

Excerpt of
Dream Chaser

By Angie Stanton

Saturday night. Talk about awkward. I knew we both want to get to that magic place our director, Tyson, keeps lecturing about. It's just really hard to let your guard down when so much hurt has been passed back and forth. But we bit the bullet, and here we were in Eli's mom's spacious Cadillac.

"Okay, so this is insane, right?" I tucked my hands between my legs for warmth.

"Yup." Eli drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and looked out over the landing strip before us.

I followed his gaze. Eli had driven us to Messerschmidt Road. I'd never been here before, but I knew a bunch of kids who had. It was a pretty spot on a hill that overlooked the airport. The runways were lit up with yellow, blue and green lights. Their reflection on the icy snow gave a festive air to the night. I shivered despite the fact I wore my wool peacoat, a thick scarf, and warm gloves.

"You cold? I can turn up the heat."

He adjusted the controls and turned on the radio, but I doubted it would help. I'd been a wreck since he set up this date. Okay, not a real date, a make-out date. No dinner, no movie, just a lip-locking, body-groping romp. Eli was determined we make our performance perfect, and we had to figure out how to sell it on stage.

I couldn't agree more. I hate to do anything halfway when other people are involved. I don't like to let them down. I'd grown to trust and admire Tyson and I wanted to do everything in my power to make sure it was a success.

But that's easier in concept than reality. I looked out the windows. Somehow the confines of the car made sitting near Eli more intimidating. At rehearsal, a huge stage and auditorium gave us space, and even though we danced close and touched, it wasn't so dang personal.

Silence hung over us like the lowering of a casket at a burial.

Eli gripped the steering wheel with both hands as if bracing for a root canal. "This is insane," he said. "It's not that big a deal, we can do this."

"Yeah, totally." I wished I had his confidence.

"It would help if you didn't look so scared."

"I'm not scared, I'm just nervous," I said. "This whole 'perform on command' is a little warped. I'm just trying to get my head around it.

"Actors do it all the time. We can too."

"I know, and we will. We just have to figure out how."

"Okay, enough talking. Let's get this thing started." He turned off the engine but left the heat and the radio on. "I don't want us to asphyxiate ourselves." Eli unbuckled his seatbelt and pushed his seat back.

Oh boy! So this was it. My palms turned sweaty. Relax, I told myself. Deep breath, let the tensions go. Find your Zen place.

Eli turned toward me so serious and determined. I couldn't help but look at his mouth. His very sexy mouth. But this was Eli, and my feelings about him were so jumbled. The last time he kissed me was before freshman year outside of Miss Ginny's while waiting for my dad.

It had been a warm fall night and we'd finished a full schedule of classes. I still remembered the full moon and the fireflies floating in the air. We'd been totally relaxed, sharing a bag of cheetos.

Suddenly, he'd leaned over, wiped some crumbs from my cheek, and kissed me. I'd been so shocked, especially when our eyes met and his were filled with so much more than friendship. I'd panicked. There was no other way to say it. My best friend for practically my whole life had suddenly changed the rules.

Thank God my dad chose that moment to arrive, so I had a quick getaway. Now, more than three years later, here we were again, only this time locked in his mom's car, watching planes land, and getting ready for a repeat kiss. This time there was no running away. I chose to be here.

"All right," I answered and licked my lips. Oh, was that wrong? I shouldn't kiss him with a wet mouth. I swiped my mitten across my mouth.

We leaned forward and touched lips. It felt strange.

So this was me kissing Eli. His mouth was firm and warm. It was sort of an out-of-body experience. He leaned forward, and our noses bumped. We repositioned, and I ended up kissing the side of his mouth in a tight closed-mouth kiss. Eli reached for me, but grabbed only my thick coat and scarf. We pulled apart.

"This isn't working." He pushed at his hair, which made it tousled in a cute sort of way.

"Nope. Felt like kissing a brother, if I had one, or a best friend." Deep down I thought his kisses would be great. I guess it was better this way.

"Well, I thought we were friends again," he said with an honesty I hadn't seen in a while.

"Are we?" It sure was hard to tell with his standoffish behavior.

"Yeah, I think so." He appeared to have just made that decision.

"Good," I said. Maybe we were finally making progress. It would be a lot easier to try to kiss now that I knew he wasn't mad.

"I think I know the problem. You've got too many clothes on. I can't even get to you."

I raised an eyebrow.

"You're wrapped up like an Eskimo. Could you lose the coat and scarf?"

"Sure." I removed my outer layer and stuffed it on the floor.

We faced each other over the front seat console and leaned in.

"Wait a minute, this thing is screwing us up." He slapped the console.

"Back seat?" I offered, not believing I actually spoke the words out loud. I sounded

like such a *ho'*.

"Yeah."

We both turned to crawl over. I realized my shoes might scratch the leather seats. "Shoes off?"

"Good idea," he agreed, kicking his shoes off.

At least we were working together. I slipped my shoes off and crawled over the top of the seats. I'm sure it didn't look too graceful with my butt up in the air. Eli didn't comment, he just followed me over, fell onto the back seat, and we rolled around trying to get situated. I laughed nervously. It felt cooler in the back seat, and we had a lot more space.

With one foot tucked under me I turned sideways so I could face him. He did the same. A few seconds ticked by.

"I think we need to go to Plan B. We need a little help," Eli said.

"What's that?"

Eli reached down, rifled around in a bag and pulled out a couple of bottles. "Liquid courage," he said with a grin, holding up brandy and Grape Power Aid. "It's not the greatest combination, but it's the best I could find."

I chewed the side of my lip, embarrassed at my relief. "Good idea." Drinking wasn't usually my thing, but we needed all the help we could get.

"Here, hold these." He handed over the bottles, dug through the bag and pulled out a couple of plastic tumblers with melting ice. Together we mixed our concoction like two co-conspirators. I poured the purple stuff, and he poured the brandy.

"More?" he asked holding the bottle ready.

"More," I answered.

He poured a couple more glugs of the amber liquid.

"A little more." I grinned and crinkled up my nose. "No inhibitions. If we're gonna do this, let's do it right."

Eli winked in response, and my heart did a little flip. He added more to each cup, then capped the bottle and put it away. We swirled our cups.

"Here's to going for it." Eli raised his glass.

I bumped my tumbler to his, and we drank. I shivered as the strong liquid burned. I took a breath and began to cough. I exhaled as much air as possible to cool my throat then tried to take smaller breaths so I wouldn't choke on the fumes.

"I think it needs to be mixed up a little more," I coughed.

Eli cleared his throat. "I'd say." He stuck his finger in his cup, stirred and took another sip. "Much better."

I did the same and raised my cup for another toast. "Here's to living life on the wild side."

"Here's to taking chances." We drank.

"Here's to what happens in the back seat, stays in the back seat," I said.

"I'll drink to that."

And we did.

"And no judging," I added.

"What?"

"No judging. I mean, I don't want you to judge my kissing skills. I haven't had a lot of experience in this department."

He arched an eyebrow. "You are bent, you know that?"

"I'm just saying."

"I thought you and that Rick guy were a thing."

"Yeah, but it hasn't been for very long." What a total liar I am! Girls always loved Eli. He had girls trailing after him all the time. I just couldn't admit my love life was less than awesome.

"So, are you two going out?"

"Ah, yeah. We go out with the squad all the time. Or I guess I should say we used to."

I got quiet knowing how pathetic that sounded.

"That must be really hard, having them all pissed off at you. Especially after all you did for them."

We sipped again.

"What'd I do for them?" It was more like what I did *to* them.

"You are clueless sometimes, you know that?" he said with a laugh. "They never would have gotten to Nationals last year without you, let alone won it." He leaned back and took another drink.

"How do you know about Nationals?" I asked.

"I know things," he said with a sly glance. I chose to ignore his comment.

"I would hardly say that. I'm just one cog in the wheel of that team. We worked our asses off to get there."

"Yeah, and who worked the hardest? Who did the hardest tricks and the highest flips? Who was always first to practice and last to leave? Hmm?" He knew me so well.

"How did you know I did the hardest tricks?" Eli had been pushed so far out of my life, I hadn't even thought about him much during that time, or at least I tried not to think about him. Yet he knew all about me.

"How could I not know? You guys were plastered all over the news. You performed at every possible sports event. I saw you perform during halftime of the Wisconsin Ohio college football game last fall. Your flips in the air were insane. You must have been twenty-five feet high. Plus, I spent most of my life dancing with you. You don't do anything halfway. Look at this show. You've had to catch up on weeks of missed rehearsals with almost no help. I know a lot of the girls have been giving you a hard time." His voice softened with that comment.

"That's an understatement. They hate me."

"True." He grinned.

"Thanks!"

"Well, it is true. You walked in and got the lead. They don't think you deserve it, but they're wrong."

"How's that?"

"You're better. You always were. It doesn't matter that you stopped dancing for a while. You have more talent in your little finger than they'll ever have, and you keep getting better."

What was he talking about, and why was he saying such nice things? He was wrong. I didn't have that much talent. That's why I kept working so hard. But I wouldn't turn away a rare compliment from Eli. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," he said matter of fact. "I can't imagine having to walk around with all your old friends mad at you and the cast, who should be your new friends, mad you too."

"It sucks, but I'll live." I hadn't realized how much the girls' animosity hurt. I tried to let it roll off, but after a while they had really gotten under my skin.

Silence filled the car as I took another sip and contemplated his words.

"So what happened with us?" he asked, his eyes filled with the pain of what I'd done.

I'd hurt him bad and he wanted to know why. I didn't blame him. I took a gulp from the tumbler, then gripped it like a lifeline in a turbulent sea.

"I got scared," I said softly and looked him in the eye. All my memories of fear and regret flooded back.

"Of what?" he asked, confused.

"Of losing your friendship. That day you kissed me was so out of left field. You were my best friend in the world. I didn't want to lose that. I'd never thought of you in any other way."

I saw the hurt in his eyes and why shouldn't he be? What was wrong with me? He was totally gorgeous and the nicest guy on the planet. Girls always wanted him, but he and I had been glued at the hip, which I guess affected my perception. I just didn't see him the way they did. "Sorry, I just didn't. I trusted you. You were my everything, and then you changed the rules."

"You were afraid of losing our friendship, so you shut me out, and ended it yourself? Doesn't make a lot of sense." He looked so vulnerable and tortured.

"No it doesn't, but who says I ever made much sense?" My words slurred a bit and my head started to fuzz from the booze.

"This is true." He held up his cup in toast.

A plane roared overhead and came into view as it approached the airport. Its lights filled the windshield. We watched it land and make its way to the other end of the runway.

"So now you're in a car with me, back at square one."

"Pretty much. How did I let that happen?" We laughed at the irony.

"Only this time you have to let me kiss you." He flashed his eyes at me.

"Lucky me." I drank, my throat now numb from the booze. "So what's with Tyson and all the making out in the show?"

"He does seem a bit obsessed with it."

"Do you think he's gay? Cause why would a gay guy want all the kissing?" I asked.

"He's not gay," Eli said with certainty.

"How do you know? He's totally hot, he dresses great, and he's a dancer."

"I'm totally hot, I'm a dancer and I'm not gay." He said.

"Are you sure?" I giggled.

"Want me to prove it?" His eyes sparkled in the dim light.

"Yeah, I do." My heart began to pound.

Enjoying my buzz, I sank into the buttery soft leather seat, and lolled my head to the side. I watched Eli. I'd forgotten how good looking he was. He must be the nicest guy on the planet; and he had the greatest smile.

Eli leaned forward; his warm breath caressed my cheek. He placed his parted lips on mine. I thought maybe he forgot why we were here, but apparently not. This time it didn't feel like kissing a brother. It was all Eli. He took my face in his hands and kissed me, his moves slow and gentle. He tasted like citrus and booze. I turned my body to him. I couldn't believe I'd been so nervous.

We parted and gazed at each other. We'd figured it out. The alcohol took our inhibitions away. He took me in his arms and kissed me again. His fingers trailed up my back and into my hair, mussing it to his liking. I sighed. His other hand moved down over my hips to my lower back. I couldn't believe this was happening. I let his hands roam and had never been so turned on in my life.

"We're pretty good at this," I murmured.

"Yeah, I'd say. Still think I'm gay?" His breath tickled my neck.

"Not so much."

I played with his sun-touched hair. I'd wanted to know how it felt since we started dancing together again, but never had the nerve. Its rumpled perfection created a golden halo. With alcohol-induced bravery, I combed my fingers through the thick strands. They were silky soft.

I looked into his eyes, and he smiled with a sexy twist at the side of his mouth. Never had anything felt so perfect. I leaned down and met his lips again. I ran my hand over his shirt, feeling his solid chest. He felt firm and strong. No wonder he could lift me with such ease.

"Do you think Tyson would approve of this for a stage kiss?" he murmured in my ear, sending tingles down my back.

"Yeah, pretty sure," I breathed.

"I think we can do better."

"You think?" I turned my head to expose my neck.

"Only if you're game," he whispered and nuzzled. Warm trills danced upon my skin.

"You jump, I jump," I said and moved my hand from his lean hip, to his waist and the bend of his back.

Without another word, he leaned back on the seat and pulled me with. My body rested on top of him, connecting our bodies from hip to breast. I sighed. His right leg

rested against the back seat. His other foot stayed on the floor. Between the angle of the seat and our position, my body nestled close to his.

My body flexed against him, revealing a hunger I'd never known before.

I looked at his face in the moonlit backseat. Deep pools of desire met mine. I leaned forward and kissed him; my tongue peeked out and he welcomed it.

His hands roamed my back and traveled low over my hips. I couldn't get enough of him. His touch, his taste. I felt like I'd been living in a cocoon and was now transforming and finally coming out of my chrysalis to a brand new world. Heaven, better than heaven.

Eli's hands caressed my bottom, my thighs and everywhere. I was afraid to breathe and ruin the moment. We lost ourselves in hot hungry kisses that explored our new connection. His kisses tasted so good I didn't want it to end. I never knew making out could be so addictive. So we kept going.