



*Sunday, September 2*

*2:00 p.m.*

Cole drops Grace at the Ellison home so she can babysit their four-year-old twins, Janey and Joey. I agree to help her later after I work on my algebra homework, so Cole drives the truck from the Ellison's to my house. He wisely chooses not to discuss Sly's problem, probably because he can tell I might burst into tears at any minute if he does.

I hop out practically before he stops the truck, and as I close the door, I catch a glance at his puzzled look. He must be wondering why I'm avoiding the subject of Sly. I kind of wonder that myself.

Shrugging out of my church clothes, I change into soft, black leggings and a huge, maroon University of Montana sweatshirt that belonged to my dad. *Grizzlies* is written across the front, and there's something comforting in wearing it.

Two minutes into my algebra homework, I start to nod off. My sleepless night is catching up with me, so I ride my bike over to the Ellison's to help Grace with the twins. There will definitely be no sleeping there.

"Gracie." I open the Ellison's front door and call out to my friend, "Are you in here?"

"Upstairs." A muffled reply drifts down from above, and I hurry to the stairway. The twins are notorious troublemakers, and I wouldn't be shocked to discover Grace tied up while Janey and Joey do a war dance around her.

Turning right at the top of the stairs, I enter the twins' room, which normally looks like it belongs in a decorating magazine. A large bunk bed is along one wall, a ladder and slide are attached to the end rail.

Mrs. Ellison is very particular about keeping the room clean and uncluttered, but I guess the twins didn't get the memo. Toys and games litter the floor, and a partially finished craft project lies scattered across the child-sized table. On the opposite wall is the latest masterpiece of Janey, the Ellison family artist.

The Ellison's have read the most recent books detailing how to encourage imagination and not stifle creativity. As I study the painting, I notice there is no paper on the wall. Janey has painted her picture directly onto the plaster. I touched the tip of my little finger to a smear of bright, yellow paint. Still wet.

Real creative, our little Janey. Apparently, painting on paper would be too stifling.

I search around for Grace with no luck. A moment later, I hear a muted version of her voice. Crossing to the closet, I thrust aside a chair, which has been jammed under the doorknob. I open the door to find Grace huddled inside, face red with anger.

"Are we having fun yet?" I grin down at my clearly furious friend.

"Where are they?" Grace stands and slides through the opening in the closet door. Not bothering to respond, she races down the hall. "I've had it with those two. We were playing hide-and-seek, and they trapped me in the closet."

In a totally different tone, she sings out sweetly, "Oh Jaaaney,

Jooeey, where are you? I give up. You've outsmarted me again. Come on out, you little brats ... er ... sweethearts."

Childish giggles lead us to the master bedroom. Grace rattles the doorknob. It's locked.

"C'mon, darlings," she continues to sing-song through gritted teeth. "The game's over now. Let me in. Jess is here to play with us."

A moment later, the door swings wide, and dark blue eyes peer up at Grace and me.

"Jess?" Janey looks around cautiously. "You didn't bring Cole, did you?"

In the background, we can hear Joey whisper, "Janey, is Cole out there, too?"

"No, he didn't come this time." I push open the door to the Ellison's master bedroom and survey the damage. The king-sized bed has been turned into a trampoline; bedclothes lay in crumpled piles around the room. Through the connecting door to the master bathroom, I notice the twins must have been playing 'beauty shop' with their mother's cosmetics. I groan. A typical day at the Ellison home.

Grace stands in the doorway, opening and closing her mouth, clearly at a loss for words.

Joey peers up at her. "Janey, look! Grace looks like Goldie."

I bite back a smile. Grace does resemble their pet goldfish a little.

"C'mon, Grace, I'll help you clean up this mess." I herd the twins into their room. For once, they comprehend they've gone too far. They remain quiet on the bed as Grace and I consider a battle plan.

"Grace, why don't you clean the bathroom." I try to sound cheerful. "I'll take Janey and Joey downstairs and make them a snack. Afterward, they can watch a movie until their parents get home, and we'll tackle the rest of the mess."

My friend speechlessly turns and stalks toward the bathroom. Poor Grace. She deserves combat pay.

The Ellison's kitchen gleams white. Obviously, the twins haven't been in there yet. I sternly usher the kids to chairs and proceed to make peanut butter toast. They sit, subdued for a moment.

"Grace said you were with Cole," Janey says. "Why didn't you bring him with you?"

Several times Cole kept me company when I sat for Janey and Joey. In his words, the twins don't need a babysitter—they require a corrections officer.

"Cole's busy." I slather peanut butter on two pieces of toast and place the plates in front of the pint-sized demolition crew. "I'm sure he'll be sorry he missed the excitement, though." I grin as a look passes between them. While the twins are crazy for Cole, they also know what he would say concerning them locking Grace in the closet and making such a mess.

"That's okay," says Janey with a wave of her tiny hand. "We'll see him another time."

"Yeah," Joey repeats with a measure of relief in his voice. "Another time."

Three hours later, Grace and I sit at my kitchen table. Grace has recovered her usual sense of humor as we discuss the twin's destructive habits.

"D'ya think they lay awake at night, thinking up ways to drive me crazy?" she asks in her soft southern drawl.

"Don't worry. You've lasted longer than most of the Ellison's babysitters."

Last year, Grace's father transferred to Montana from Atlanta, Georgia, and she started attending Justice High School. Grace's accent always fascinates me. Sometimes, I attempt to talk like her, but I sound like Alvin the Chipmunk. The combination of her accent, strawberry-blond hair, and blue eyes is attractive.

But there's also something restful in Grace. While I've often been compared to a tornado, she's a calm summer breeze that gently swept in during the worst time of my life. Sometimes, I

wonder if God sent Grace to Justice, Montana, just for me. She tempers my schemes with her voice of reason. Not that I always take her advice, but it's nice to have it.

The only time I've ever witnessed her even temporarily ruffled is when she deals with the Ellison twins.

"At least the Ellison's don't blame you for the mess. They must be aware of what their own children are like. The way I look at it, if they come home to find the twins are healthy and the house still standing, you've accomplished your job."

I raise my can of Pepsi, and Grace meets it with her Mountain Dew.

"To a job well done," she declares with a grin. "Now, speaking of a job well done, how did the driving lesson go yesterday?"

I groan. "I don't want to discuss it. I almost wrecked Cole's truck three times."

"Ouch," Grace says. "What did Cole say?"

"I'm not sure," I reply with a frown. "Most of it was in Sioux." I hook my foot through the chair spindles and settle in to tell her all about my day with Cole.

Grace laughs as I conclude the story. "Uh oh, did you make that vein stand out in his neck?"

"Oh, yeah," I smirk.

"Cole is right about Mark, though."

I cringe. "I wouldn't get in a car with Mark Crowley."

"I know that. I mean, it's not smart to make Cole jealous of Mark."

"But I'm not!" I protest.

Grace raises an eyebrow.

"Well, okay," I admit with a shrug. "But Amy was there and went for a ride with Cole."

Grace's eyes narrow at the mention of Amy's name.

"I can't bear the thought of her latching on to him." I justify myself, "Besides, Cole knows I'm teasing." I nibble on my lower lip. "You think he knows that, right?"

Grace gives me a reassuring nod. "Maybe. It might be a good

idea to remember that Cole isn't the kind to play games. Have you considered it's time to tell him how you really feel?" Grace watches me, and when I don't answer, she continues, "But there's something else you should keep in mind."

"What's that?"

"If you do play games, Cole might decide to make a few rules of his own."