

Chapter 1

Home at Last

August 1974

“Chicago, Chicago, what a toddlin’ town... what a wonderful town.” The only words I knew to the old Frank Sinatra song came blaring out of my mouth as my cat, Charlie, and I drove past the city limits sign on I-90. Over the last few months, my life seemed to be ruled by events that were out of my control, forcing me to make critical decisions in the blink of an eye. Between jobs, drug deals and hospitals, I’d barely had time to think, my only focus was on getting back to this city, the sooner, the better. I was months late, but I was finally here.

I was meeting Michael at his mother’s house later, but since I was a few hours ahead of schedule, I decided to take a sneak peek at my new apartment on W. Cornelia Avenue. The location couldn’t be more perfect, between Lake Shore Drive and Broadway and I was anxious to move in.

“Wow, Michael found us a great place,” I said to Charlie as we walked in the main entrance. “Look at all the wood in this foyer, it’s gorgeous, and even the railing is carved,” I said running my fingers over the smooth varnished surface as I made my way up the stairs.

Opening the apartment door was like walking into a 1920s heaven, my ideal atmosphere. I loved these old buildings; they had so much character, they fit my idea of what Chicago should look like.

“Charlie, shit, take a gander at the size of those windows. You can sunbathe and there’s a big tree in the courtyard so you can watch the birds and squirrels on Kitty-Cat TV. It’s cat paradise.”

The apartment was huge for a one bedroom. The living room had a fireplace with an intricately carved, wooden mantel and a marble hearth spreading out from the opening set into the hard wood floors. Michael had told me he and Frank made sure it was working so I could actually use it when the weather turned cold.

I wandered into the full dining room with its fancy crown moldings, then smiled to myself as I entered the bedroom and saw a big brass bed. “Holy shit – this looks real!” I called out to Charlie examining the scrolling brass design of the headboard. Real antique brass beds were impossible to find ever since Bob Dylan’s song “Lay Lady Lay” came out. Everyone wanted one including me. It didn’t matter whether it was real or a reproduction, what filled me with joy was the fact that Michael remembered.

It was all perfect.

And he must be as anxious as I am, I thought as I sat on the edge tracing the scrolls with my fingers. My mind was conjuring up sensual images of what the night would be like. God I missed him, the way he made me melt with one glance. My pulse raced, my body remembered the tenderness of his touch, but more importantly, how safe I felt wrapped in his arms, how he seemed to know what I was thinking before I even did myself. No one else, not even in the midst of my “one-night-stand” phase when I was working at the bar, had ever been able to produce this kind of reaction in me. And I’d certainly not had that feeling of safety with my ex-husband, Stephen.

I really loved Michael’s mother, she had been great to me the whole year I was away, and while I wanted to see her again, I wished I’d been able to arrange it for later... after the two of us had some time alone together. While we were planning my move, I tried to finagle seeing Shirley later, however, Michael always came up with some objection to shoot down my suggestion. Finally, I relented, figuring the two of them must have some kind of welcome back surprise that required me going to Shirley’s house right away.

After grabbing some necessities from the U-Haul, I made up the bed so

we wouldn't have to wait once we got back here this evening — it had been way too long since I'd felt his touch. I also carefully hung up the black negligee he'd given me during our first Christmas together so it would be easily accessible. *I wonder how long I'll be wearing it this time?*

"Damn it Charlie, I wish I hadn't agreed to go down there right away. I should've insisted he come here first—I'm not sure I can keep my hands off him long enough for whatever Shirley has planned," I giggled as I dug through the boxes.

Charlie wasn't listening, he never listened well, usually ignoring me while he cleaned himself or napped. The vet told me Charlie was deaf, but I had serious doubts about it since he appeared to hear the things he wanted to hear. My mother said he was a "typical man." This time he was busy exploring every nook and cranny of the place, letting out an occasional "meow" when he found something that smelled particularly good. I found a corner spot by the back door, set up his litter box, put out some food and water, kissed him and told him to settle in. I'd be back later and he'd finally be able to meet Michael.

I headed down the stairs as Frank Tanner, came out to introduce himself. Up until now I'd only spoken to him on the telephone. As I shook his hand he stared at me as if he'd been stunned by an electrical current or stung by a bee or something. *Goddamn it, my new landlord is a freakin' weirdo — just what I need.* Frank and Shirley had dated years ago when Michael and his siblings were still kids. The only reason I had this fabulous apartment now, was because they had stayed in touch.

"I do apologize for staring like that, it's just that you bare a remarkable resemblance to someone I knew many, many years ago," he said smiling at me.

"Well I hope it's a good memory," I replied.

"Yes, it is. A very good memory."

And with that, the awkwardness was gone as quickly as it had appeared. We chatted for a couple minutes, then Frank volunteered to unhook the U-Haul from the back of my car, so I didn't have to pull it through city traffic down to Michael's place. He maneuvered it into an empty space next to his garage in the alley, disconnected some hooks and wires, and waved as I drove off. *He was okay after all.*

Chapter 2

Surprise!

“Hello Michael,” I said softly as I walked up behind him in the driveway. He wasn’t expecting me for another couple hours. He turned, flicking his dark hair back out of his eyes. I melted, realizing how much I missed seeing his face, those whiskey brown eyes, and that curl at the corner of his lips.

“Jackie,” he replied hurrying forward, wrapping me in the safety of his arms and kissing my forehead... just like I remembered. “My God, you’re actually here — I’ve missed you so much... you look wonderful.” His voice filled with emotion as he stepped back, looking me over from head to toe, pulling me close, kissing me so tenderly I felt all the strain of the last year drain from my body. His mouth covered mine as our tongues met, and our bodies melted together the way they always had in the past. He hugged me so tightly I could barely breathe. Gazing up at him I saw his eyes filling with moisture as we kissed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt this overwhelmed with pure joy, so willing to lose myself and dissolve into one.

“You look wonderful to me too,” I said smiling, fighting back my own tears of joy. “I’ve missed you too, Michael, but it’s going to be okay now, isn’t it? We’ll work through all the shit together.” His breath stopped and he pulled away from our hug, just looking at me in a way I’d never seen before. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “Has something else happened or... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to assume... I mean, I thought... shit, at least we won’t be making any more long distance phone calls, I... well you know what I mean,” I stammered.

"Yeah, I do," he said almost choking on the words, glancing up at the house. "That's what I want too. You know I love you, no matter what happens, you must believe me, you're the only woman I want."

"Of course I believe you. You sound as if I'm leaving or something instead of just getting back. I've been to the apartment, it's perfect. I can't wait to try out our new bed. Where the hell did you find a brass bed?" I said in a teasing tone, hoping to shake whatever strangeness I sensed. There was something on his mind, I saw it when I peered into his face — whatever it was, he was letting it show, not hiding, but at that moment, before I could question him more, Shirley came out to greet me.

"Jackie, sweetheart, I'm so glad you're back. Thanks for coming over here so I could see you," she said in her usual, friendly voice, while she hugged me.

"It's good to see you too, Shirley. I missed you more than I realized until this very moment. Seeing this guy makes me feel like I'm at home again," I responded lifting my chin in Michael's direction and smiling. She smiled back, but I caught a look, some kind of message flying back and forth between the two of them, from the corner of my eye.

"I'm sorry we haven't been able to talk for a while. I've been so tied up with all the legal things for Tom and Keith, and trying to help Patty as much as possible while Jeff's recovering, but Mike's been keeping me up to date. And I never got a chance to congratulate you on getting that graduate assistantship. I'm so proud of you, Jackie."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I missed our phone calls too, but now we can talk in person like we used to. I'm just so damn happy to be back here," I said putting my arm around Michael's waist, leaning in and squeezing him close.

"Have you seen the apartment yet? I think it'll be a good place for you. Frank is a good guy, anything you need, just ask and he'll take care of it," she said.

"Yeah, I stopped there to settle my cat in. It's absolutely perfect, thank you so much for finding it for me."

We chatted some more, then both she and Michael turned towards the house at the sound of the back door opening.

Something shot through the air between them again, an almost imperceptible, though uncomfortable pause in the conversation, and