

# GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

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words

123,000

Author's Note:

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) as described in this novel, is a real technique, and works just as described (with a very little artistic licence to keep the pace of the story).

# Chapter 1

I gave myself a final, critical, scrutiny in the mirror, turning this way and that to view myself from different angles, and I gave myself a nod of approval. I'd do. I still scrubbed up reasonably well, I was glad to note. Dev would *surely* have to notice how much effort I had made. He would definitely pay me some sort of compliment.

I hoped.

I was wearing a brand new dress (bought at one of the less-expensive chains, given our current financial situation, but even so I was pleased with it). It was a dark pink halter-neck with a wide skirt and tons of netting underneath. I wore a cream crocheted shrug over it, given that it was only mid-April. The weather was exceptionally good, mind, but still, mid-April in Ireland? How warm could it be?

I had taken such care over my appearance. My shoulder-length brown hair was freshly washed and styled. Fake tan was perfectly applied with not a streak anywhere; my mauve eye-shadow and black mascara made my blue eyes look huge; the last scrapings of that expensive foundation made my skin look like a twenty year old's (or so I persuaded myself anyway); and I wore the prettiest pale pink lip gloss.

It wasn't any special occasion, just a barbecue with Cara and her new boyfriend, for the Easter Bank Holiday Monday. A bit ambitious having a barbecue in April, granted, but the weather had been so nice recently that we had organised it.

I was looking forward to it – it was an excuse to dress up and give Dev the opportunity to appreciate me.

Because it was becoming more and more obvious that Dev no longer really saw me. I was just there. Part of the furniture. A pleasant, agreeable part, no doubt. But nothing spectacular, nothing to be noticed. So I thought that if I made an extra special

effort he would be sure to notice me again.

It was worth a try anyway.

I went down the stairs of our tiny townhouse, and into the yellow-and-cream kitchen.

Preparations for the barbecue were well under way. The smell of garlic and lemon filled the air, and a bottle of creamy-green olive oil rested on the table. Dev was placing glistening dark red radicchio into our blue and green pottery salad bowl. The one we bought on honeymoon in Malta and which had been so difficult to transport home. But I had so wanted it, and so Dev had cheerfully carried it home for me.

Hard to believe now, but he did used to cherish me that much.

I waited for him to comment on my appearance.

But Dev said nothing about how I looked – he didn't even appear to register that I looked any differently, that I had made an effort.

Instead he asked, as he added some rich green rocket to the bowl, "What time will they be here?"

"I did tell you." I had actually told him *three* times. "Don't you remember?" I asked, trying to keep my irritation hidden.

I didn't completely succeed – I could hear a layer of exasperation in my tone. Not to mention another layer of hurt because he hadn't even noticed the effort I had made.

But Dev wasn't attuned to any nuances of tone and, as usual, just took the words at face value.

"You told me?" He shrugged and twisted his generous mouth in mild surprise.

"Sorry. Mustn't have heard you."

I became aware that I was grinding my teeth and I deliberately unclenched them, forcing my jaw to relax. I absolutely was *not* going to have an argument now, and have to spend the afternoon pretending harmony in front of our guests.

So I swallowed my angry retort and glanced at my watch. “They should be here in about half an hour. Or any multiple thereof, knowing Cara! But still, she might be on time for once, she seems pretty keen for us to meet this new man of hers.”

“Hm,” said Dev, “I hope we get on with him okay.”

“So do I. But it’s important to Cara that we make the effort, and if it’s important to Cara, it’s important to me.”

“I know, I know! I *will* make an effort with him, I swear. It’s just that Cara changes her boyfriends so often, it’s a pain having to get to know new ones all the time.”

I shrugged, but not without sympathy, as he had a point. Most people have longer relationships with the Sunday newspaper than Cara does with her boyfriends. Mind you, there was good reason for that, and I could understand it.

Dev was still giving out. “And they’re all so ... so ... ”

He wasn’t sure what words to use, but I knew exactly what he meant. Yes, Cara’s boyfriends *were* all so ... so ...

For a start, they were all so similar that it nearly didn’t matter that she changed them so frequently – it was like having one continual boyfriend who happened to have frequent name changes. They were all that new phenomenon – cubs of the Celtic Tiger.

The best way I can explain it is like this: I had a bad cold last winter and was huddled under a duvet on the sofa and I ended up watching that 1980’s film *Wall Street*. And as I was watching Gordon Gecko assuring us that greed was good, I was

thinking, *Who does he remind me of? I know him, I'm sure I do.*

It took me a little while and then I realised – he was the template for Cara's clone-boyfriend! That was why he had looked so familiar to me.

It took us in Ireland twenty years to catch up on the rest of the world. Everybody else is now onto downsizing and being environmentally responsible, and we've just discovered conspicuous consumption.

We can't be blamed, really. After all those centuries of extreme poverty the Celtic Tiger was suddenly born, and we all became so rich we couldn't believe it. No wonder we're living the lifestyle now that others lived in the eighties.

Cara's clone-boyfriends typified that. They were Gordon Gecko reincarnated. And so, like Gordon Gecko, they weren't very nice. Oh, very charming, that's for sure. And well-off, and well-dressed, and well-spoken, and well-thought-of (especially by themselves).

However, she seemed to have a talent for picking the bastards who would totally let her down in the worst way – unless she got one of her famous pre-emptive dumpings in first. (To be fair, some of the pre-empted dumpees might have been quite genuine and decent – they just never got the chance to show it.)

Dev was continuing with his own line of thought about Cara's new boyfriend. His strong pleasant face brightened as he thought of something, "You never know, he might like rugby."

"He might indeed like rugby," I agreed, suppressing another sigh. Many of them did, after all. It was that sort of game, which attracted that kind of people.

It could be worse though, I mused. If Cara's new boyfriend was equally passionate about something other than rugby then it would make socialising even more complicated.

It was bad enough arranging one's social calendar around rugby fixtures (and not only Irish international games, oh no, but the local club fixtures as well), without having to factor in, say, the Grand Prix or golf classic dates as well. Honestly, sports are the bane of my life.

*What is it with men and sports?* I wondered, and not for the first time. *Is it a diluted remnant of tribal warfare? A residue of a more involved past, during which living side-to-side with death made them feel more alive? And for those armchair supporters – like Dev – was it because they were trying to get all this by proxy?*

Still debating this question I began to bring plates and cutlery outside to our tiny outside space which was known in estate-agent-speak as a courtyard garden, but which was really just a patio with pretensions.

Still, patios with pretensions are what you get when you choose to live in Dublin's upmarket suburb of Clontarf. Three miles from the city centre, right on the sea, prestigious address – we couldn't have all that *and* space too, no matter how much I wished for a bigger house and a little more garden.

Not too much more garden, though! Oh no! Otherwise Dev would lose the run of himself and start planning vegetables. The herbs weren't too bad. Lots of people grew herbs. It was even quite chic.

But to have vegetables growing would be a bit embarrassing really. It was just as well that the size of our so-called courtyard garden precluded that.

As it was I thought it was pretty much perfect, with its terracotta pots filled with herbs, and the terracotta paving stones. The wooden slat fence was painted a bright blue, and had multicoloured pots hanging off it, all filled with more flowers. Sunlight spilled into the space for a brief period in the middle of the day – like now – and I sighed with delight at it.

As I placed the plates and cutlery onto our teak table, I realised that Dev followed me out.

“I was wondering if you thought I should put the barbecue on now?” he asked me.

I sighed, as surreptitiously as I could manage. “I’m sure you could have figured that one out yourself.” I could hear the sharpness in my voice, and deliberately softened it. “But since you’ve asked, then yes, do put it on now.”

“Okay, keep your hair on!” He laughed, but his laugh was somewhat pointed. “I was only asking!”

It was on the tip of my tongue, and making a lunge for freedom, to say, *But you’re always ‘only asking’*.

God but I was so fed up with making all the decisions. It was just exhausting. I never signed up to be a micro-manager – I missed that bit on the wedding vows. It must have been in small print.

But as I said, I didn’t want a row today of all days, and having to spend the afternoon pretending to be civil and loving to each other for the sake of our guests, all the time knowing that they were quite possibly picking up on the atmosphere anyway. So I said nothing more.

He busied himself lighting the coals on our gleaming chrome barbecue, whistling cheerfully as he did so, and I brought out the rest of the stuff we would need: narrow and elegant wine glasses, our blue linen napkins and so on.

In this way we companionably enough finished preparing for our guests’ arrival, little thinking how Cara’s new boyfriend would change both our lives in ways. Oh, he’d have help, that was for sure. But he was instrumental too.

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