



‘Kiss me, babe.’
‘No, really.’ Beneath the light of a sixty-watt bulb on her porch, Adele Harris placed a hand on the chest of her latest date. ‘I’ve had enough excitement for one night.’

Investment banker and former nerd turned world-class jerk, Sam King mistook the hand on his chest for a caress and took a step forward, backing Adele against the front door. Cool October air slipped across her cheeks and between the lapels of her coat, and she watched horrified as Sam lowered his face to her. ‘Baby, you don’t know excitement until I fire you up with a kiss.’

‘I’ll pass. I don’t thi— urggg—’ Sam smashed his lips against Adele’s and silenced her protest. He shoved his tongue into her mouth and did some sort of weird swirly thing. Three quick circles to the left. Three to the right. Repeat. She hadn’t been kissed like that since Carl Wilson in the sixth grade.

She forced her free hand between them and shoved. ‘Stop!’ she gasped as she reached into the small purse hanging from her shoulder and pulled out her keys. ‘Good night, Sam.’

His jaw dropped and his brows lowered. 'You're not inviting me in?'

'No.' She turned and unlocked her front door.

'What the hell? I just spent a hundred and twenty bucks on dinner and I don't get laid?'

She pushed the door open and looked over her shoulder at the moron standing on her porch. The evening had started out okay, but had begun a downward descent with the salad course. 'I'm not a prostitute. If you'd wanted a sure thing, you should have called an escort service.'

'Women love me! I don't have to pay a prostitute,' he protested a bit too much. 'Women are dying to get some Sammy.'

By the time the dinner plates had been cleared, the date had nosedived into the third level of hell, and for the past hour Adele had tried to be nice. 'Of course they are,' she said, but failed to keep a bite of sarcasm from her voice. She stepped into her house and turned to face him.

'No wonder you're thirty-five and alone,' he sneered. 'You need to learn how to treat a man.'

For the past hour she'd pretended interest in his narcissistic ramblings. His nonstop bragging and his presumption that he was quite the catch and she was *very* lucky. She tried to tell herself that it wasn't his fault. That lately she'd begun to suspect there was something about her that made men insane, but he'd just crossed the line. Poked at a very sore spot. 'And *you* need to learn to kiss like a man,' she said, and slammed the front door in his stunned face.

'What the hell is going on in my life?'

She pushed one side of her thick curly hair behind her ear and

leaned her back against the door. This was getting ridiculous. Every man she'd dated for the past . . . what? . . . two or three *years* had been a jerk. If they hadn't started out as jerks, they'd quickly turned into jerks. At first she'd thought she was just a jerk magnet. That she attracted idiots, but lately she'd begun to wonder if there was something else going on. That there was something about her that turned otherwise-okay men into morons. Because really, how many jerks and idiots were there in this world? And how likely was it that she just happened to date every last one of them? Repeatedly? Without a break?

Not likely. Adele flipped the dead bolt and pushed away from the door. For the past few months, she'd begun to think that she was cursed. Cursed with perpetually bad dates.

She hung her coat in the front closet and moved into the living room. She tossed her purse onto the green sofa and reached for the remote control on the glass-and-iron coffee table. A couple of months ago, she'd mentioned to her friend Maddie that she thought she might be cursed, but Maddie had laughed it off and Adele hadn't brought it up again.

There were some people who thought she was a little different – maybe *a lot* different. Growing up she'd believed in magic; in fairy dust and unicorns and pots of gold. As a child, she'd believed in cracks in time and life on distant planets. Ghosts and alternative realities. In endless possibilities. As an adult, though she never ruled out anything completely, she no longer believed in endless anything anymore.

She turned on the television and sat on the arm of the couch. These days, she might not believe in endless

anything, but she did make a good living off her imagination and the possibilities she'd believed in as a child. To date, she'd published ten science-fiction and fantasy novels. Researching those books had taken her to some truly bizarre places, and she'd personally witnessed too many instances of paranormal phenomena that could not be explained away by science to casually dismiss anything out of hand.

She flipped through the TV channels and paused on the ten o'clock news. Out of the many books she'd written, she'd never researched curses, and she didn't know a lot about them. She didn't know how curses worked, if they had to be cast by means of witchcraft or black magic. If just anyone could curse anyone else, or if there had to be a certain knowledge of curses, spells, and hexes?

I'm crazy. Adele felt her brain squeeze, and she dropped the remote onto the sofa. As crazy as people sometimes thought she was. She rose and moved through her living room to her bathroom. Because really, what kind of person thought she was cursed?

A crazy person, that's who.

She pushed her long sleeves up her arms, turned on the water above the sink, and reached for the soap. A crazy woman who hadn't had a good date or decent sex in years. A perpetual bridesmaid but never a bride. In the past two years, she'd been in the weddings of two of her close friends, while a third friend, Maddie, had just announced that she was getting married in the spring. Maddie, who thought all men were potential serial killers. Maddie, who was so paranoid she carried an arsenal of pepper spray, brass knuckles, and stun guns, had found someone to love her. Crazy Maddie had

found someone who wanted to spend his life with her, and Adele couldn't find someone who wanted a relationship past midnight.

The soap slipped out of her hands as she worked up a good lather. She looked up into the mirror and washed her face with her fingertips. It was really depressing. A couple of years ago, the four friends had all been single and meeting for lunch and going on vacations to the Bahamas together. They were all writers and shared a lot in common. Then one by one they'd all gotten married, or were getting married, and Adele was the only one left single and alone. She could no longer pick up the telephone anytime she felt like it and discuss book plots, man problems, or the latest episode of *CSI*. After years of having an active social life, she now felt alone and lonely. She felt cut off and sorry for herself. She *hated* feeling sorry for herself almost as much as she *hated* all the time she spent wondering what was wrong with her.

She reached for a washcloth, ran it under the warm water, and rinsed the soap from her face. She'd been in love twice. The last time had been three years ago. His name had been Dwayne Larkin and he'd been tall, blond, and very hot. He hadn't been perfect, but she'd overlooked his annoying habit of smelling the armpits of his shirts and playing air guitar on the zipper of his jeans. Despite his faults, they'd shared some things in common. They both loved old science-fiction movies, being lazy on a Saturday afternoon, and they knew what it was like to lose a parent at a young age. Dwayne had been nice and funny, and she thought she just might want to spend the rest of her life as Mrs Larkin. She'd even mentally started to pick out a china pattern. Right

up until the day three years ago that he'd stood in her kitchen and called her a fat ass. One second he'd been telling her about his day at work, then in the next, he just stopped in midsentence, turned his head to one side like some sort of android, and said, 'You're a fat ass.'

She'd been so stunned, she'd asked him what he'd just said. Unfortunately, he repeated it.

'Adele, you have a big fat ass.' He'd set down his beer and spread his hands really far apart. 'About three ax handles.'

Out of all the hurtful things he could have said to her, that was the most hurtful. He could have called her stupid or ugly, and it would not have wounded her so deeply. Not only because it was her biggest fear, but because he'd known how deeply it would hurt her. He'd known she'd inherited her grandmother Sally's bubble butt and that she jogged five miles a day, every damn day, to keep it from taking over the lower half of her body. Before that night, he'd always said he loved the way her bottom fit in his hands. Apparently he was a liar. Worse, he was a mean liar.

Adele had kicked him out of her life, but for some reason, Dwayne just wouldn't go completely. Every month or so she'd open her front door and find random stuff on her porch. One sock, a scrubby, or a headless Darth Vader, all the things she'd forgotten and left at Dwayne's house after the breakup.

She turned off the water and dried her face. Her friends thought she should have Dwayne arrested or hire someone to beat him up. Yeah, he was a bit of a stalker, she thought as she moved to her bedroom, but she wasn't frightened or creeped out by Dwayne.

A pile of scrunchies sat on her oak dresser and she pulled her long, curly hair into a thick ponytail. If anything, she was more annoyed with Dwayne than scared, and wished he'd just move on. It hadn't been easy, but she'd moved on.

She changed into a plain white T-shirt and returned to the living room. She'd stopping buying and wearing nice lingerie about the second year of the curse. Sexy undies were a waste, and plain T-shirts were comfy to sleep in.

After every loss and setback in her life, she'd moved on. She'd recovered from the death of her mother when she'd been ten, and her broken heart had eventually healed after getting shattered by her first love. Not that she equated the death of her mother with getting dumped by the first boy she'd ever loved, but each loss had been devastating in its own ways and had changed her life. Losing her mother had taught her how to be independent. Losing her first love had taught her not to give her heart away so easily.

The Tonight Show replaced the news, and Adele changed the channel. She hadn't thought of her first love in years, but even after all this time, she still felt embarrassed over how fast and hard she'd fallen for him. She'd loved everything about Zach Zemaitis. She'd loved his easy smile and the sound of his deep laughter. She'd loved the weight of his arm across her shoulders and the smell of his T-shirts and warm skin. The first time he'd kissed her, she'd felt it *everywhere*. Heart. Stomach. Backs of her knees.

She'd met him in her senior year at the University of Texas, but she'd known who he was the first day she'd set foot on campus in her freshman year. Everyone

knew who Zach Zemaitis was. Longhorn football was huge, and with his golden boy good looks, and impressive stats, everyone in Texas knew of UT's star quarterback. Everyone knew he was destined for the pros just as everyone knew he dated UT's head cheerleader, Devon Hamilton.

Adele might not have known Zach until they met in college, but she'd known Devon for most of her life. The two had come to UT from the same small Texas town. They'd attended twelve years of the same public schools, but the two hadn't exactly been friends. Not even close. Devon's family had been wealthy, while Adele's father had barely scratched out a middle-class existence for himself and his two daughters. Devon did not associate with girls whose families didn't belong to the Cedar Creek Country Club and whose mothers weren't members of the Junior League. Adele had always been beneath Devon's notice – until the sixth grade, when Adele had committed an unpardonable transgression. The two girls had been up for the role of Tinkerbell in their school's production of *Peter Pan*, and Adele had won. After that, Devon had taken it upon herself to periodically make Adele's life hell. The last time had been their senior year at UT when they'd both been up for the role of Zach's girlfriend.

Adele paused on the Sci Fi Channel and *The Dresden Files*. She sat on the couch and figured there were worse things to do on a Saturday night than watch Paul Blackthorne, in his leather coat and perpetual five o'clock shadow, solve paranormal crime and save Chicago from power-mad vampires, werewolves, and assorted badasses. Worse things like suffering her way through another bad date.

But tonight, Paul didn't capture her attention, and her mind returned to Zach Zemaitis and the way he'd looked in a pair of worn Levi's and a soft old T-shirt.

They'd been in the same communications studies class, back when she'd thought she just might be a journalist. For the first few weeks of that semester, she'd sat in the back row, trying not to notice the short commas of blond hair touching the tops of his ears and the back of his long, thick neck. Like all the other females in the class, she'd tried not to let his wide shoulders and big arms distract her, and like the other girls, she'd failed.

Zach had been blessed with looks and talent. He'd been treated like a rock star, yet everyone on campus genuinely seemed to like him. While Adele could appreciate his hard body and gorgeous face, she'd always figured there had to be something wrong with his brains. He had to have a mental defect, perhaps the result of too many hits to the helmet that made all that physical perfection a total waste and a damn shame. Why else would a guy like Zach date a heinous bitch like Devon Hamilton? Sure, Devon was gorgeous, but there were a lot of gorgeous girls at UT. Obviously, he was retarded or just superficial. Maybe both.

Then one day he plopped down in front of her and turned in his chair. If suddenly looking into Zach's dark brown eyes surrounded by long, thick lashes hadn't been shocking enough, he'd said in an easy drawl, 'I've been wonderin' how you get your hair to do that.'

'What?' She'd been so stunned, she'd actually looked behind her to see whom he was talking to. There hadn't been anyone but her, and she'd turned back, and asked, 'Are you talking to me?' Because jocks like Zach,

with beautiful cheerleader girlfriends, didn't talk to girls like Adele. She was into theater and hung out with people who debated interplanetary teleportation.

Not that she thought she wasn't good enough or pretty enough, she just didn't live in the same privileged sphere, where everyone kissed your ass because you could throw a football or execute a perfect back handspring into an equally perfect herkey jump.

His soft laughter had filled the silence between them. 'Yeah, I'm talkin' to you. Do you get it permed?'

Was he making fun of her? Before the days of Carrie Bradshaw and Shakira, she'd always hated her hair and had never understood why anyone would get a perm when they could have straight hair. 'I don't do anything to it,' she'd answered, waiting for the punch line. Back in junior high, she'd been called pube head. Usually by his cheerleader girlfriend.

'It's just naturally like that?'

 His gaze moved across her face and touched her hair.

'Yes.' He had the longest lashes of any guy she'd ever seen, and yet he was the most masculine guy she'd ever seen.

'Hmm. It's really pretty. I like it.' He looked back into her eyes, and said, through a flash of white teeth and perfect smile, 'I'm Zach.'

Had he just said her hair was pretty? *Shocking.* 'Adele.'

'I know.'

Shock number two. 'You do?'

'Sure.'

Then he'd turned back toward the front of the class, tossed a notebook and pencil on the desk in front of him, and she'd been left staring at the back of his

football player's neck and wondering what the hell had just happened.

The next scheduled class day, he'd sat in front of her again. And once again, he'd turned around. This time he asked about her silver cuff bracelet engraved with three Celtic knots.

'This symbolizes the interdependency of nature,' she'd explained, while wondering why he was talking to her again. She didn't even go to football games. 'This, the relationship of man and Earth. This, the unity knot of lovers.'

He looked up from her wrist and grinned. 'Unity of lovers, huh?'

She pulled her hand back and shrugged. 'That's what some archaeologists believe. The Celts left very few records, so no one really knows for sure.'

He reached across the desk, grasped her fingers in his warm palm, and lightly tugged her hand toward him. 'I've never seen a knot of lovers that look quite like this.'

She tried to pull her hand free, but he'd tightened his grip. 'You won't find it in *Penthouse* or *Hustler*.'

He chuckled deep in his chest and let go. 'I guess that explains it.' He looked into her eyes for several long seconds, then turned around as class had begun.

Her fingers still warm from his touch, she'd grabbed her pen and pretended an interest in the professor at the front of the room. But in order to see the teacher, she had to look past Zach's wide shoulders in the T-shirt that hugged his muscles and fit tight around the bulge of his biceps. She gave up and studied the back of his head and his golden hair.

Zach didn't seem slow, like he'd taken too many hits

to the head. He seemed kind of nice, but there had to be something wrong with him. Some *thing*. Some reason why a nice guy would date Devon Hamilton.

She was still wondering about it five hours later when Zach walked into the restaurant where she worked five nights a week serving pizza. He came in with three of his football friends, but he'd hung around until she got off work.

'Where's your girlfriend?' she'd asked, as he opened the door for her.

'What girlfriend?'

Adele walked out into the crisp autumn night and shoved an arm into her sweater. 'You know what girlfriend.'

He moved behind her and held her sweater while she threaded her other arm inside. 'Describe her for me.'

'Blond. Skinny. Jumps around a lot in a cheerleader's skirt.'

'Oh, that girlfriend.' He pulled her hair from the back of her sweater, and the tips of his warm fingers brushed her neck. 'She isn't my girlfriend.'

Adele looked up into the shadows of his face. 'Since when?'

'You ask too many questions.'

It really wasn't her business anyway. It wasn't like he was asking *her* out. 'Aren't you cold?'

'I'm like a furnace. I don't get cold.'

She supposed it had to do with all those muscles. He walked her back to her dorm room and left her at the door with no more than a handshake. But the next night when he walked her to her door, he backed her against the wall and kissed the air from her lungs. He'd told her

he couldn't stop thinking about her, and within two very short months, he'd made her love him so completely that she'd found it hard to breathe around him. Hard to do anything but think about him. She fell so fast and hard and completely, she hadn't thought twice about giving herself to him, body and soul.

Adele had never planned to save herself for marriage, but she had wanted her first sexual experience to be with someone she loved. She'd thought that person was Zach, but once she'd given him everything she'd had to give, he'd crushed her heart like a can of Lone Star. He'd dumped her flat and returned to Devon, and Adele had been so devastated that she'd left the University of Texas at midterm and moved more than a thousand miles away to live with her grandmother in Boise, Idaho. A few months after she'd moved in with her grandmother, she'd received an invitation in the mail. Cecilia Blackworth Hamilton Taylor-Marks and Charla May and James Zemaitis requested the honor of Adele's presence at the wedding of their children, Devon Lynn Hamilton and Zachary James Zemaitis. There had been no return address, but Adele had known who'd sent it.

Adele had known that Zach would marry Devon, but apparently it hadn't been enough for Devon to have Zach. She'd wanted to rub Adele's face in it.

She'd never told anyone about her relationship with Zach. Not her friends and not her sister. Looking back on it, she wondered how she could have been so foolish. Not only had she given her heart away easily, she'd given it to a jock.

The last she'd heard, Zach was playing pro ball for Denver, not that she kept up on sports. But occasionally

she had heard his name mentioned in the sports segment of the nightly news or seen his face selling Gatorade or Right Guard or jock itch cream on television. Okay, so she'd never seen him selling jock itch cream.

She didn't know if he was still playing for Denver or had been traded. She didn't know where he was or what he was doing, and she didn't give a damn. Hopefully, he was still married to Devon, and his wife was making his life hell.

Adele leaned her head back against a cushion and let out a breath. She was getting a little bitter. About her life and men, and she really didn't want to live that way. She loved her life, mostly, and despite her rash of bad dates and her first heartbreak, she loved men.

Don't I?

She sat up and looked across the room. What if all the bad dates had more to do with hidden anger and resentment? Adele shook her head. No, she didn't have hidden anger and resentment. Or at least she didn't think she did, but . . . if it was hidden, how would she know?

'Oh God,' she groaned. She *was* crazy.

The telephone rang and saved her more mental torment. She rose and moved to the kitchen to pick up the cordless receiver. She glanced at the area code and groaned. Apparently her mental torment was not over. She really wasn't in the mood to talk to her older sister, Sherilyn. The responsible one. The one with the perfect life. The one happily married to a dentist and happily raising a perfect teenage daughter in Fort Worth. The perfect sister due to have a perfect baby boy in four months. The one who wasn't cursed or crazy.

She thought about letting it go to voice mail, but in the end she answered because it might be important.

‘Hey, Sheri. How’re things?’

‘William left.’

Adele felt her brows go up and her eyes widen. ‘Where did he go?’

‘He’s moved in with his twenty-one-year-old assistant.’

‘No.’ Adele pulled out a kitchen chair and sat. She’d never liked William, but she’d never suspected he was so low as to abandon his pregnant wife.

‘Yes. Her name is Stormy Winter.’

Adele supposed there were more important questions, but the one she asked was, ‘Is she a stripper?’

‘He says no.’

Which meant she’d asked. ‘How’s Kendra?’ Adele asked, referring to her thirteen-year-old niece.

‘Mad. At me. At William. At the world. She’s embarrassed that I’m pregnant and that her father’s moved in with somebody eight years older than she is.’

Wow. Sherilyn’s life was more messed up than Adele’s. That was a first.

‘My life is a wreck.’ Sherilyn’s voice broke, and she started to cry. ‘I don’t know how this happened. One day everything was per-perfect, then the next William’s run off.’

Adele suspected there’d been signs that Sherilyn had chosen to ignore. ‘How can I help?’ she asked, figuring there was really nothing she could do but listen.

‘I’m moving back to Cedar Creek. Come home with me.’

Adele was home.

‘I need you, Dele.’

Adele hadn’t been back to Cedar Creek since her father’s funeral seven years ago.

Sherilyn burst into another round of sobbing before she pulled herself together and managed, ‘I nee-need my family in my time of cris-sis.’ By the sounds of it, Sherilyn was beyond crisis and rushing headlong into a breakdown. ‘Please. I have to go home. I can’t stan-nd it here without William. All our friends kn-ow, and they pity me. My life is falling ap-part.’

Sherilyn was the most capable woman Adele knew, and she knew a lot of very capable women. For that reason and many others, she and Sherilyn had never really gotten along for more than five minutes at a time. ‘Oh, Sheri . . .’ For the first time ever, Sherilyn needed her, and Adele was the only real family she had left. But . . . Adele’s life was in Boise. She’d bought a house and planned on painting her office. She was thinking about getting a Pug.

‘Just for a little while. Until Kendra and I get settled in our new pl-ace.’

She’d made a life for herself, and she had friends here. Good friends . . . who were married or getting married and had lives different from hers now. She was quite possibly cursed with bad dates and was very likely crazy. Maybe she needed a break. To get away from her life.

Just for a few weeks. ‘When do you need me?’