needs a home and security much more than she needs adventure. Yes, she loves to travel, but she needs someone to come home to. She wants a man who'll always be there for her."

"I've been doing this for a long time and I say Iris and Antonio are simpatico," Hildegard said. "You can't just waltz in here and tell me how to do my job."

"If you're so good at your job," Angelica countered, "how come so many mortals get divorced?"

"It's not my fault." Hildegard straightened to her full height and gave her wings an impatient shake, her face registering her annoyance. "I make excellent matches. If the mortals choose to look elsewhere there is nothing I can do to stop them. If you'd studied the policy manual like I told you, you'd know that we here in Relationship Division are allowed to orchestrate the first meeting between our soul mates but after that it's all up to them. The Divine Leader has forbidden us from any further interference. After all, mortals have free will. Far be it from me to question the Divine Leader's directives."

From the tone of her voice, Angelica suspected Hildegard didn't exactly agree with the Divine Leader. Perhaps she wasn't the by-the-book angel Angelica believed her to be. Maybe she had a touch of rebel in her after all.

"Hildy, matching soul mates is what I'm supposed to be doing here in Heaven, I'm sure of it. This is where I'm supposed to be."

Hildegard folded her arms across her chest, one eyebrow rising skeptically. "Oh, really."

"Yes, really. I can feel when two people belong together. Why don't we work together? With your scientific method and my creative genius we can't lose."

Hildegard burst out laughing. "You *are* vain. What am I going to do with you Angelica?"

"You're going to give me a chance to prove myself," Angelica said, seizing her opportunity. She grasped Hildegard's hand and pressed it between both of hers. "Let me prove to you that the match I made for Iris Jennings is the best one for her. If she isn't madly in love by the end of six weeks, I will tender my resignation here in Relationship Division and immediately report for duty in Service Division."

"You're serious." Hildegard sounded surprised.

"Completely."

Hildegard stared into her eyes, her expression unreadable. "So who did you have in mind for Iris?"

She's considering it! Angelica could barely contain her excitement. "He's right there. The second firefighter from the left. Riley Benson."

"Well," Hildegard said dryly. "I'll give you points for irony. Matching a girl who's prone to starting fires with a firefighter. By the way, this fire, was that Iris or did you give her a little help?"

"A little of both. Iris put the pan on the stove to heat. I made her forget about it. I wanted Iris and Riley's first meeting to be unforgettable."

Hildegard snorted. "I'm sure it was. What makes Riley a better match for Iris than Antonio?"

"Riley needs Iris. Antonio doesn't. And Iris needs Riley. She needs security in her life, whether she realizes it or not. They even live in the same city. Is that kismet or what?"

"Okay, suppose I go along with this ridiculous plan. At the moment Riley thinks Iris is a crazy firebug. How are you going to change his mind about her? For that matter, how are they even going to meet again? You've had your one chance for a first meeting."

"I have faith," Angelica said. "These two belong together. Somehow the universe will make it happen."

"As long as you don't make it happen, Angelica," Hildegard warned. "Setting up a second meeting is totally against policy."

"I know."

"I'm serious Angelica. I will only consider your crazy plan if you solemnly promise to obey all the rules, including the provision banning second meetings."

Angelica held up her right hand. "I solemnly promise I will not set up a second meeting."

"Good. What about the other rules? Under no circumstances are we allowed to go to Earth to befriend, coach, or otherwise influence our matches. The Divine Leader absolutely forbids it."

"If we can't go to Earth, how do we know if the match is working?"

"No problem." Hildegard snapped her fingers and a picture of an old house in the middle of extensive renovations appeared at the Earth window. "This is Riley's house in Portland, Oregon. We can monitor the situation from here. Do you agree to follow the rules?"

"I agree to follow the rules."

"Good. Then in that case I agree to give you a chance to prove yourself with this match you've made between Iris and Riley. If the match works, you'll stay here and work with me in Relationship Division. But if they are not madly in love and totally committed by the end of six weeks, Iris will go on

her Mediterranean cruise and be matched with Antonio, and you will go to Service Division. Do we have a deal?"

Hildegard held out her hand. Angelica took a deep breath. Her whole future in Heaven depended on Iris and Riley and the accuracy of her intuition. Angelica simply couldn't allow them to languish in loneliness. She needed to fight for them, whatever the risk to her.

But if she was wrong, if they weren't soul mates—

Angelica shivered. She couldn't bear to think of it. She was far too pretty to wear one of those horrid Service uniforms.

She shook Hildegard's hand. "Yes, we have a deal."

Hildegard sighed. "Heaven help us."

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