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# RED HOT *Lover*

LYN CASH

# **Red Hot Lover**

by Lyn Cash

*Two firefighters battle the hottest flames they've encountered—their attraction to one another.*

After a fire sweeps through the school where she teaches and she's unable to save the life of her best friend, Faith Sloan leaves the chalkboard jungle for a career as a firefighter, only to find that one of her former students may be the arsonist responsible for the current devastation in her area of the city.

Without losing her trust, Captain Chance James must ensure that his rookie firefighter doesn't get caught between the truth and a killer. He's willing to bend the rules to protect Faith from harm, but there's nothing he can do to shield his own heart once they become lovers. Faith takes him into her bed, her parents take him into their home as he recuperates from a freak accident, and soon the rough-and-ready firefighter must decide what he wants most...his woman or his career.

**Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.**

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# Red Hot Lover

*Lyn Cash*

# **Dedication**

For SAM

## **Chapter One**

Smoke billowed, the heat from the fire choking them despite their gear, and Chance James could feel his protégé's heart pounding through her asbestos as their bodies clung together in the burning building, but she didn't cry out, much less flinch.

And he felt her shiver. He wasn't sure if it was from fear of fire or the fact that his cock was about to puncture his own gear and her back.

He knew the drill was frightening, that many grown men gave up on their training at this point. They were all muscle and bluster until the flames licked them from all sides. But not this one. Not Faith Sloan. She was as quiet and steely as the day he'd met her twelve months earlier, when he was her primary trainer instead of her soon-to-be captain.

She'd been a pint-sized powerhouse of determination, if not brawn. With her diminutive, curvaceous figure and her hip-length, dark hair braided and tucked beneath the regulation cap, she'd looked more like the cover model for a girly magazine than any fire fighter Chance had seen. Although she'd kept her face free of make-up, those dark-lashed hazel eyes and full, firm mouth set delicately above a stubborn little chin had seemed incongruous to her surroundings.

Chance had watched her suffer through months of climbing stairs with heavy gear attached to her back, pumping more than the required amount of poundage in the gymnasium as she tried to prove that her height and weight could hold their own against the other recruits. Only

Faith and one other female had survived the first six months, and the other one, Gloria, had caved in when asked if she'd like a desk job. But not Faith. Faith *wanted* to rush into burning buildings alongside her fellow firemen, whose admiration for her spunk and confidence in her abilities had been slowly won over the course of their intense training.

"What do you make of her?" his commanding officer had asked the week before when they reviewed the files of the recruits who had passed all but the last level of their training. "Think she can do it?"

Chance had shoved his fingers through his hair, his mind snapping to attention as he thought of Faith's outstanding record. She'd placed third out of over a thousand applicants on the written entrance exam. Her oral examination had impressed even the most chauvinistic members of the board who tested her. Physically, she was stronger than some of their men when it came to pumping water, carrying hose, or climbing stairs. God knows she wasn't afraid of doing her job or dying. So what was it about her that made Chance, who was noted for his no-nonsense approach to training, want to throw his arms around her protectively and knock the hell out of anyone who dared so much as glance at her?

"She wants to fight fires," he'd said.

"But can she handle a ladder company, Chance?"

"She can do it. Shift bids are out next week. I don't want her going to another station, so do me a favor? Make sure she's assigned to Station Three."

"Not a difficult request, Chance, considering she's the only female we've got graduating outside of Gloria and considering few of the chiefs want her. But federal regulations require we hire a woman. You sure you want the headache? Do you really have that much *faith* in her?"

Chance had smiled. “No pun intended? I trust her. She’s more than earned it.”

“I sense reservations. Chance, if there’s *any* doubt in your mind that this little lady can’t do the job, you need to tell me now. I’ll bigod *force* her to take a desk job or...she can work with one of the lab groups or...”

Chance shook his head. “The grapevine has it that Bob over at Internal Affairs has already offered her a job. So did Wyatt in Arson. She turned them both down.”

Commander Chuck Griffin smiled and chuckled. “We haven’t had but one woman in ten years do what she’s done...and that one was well over six feet tall! I just don’t get it. Bright, pretty little thing like that. She could’ve done anything she wanted. Why do you suppose she wants to fight fires?”

Chance had shrugged. “She’s a woman, so who knows? You’d think with three daughters and a wife of forty years that you’d not be too surprised.”

“Yeah, but old as I am, women still never cease to amaze me. Of course, I’d put my foot down if one of my own daughters wanted to do this for a living. There’d be hell to pay with the wife, but I’d do it.”

“Not much you *could* do about it, Griff, if they were over twenty-one.” Chance gave his comrade a crooked smile.

“I just don’t get it,” Griff said again. He gave Chance a shrewd look. “You had her followed?”

“You know that’s harassment.”

“So what did you find out?”

“Not much.” Chance winked. “I’m not about to swim in waters that aren’t politically correct with you, Griff.”



Griff snorted. “Since when did you or I do or say anything that *was* politically correct? I’ve known you since you were a rookie. Hell, I sat through the final fire of your training with you.”

Chance thought back to Griffin’s words as he huddled with Faith. He still couldn’t figure out why she’d joined the force, how she’d managed to survive the training, or what her career goals were within the department. But if she was going to work for anyone, it was going to be him. If she survived this last battery of tests. One by fire, the other by water.

He’d already taken her up in the chopper and had her bail out over the Arkansas River in a simulation rescue from air. Two men had thrown up, one had quit the program altogether, and one had fractured a leg and been retired before he was even hired. Faith had merely hoisted her backpack, stared out over the expanse of land and water below, and dove out as if she were Peter Pan when given the command...and all without so much as a kiss-my-ass-I’m-gone.

*If only she weren’t so damned pretty!*

Huddled against her, he could feel her small frame quivering only slightly, probably in anticipation, knowing Faith. She felt good in his arms as they waited for the others in her team to “rescue” them as part of the drill.

The city had purchased this and other ramshackle buildings for fire department training purposes, and while Chance had been through this exercise numerous times, he’d never felt such powerful emotions nor physical responses to a new recruit.

Everyone always wanted to be the rescue team on this particular exercise. Nobody in the twenty years since he’d graduated had *ever* volunteered up front to be the guinea pig who let the others rescue them. In fact, he’d been the last person he knew of who’d done such a thing.

Chance had gone over her application and the growing file that contained her recommendations and qualifications. She'd been a high school English teacher before applying. Not a blemish on her record. Single, attractive, graduated *cum laude* from one of the state's top universities. She'd lived on her own since the age of seventeen when she left home for college and had graduated with a four-year degree in only three years. When asked why she wanted to leave teaching to become a fire fighter, she'd given a standard response that didn't hint of emotional reasons.

But Chance knew in his gut there was something eating away at the woman in his arms. For all her standoffishness and polite professionalism, there raged a secret so dark and dangerous she was willing to throw her life literally in the line of fire with no regard for her own safety. The thought occurred to him that he wanted to probe more than the depths of her reserve as he felt her small, tight butt resting against his stomach. She may not trust him now, but he'd find out just what made Faith Sloan tick if it was the last thing he did as captain.

And, yes. He'd followed her many times. Just to see where she went when she was out of class, he told himself. She stopped at a local bookstore for whatever newspapers she read...and by the looks of it she read two or three each day. She visited her parents for the occasional Friday night pot roast with veggies. And she trained—good Lord, did she train. Faith must've hit the gym for free weights at least three times a week. She ran almost every evening, sometimes through neighborhoods that would've given most women pause.

One evening, when everyone else was gone and the practice field gates were supposed to be locked, Chance caught her running up the stairs of the practice tower with the heavy hose draped across her back and shoulders, the tip of it almost hitting the ground as she climbed.

Faith Sloan was definitely a mystery, and Chance James was the Sherlock Holmes who was going to solve her.

Faith glanced sideways as she felt Chance's incredibly strong, muscled arms about her, protecting her, seeming to comfort her. She'd had to fight her attraction to silver-haired Chance James the moment she'd looked into his frosty blue eyes, and proximity to him still made her shiver, but she'd die before giving him the satisfaction of thinking she was afraid of the fire burning around them or the heat developing in her own body from his nearness.

*One more week*, she told herself, thinking that after graduation she would be free to join a ladder company across town, even if it didn't see as much action as the one where Chance was in charge. There were only three ladder companies in the area, and she'd bid for all three, knowing she was certain to get her first choice considering her evaluations.

It'd been a hard-won victory, but with the exception of Leroy Larson, a short, squatty fire-plug-looking recruit who resented her taking a job away from a *man*, she'd managed to win the respect of her fellow fire fighters. She was sure that while their wives and girlfriends would complain, the men would welcome her no matter where she was stationed. But knowing her own attraction to Captain James? She shuddered involuntarily at the thought of being housed with him on a forty-eight-hour basis once she started her shift of two days on, one day off.

She knew, too, that despite her performance, few—if any—of the captains would want her. Too much hassle. Wives and girlfriends were already bitching because she'd be sleeping in the same bunkers and sharing showers with their husbands and boyfriends, albeit at different intervals. Certainly didn't help her cause as a female when just last

month, two of the firemen across town had been suspended for inviting the perky blonde who delivered their mail to join them in the showers. So Faith could well imagine the glass bowl in which she'd be living, where her every move would be suspect.

As she shivered, she felt Chance's arms tighten about her, pulling her closer into the comfort and safety of his body.

"Sloan?" His voice was rough against the back of her neck.

"I'm alright. It's nothing," she managed to say through her mask.

She swallowed hard and closed her eyes, knowing that any second several of the men from her class would be bursting through with hatchets and hose to rescue them, each man realizing his every move was being monitored and measured from instructors outside as well as inside, that his performance on this assignment would be the making or breaking point of his future career in the Fire Department.

Soon she heard the first axe hit the wall separating her and her captain from the flames that threatened to engulf them. She steeled herself not to react, not to run toward them but to let them find her as planned. But in her effort to remain calm, her thoughts drifted back to her reason for joining the fire department.

Billy. Poor, underachiever, picked-on Billy Freeman, who had flunked so many years that he was growing facial hair before he was even out of junior high.

"*Why?*" she'd asked him tearfully, after she and several of the students in her charge had been rescued from the flaming school building.

He'd stood sullenly as policemen cuffed him and led him away, but the look in his eyes had told her volumes of reasons. Because nobody had paid any attention to him except to correct him—his speech, his slovenly appearance, his manners, his schoolwork. He'd been so alone

and angry, and she as his teacher should've seen that. She should've been able to do something, send him for more counseling...something. Anything to have kept him from setting fire to the school and injuring so many others...and killing two.

Her principal and even her own parents had tried to calm and comfort her, but Faith couldn't shake the feeling that if only one of the adults in Billy's life had been there for him, so much monetary damage and human life could've been saved.

"They're almost here," Chance said in low tones.

Faith could only nod to let him know she'd heard him. She didn't dare speak for fear her voice would waver, and she didn't want him above all the others to know how frightened she really was.

She did what she'd done for the past year and a half whenever she felt frightened. She steeled herself to think of Rob Dunaway. And how because she didn't have the strength to lift him and haul him out of the burning school building, he'd died in the fire...mere inches from safety.

Rob had been her best friend when she signed on with Quartz Public Schools in the countryside suburb of Oklahoma City. His math classroom had been directly across the hall from where she taught history and civics. They'd started out exchanging glances during her first teachers' meeting and then again later at the opening school assembly. They'd begun having lunch together, and most of their conversations had dealt with students and how they could help them.

Billy had been a topic nearly every day. Rob had tried to mentor the young man, to give him a feeling of self-worth and pride. But Billy's home life was something out of an Abuse of the Week movie. A father who beat him, a mother who ignored him, and a desperately poor grandmother who had no control over the child when his parents were gone.

The day of the fire had started smoothly enough. Then a couple of Billy's classmates had poked fun at the peach-fuzz growing on his chin. Somebody else had chimed in about him being stupid, saying he'd otherwise never have remained in the same grade so long.

And even though one of his friends had taken up for him, Billy had spent the rest of the morning sulking and moody. At noon, he'd skipped school. His teachers had done the required attendance checks and turned them in, and while it wasn't unusual for Billy to miss class, none of them had been prepared for what happened next.

Before the truant officer left to go look for Billy, the first Molotov cocktail flew into a classroom at the opposite end of the building from Faith's wing. The next landed in Rob's room, where the students who had taunted him were taking a math quiz. Within seconds, students were screaming and bolting, despite their teachers' warnings to remember their fire drills. One girl's blouse and hair had caught on fire—papers flamed like torches.

And every student and teacher had shaken with disbelief that anything so terrifying could happen.

After the majority of the students were accounted for outside, Rob had realized one of his students was missing and went back into the building with Faith on his heels, while other teachers tended to the students she and Rob left in their charge.

They were on their way out of the building with the boy in tow, when the ceiling in the hall gave, showering them with debris. Rob had been trapped, breaking his leg in an effort to dodge the falling ceiling tiles.

Faith had ushered the boy outside then gone back for Rob. He had crawled to a nearby classroom was nearly unconscious from smoke inhalation by the time she found him. Fire blocked their way back through the classroom door, so she'd managed to drag Rob to a high

window with a ledge, hoping to haul him to safety, but their escape was just out of her reach. Standing on a student's chair, she'd been able to stare over the brick and mortar to the schoolyard below, where firemen were clamoring from their truck.

Even now, her heart raced as she thought of the fire and the fear that had gripped her. The absolute panic as she'd tried in vain to hoist Rob up to the ledge in order to pull him to safety. Screams of terror had filled her mind and lungs. And the certainty, even as she'd tried pulling him to her, that they'd never make it.

But she'd lived, and Rob, who'd already inhaled too much smoke before she reached him, didn't. He'd died within minutes.

She jumped despite herself when strong arms reached to grasp her, her mind splintering into shards of panic as she fought to distinguish between the past and the present.

Faith felt Chance's hands on her ass, helping move her forward, his palms pressed flat against her rounded bottom. She grimaced. *Out of one fire, and into another.*

## Chapter Two

Later that night, Chance knew as he followed her that Faith would need to unwind, that somehow the free weights and running she did wouldn't be strong enough to free her from whatever demons filled her mind and propelled her into such a dangerous career choice.

He'd gone home after the drill, showered and crashed on his couch, trying to rid his mind of how soft she'd felt in his arms. How extremely vulnerable, despite their gear. His hands had crept to his throbbing cock at the thought of her, his fingers working to release the tension he'd felt with her butt planted in his stomach, so tantalizing, so easily accessible, If only he'd had the bad sense and good courage to let her know he'd like nothing better than to fuck her. Would've made them both feel better after the ordeal.

Now she wore a simple black cocktail dress of a frothy material that billowed about her body. It had a diagonal hem, and the sexy side slit showcased her legs. The neckline bared one shoulder completely, exposing a slender, graceful neck.

Chance's breath caught in his throat after she locked her door then dropped the key to her apartment into the bodice of the form-fitting concoction. If lingering, wistful stares could caress, her nipples would've been tight and ripe for licking.

Chance felt himself near laughter. *Clever girl*. Even though she was carrying a purse, she used her street smarts. Women who hid their keys



had a fighting chance to ward off a would-be rapist or mugger. One good jab to the eye, and the attack was usually thwarted.

She slung the small purse with its glittering chain over her shoulder and walked briskly towards her car, the calves of her legs and the small yet defined muscles of her tanned arms proof that her visits to the gym and track had paid off well.

Chance blinked and wet his lips, knowing he would follow her. That dress and the high heels encasing her feet said *dance with me*. And the creamy skin and loose, flowing hair begged *make love to me*. Chance could only hope the outfit wasn't meant for anyone in particular.

He was grateful when she parked her four-wheel drive at Sal's Firehouse, a nightclub known for its blues, jazz, and old-fashioned rock and roll rather than a boisterous teeny-bopper joint where the inhabitants were more concerned with getting laid than dancing. Sal's was a pub-restaurant and catered mainly to firemen and their groupies. It had begun as a memorial to Oklahoma's fallen fire fighters and was staffed by retired firemen. Maybe...just maybe...he'd have an opportunity to talk with her there.

"Hey, Faith!" the bartender called out, coming around the wrap-around polished oak that separated him from his customers. "Long time, no see, girl!"

As Chance studied him, wondering where he'd seen him before, Faith leaned forward and hugged him then sat at the bar and ordered her drink. Before it arrived, she'd already been asked to dance.

Chance sat several feet away at the bar where he could observe, and he had to make a concerted effort not to leap to her defense when her dance partner's hands roamed from her shoulders to her deliciously rounded butt.

The first time it happened, Faith merely pulled his hands back up to her waist. The second time, when the man complained that he just wanted something to hold onto and let his hands wander, Faith kneed him in the groin.

“Now you’ve got something to hold onto,” she quipped, turning on her heels and leaving him in the middle of the dance floor clutching his balls.

Chance hid a smile of admiration and chuckled. Maybe all she wanted tonight was to dance. In that case, he’d oblige her.

He slid off the barstool with his drink and moved to stand behind her as she took a sip of the champagne cocktail her bartender friend had set before her moments earlier.

“You learn that move at the academy?” he asked softly, stuffing his free hand into his pocket to resist touching her bare shoulder.

Faith turned her head seductively to peer over her shoulder and smiled, the first real smile Chance had seen from her in weeks. The last time had been at the chili cook-off when she’d accepted her co-recruits’ challenge to sample the five-alarm batch prepared by one of the chiefs who had volunteered to host the event.

“Is that a yes or a no?” he asked.

“It’s an invitation. Sit down, Captain James.”

“Chance. Don’t you think since we’re both out of uniform and having a drink together that you can call me by my first name?”

“Sure. Considering after today we probably won’t even see one another except at stuffy meetings or blazing fires...that is if Number Three needs help from the God Squad at Station Seven.” She grinned and motioned for him to sit beside her.

Chance opened his mouth to tell her she’d be working side by side with him, rather than with the God Squad, starting Monday but decided

against it. Better to let her relax for at least one evening before springing that surprise on her.

“Did you really apply to work for that inflated group of testosterone?” he asked. “I wouldn’t have thought rappelling off of the side of buildings was your thing.”

“Is Chance really your name, or is it a cover-up for something more austere and intimidating like Maximilian or Boris?” she countered.

He narrowed his eyes and baited her. “No, it’s really Chance. As in my mama took one with my daddy and then later with me. Care to take one?”

“One what?”

“Chance. There’s a nice little dance floor not ten feet from us, and I promise to keep my hands off of your ass.”

Faith blushed, nodding her head slowly. “You saw all of that?”

“I saw.” He set his own drink down then reached for hers, his fingertips brushing her wrist as she relinquished the glass. He stood and held out his arm for her to take. When she slipped her fingers around his forearm, he led her to the center of the floor just as a slow, seductive melody began.

Faith melted against him, and her body felt warm and liquid in his arms.

“How many of those drinks did you have, anyway?” he asked, stifling a chuckle.

“Just the one.”

“So why did you chug it?”

“Because I’m celebrating, Captain James. I am celebrating two year’s worth of planning and sweating to grasp this momentous achievement.”

Chance frowned. “But your training has only been for a year.”

“Yeah,” Faith drawled, “but I started working towards this goal a year before that.” Her face clouded, and she closed her eyes, as if she were blocking out the past rather than sinking into the comfort of the present.

“I see. And what happened two years ago that made you decide to become a firefighter?” Chance asked softly.

“Ah, but that would be confiding secrets, Captain, and I don’t know you well enough to tell you my darkest thoughts.”

Chance decided to let the moment pass without further questions. While he was still intrigued at her reasons for joining the fire department, he was more interested in keeping her in his arms.

He was surprised at how well they moved together, because he’d spent maybe a full thirty minutes in the past ten years on a dance floor. If he let himself think about it, it’d be another ten years before he did so again. Dancing just wasn’t his thing...too intimate in most circumstances. Now, however...not bad at all.

“Chance, you crazy bastard!” a rough voice chided him when they finished their dance and returned to the bar.

Chance narrowed his eyes as he studied the bartender. “Dennis?”

“That’s right! I thought I recognized you!” The bartender patted his firm stomach and stood back in order for Chance to admire him.

“You must’ve lost eighty pounds or better!” Chance exclaimed.

“A little over a hundred...but who’s counting?” Dennis Grady said with a laugh. “What brings you in here? My God, man...it’s been three years since I’ve seen you.”

“When did you start working here?” Chance asked, completely forgetting about the woman at his side.

“Just before Christmas of 2001. Had to do something to keep busy.”

“Yeah. I heard about your cousin in New York that year. I’m sorry, Denny.”

Faith excused herself to go to the bathroom, and Denny shrugged. “We all know when we sign on that things happen. Of course, nobody could’ve predicted 9/11, but...just the same. Shit happens. He’d have wanted to go that way.”

Chance nodded and swallowed a hard lump in his throat as he thought of the hundreds of firemen who’d lost their lives that day.

Once she was out of earshot of her companion, Faith nearly burst into tears. She’d have been just fine if the men’s talk hadn’t turned to 9/11. Seemed once topics of that nature were brought up, one death by fire after another got mentioned, and right now she couldn’t handle it.

Rob had been on her mind constantly, and each step closer to graduation, instead of making her feel better, only made her feel worse. Sure, he’d been her catalyst for joining the fire department, and he’d be proud she’d completed her training. She’d rather have her friend beside her, though, instead of six feet under.

Once inside the women’s restroom, she ran cold water over her wrists and splashed some of it on her face, hoping to settle her nerves. What was it about her handsome dance partner that unnerved her so badly?

She and Rob had never been more than good friends, but during that time, she’d been comfortable, secure in his friendship, free from the demands of a lover or anyone who wanted more from her than she could give.

With Chance James, she felt like she was free-falling, enjoying the excitement but waiting for the ground to rush up to smash her at any moment if she let him get to know her.

“It’s the thrill of the job—that’s all it is,” she told her reflection in the mirror. “Outside the job, you’d never strike up a conversation with him. Now go back out there and forget about Rob for the time being.”

Dennis leaned forward on his elbows and said in a whisper, “What I want to know is how you managed to get Faith Sloan to dance with you after she just decked a man on the floor?”

“You know her? How long has she been coming in here?”

“Maybe six months. But she usually keeps to herself. Just has a drink or two then splits.” Dennis cocked his head and gave a low whistle. “Never saw her dressed up like she is tonight, though. Must be she passed the final exercises.”

“Yep. With flying colors. I was in the bunker with her when it was on fire.”

“R-e-a-l-l-y? Well, don’t know why I’m surprised she did it.”

“Did it, hell—she volunteered!” Chance told him.

“No shit? So what are you doing here? You follow her?”

“I was worried about her.”

“Know what you mean. The fellas and I always keep an eye on her when she comes in here. She only comes in maybe once or twice a week, and then it’s usually for a sandwich or something. Never on karaoke night—God, I hate that shit myself! And I never saw her dance before, so I figured she was celebrating something. Well, good for her.”

Chance snorted. “Yeah. Well, she may not be so happy come tomorrow or next week when she gets her mail. I snagged her before she could get on with one of the other stations.”

“You *want* a female on your shift?” Dennis’s eyes were wide with surprise.

“I want her.” Chance reconsidered his choice of words. “I just don’t want her to go anywhere else. She wants to fight fires, not get involved with politics or wind up sitting behind a desk. She’ll do better under me.”

When Dennis was the one who snorted this time, Chance amended, "You asshole. You know what I mean."

"Yeah, buddy boy, I'll bet I do at that!" Dennis winked and moved to another customer as Faith returned.

*Now what?* Chance asked himself as Faith sat beside him and held up her empty glass for Dennis to hit her again.

She turned to Chance and said candidly, "I'm going to drink another of these and then...then...I'm going home. And I'd like for you to come with me."

"P-pardon me?"

"I'm inviting you to come home with me, Captain James. While I'm still quite sober and quite lucid, I am asking you if you'd like to take me home and spend the night. You can bring your hat and your ass, or you can leave your hat at home. The choice is yours. But I don't want to be alone tonight, so I'm asking you...please...come home with me and spend the night?"

## Chapter Three

"This is a mistake...this is a mistake...this is a mistake..." Chance ranted as he followed Faith's car back to her apartment. He thought of the many reasons he should just go home, jerk off in the shower, and reconsider having her reassigned to another station.

For one thing, there was a rather large age difference. Sure, he'd gone prematurely silver-haired, as had his father and grandfather before him, but he was still a good twelve years and many life experiences older than Faith.

*But she does have a tight little butt and big brown eyes,* warred the devil on his shoulder.

"Shut up!" Chance snapped at his horny alter ego.

For another thing, he'd wrestled most of his demons, while Faith's eyes betrayed her...she had ghosts to put to rest.

"She's also one of your employees come a week from Monday," Chance reasoned, shifting down as they entered her apartment complex entrance. "She's going to get her letter tomorrow morning or sometime early next week letting her know you're her boss."

*You want to protect her from the harassment and problems she'll face if she goes to another station,* the devil countered. *Don't forget the locker room jokes, the long hours, and the prejudices many of the men still hold toward female firefighters. She might quit on you.*



“Not this one. She’s a fighter, and she’s on a mission to prove something to herself.”

*Some of the men are still going to be tough on her.*

“Precisely why I want to keep her close to me and away from those who could damage her self-esteem and make things rough for her on the job. I can watch her, let her do her job, but make sure there’s muscle and size around when it comes to something that might endanger her or the others.”

*Ah-ha. So you don’t really trust her to do her job.*

“Of course I do! And I am still her supervisor come Monday.”

*Already covered that one, buddy boy...but she’s not your employee tonight, so why not let her continue taking charge of this thing tonight?*

“Damn it to hell!” Chance muttered, shutting off his engine and stepping out to greet her as she exited the vehicle to his left.

Faith gave him a sultry once-over then beckoned for him to follow her up the stairs leading to her second floor apartment.

The space between her apartment and the one across the hall had been turned into a cabana-like retreat. Two rattan sofas stuffed with colorful cushions, a couple of end tables bearing plants, and a magnificent view of the kidney-shaped swimming pool below made the small area cozy, almost like some Caribbean hideaway.

Faith opened the door to her apartment, and a silver-haired cat ran out and jumped into her arms.

“Athena!” Faith cooed, stroking the cat’s fur. “Poor baby. You didn’t get to hunt earlier when Mama was home, did you?” She turned to Chance. “Captain, meet Athena, Goddess of the Cat World and Tormentor of Neighborhood Dogs. She just stopped to say hello and to remind me that I didn’t let her roam enough earlier.”

Faith set Athena on the ground then drifted into the apartment, turning on a floor lamp in the compact but cozy living room.

Chance wasn't sure whether to follow her or not as she headed down the hall toward what he assumed was her bedroom. Then she looked over her shoulder and issued an invitation with her eyes. If she'd grabbed his cock and led him, the lure couldn't have been as forceful as that one look.

The room was bathed in moonlight, but Chance could see the outline of a very large and very real fireplug sitting near her closet doors.

"You're kidding, right?"

"I know lifting street signs and other city property is a no-no," she told him, "but this was being thrown into the dump after it was replaced."

"When did you acquire this bit of furniture?" he asked, removing his jacket and laying it across the fireplug.

"Couple of years ago. I was with a friend...my mentor in the fire department, if you will. We were in the truck bays at his station, and he saw me eyeing the thing and said if it was gone when he got back, he wouldn't ask any questions."

"Surely, you didn't...?"

"By myself? Not when there were four other firefighters and a dolly standing by. No. Getting the damn thing up the stairs was the real test, however." She smiled then turned her back for him to unzip her.

Chance's fingers slid through the soft curtain of hair, giving him access to the zipper, and he felt her shiver slightly when the backs of his fingers grazed her neck. He bent to drop a light kiss on her shoulder as the dress slid down her arms, and when she relaxed against him, exposing her breasts to the moonlight, he knew he was a goner.

Her arms crept up and back to entwine about his neck, and she rolled her head against his chest, giving him total access to her body from the front and inviting his hands to claim her.

He'd never known a woman so trusting, so willing to give herself to the moment. To unabashedly invite him as she had, to taste and touch her. And he wasn't about to say no.

She turned in his arms and began aggressively undressing him, her fingers sure and confident as she released his belt and practically ripped his shirt open.

"Faith!" he whispered, his head bent to her hair. "Are you sure that you...?"

"I'm sure!" she said, pressing her lips against his chest and trailing kisses across it as she continued in her quest to strip him to the bone. "I want you!"

After a failed marriage several years back, in which case nobody wanted anybody, and several affairs in which case the spark just wasn't there, Chance was overwhelmed with her passion, her audacity, and her...*enjoyment* of the moment. She took his breath away!

The little devil on his shoulder smiled an evil *ah-ha* as they tumbled to the bed in a flurry of undergarments.

He tried to register his thoughts, to rationalize why he was a party to this seduction, how he could possibly face her afterwards once she knew how their relationship would change come Monday morning. He struggled not to fall into the abyss she'd created and to cling to at least one solid reason for not sleeping with her tonight.

"Faith, I didn't plan...that is, I didn't bring any..."

She leaned over and pulled a foil packet from her bedside table. "Taken care of, sir."

"But...this is...I mean, you've had a bit to drink tonight."

"I'm not drunk." She shut him up with a kiss. "Intoxicated in another way, but I assure you that I am not drunk."

Chance lay back and moaned in ecstasy as Faith administered the condom on his aching shaft.

"Captain," Faith said, after she'd managed to land on top of him, with his hands on her bare hips and her body poised above him. "I'm not asking for your hand in marriage." She cupped his balls as she slid down on him.

"Nope," he agreed breathlessly, enunciating each following word clearly in an effort to maintain concentration. "That wouldn't be my hand."

"Then show a little enthusiasm." She gouged him in the ribs and laughed. "You're not immune to me, are you?"

"This feel like I'm immune?" His hips thrust to meet hers.

Faith eased herself up and down over his body, rubbing her stomach with her fingertips before letting them travel upwards to caress her own breasts and then to slip into her hair as Chance's hands replaced hers on her body. And as blood gathered speed and intensity in his veins and his rod became more rigid, she began thrusting harder, taking him deeper and eliciting one unvarnished groan after another from him, her body glistening with sweat the closer she came to climaxing.

Chance pulled her off him and rolled her onto her back.

"No!" she cried. "Chance...no...please!"

"I want to taste you as you come." He growled, burying his face into the moist curls that had rubbed against his groin moments before.

He thrust his tongue inside of her and laved her clit, tugging at it until he had his teeth gently but securely planted on it. She clutched his hair and screamed as his growls of hunger and pleasure pushed her over the edge and one firecracker blast after another raced through her.

Before she could catch her breath, he was inside her again, urging her toward another fiery release that completely shattered her.

Her fingernails raked his back as she fought for control of her senses...dear God...he wasn't finished with her. The anxiety and frustration she'd been feeling for weeks that had culminated into an unbearable ache was finally being extinguished. She cried out once more as she felt his body swell even more than she'd thought possible, and Chance suddenly exploded inside of her, his shoulders and ass drenched with a heat that sent tremors throughout her soul.

She hadn't meant to kiss him...merely to screw him blue, but she found herself searching for his lips, burning for one more taste of him, one more reassurance that what she'd felt was real, that she wouldn't wake up later still feeling as off-center as she'd felt prior to meeting him at the pub.

But Chance wasn't letting her off that easy...not just with a few kisses. He drained every last kiss he could from her lips before he sank beside her on the bed and curled his body around hers from behind.

One of his hands splayed across her stomach while the other clung to her hair, tugging until her neck was resting against his chest and her head far enough back that he could trail his tongue across her carotid artery. Then he slid the hand on her stomach down...down...and slipped inside her slick opening. Her pussy muscles tightened then clamped down on his fingers as he played with her.

"Wh—what are you doing?" she gasped.

"What does it feel like I'm doing?" He flicked one of her earlobes with his tongue. "I'm hoping to start another fire."

"Captain...trust me. The first one is going to burn itself out, say...oh, never. No need to start another one on top of it."

He nudged her bottom with his erection. "Oh, I was thinking something besides top."

She giggled. "I don't think so."

"I do, however, think that maybe we'd be better off with asbestos sheets next time," he teased. "Considering how quickly this last one got out of hand."

She rolled to face him and lock her fingers behind his head. "Thank you," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

"What was that for?" He wasn't at all embarrassed at being butt naked with her but felt out of his element with a sincere, sweet little peck on the cheek.

"For following me home. For helping me through what had promised to be a very rough night."

"I'd have thought you'd be celebrating tonight. You've graduated from the academy—it's party time."

"What makes you think I'm not celebrating?" Her tongue darted out to lick her top lip as she grinned mischievously.

"Come here, you!" Chance was immediately hard and ready for her again.

She squealed as he grasped her bottom and pulled her toward him again then eased into her wet pussy.

He was mid-stride, working up to a full-blown fire hose bursting to be pumped, when she shrieked.

Chance stopped moving and watched her face in the moonlight—she was in pain! "What the fuck?" he asked.

Next thing he knew, Faith had writhed from beneath him and was on all fours on her bedroom floor, moaning and clutching her ass, stretching and crying.

"Faith?"

“O-o-o-we! I have a butt cramp!” she wailed, continuing to move like a cat in heat.

She made it to the fireplug and clutched it like a drowning woman, clinging to it tightly, sobbing and giggling. “I am so-so-so sorry!”

Chance sat back on her bed, positive he looked like some naked, grinning Buddha, struggling to keep his composure. “Is there anything I can do?”

“N-n-no! Un-un-n-n-fortunately. I’ll just have to work it out.”

Chance deliberated on asking whether or not this might occur before the sun came up or his balls shriveled to the size of peanuts from the cold night air. He didn’t know how long he should witness her agony without doing something to alleviate her pain.

“Faith, I’m not used to seeing anyone hurting without doing something.”

“Then fix me a fucking drink!” She practically yelled the last statement as another spasm hit her and she grabbed her ass.

Gone was the elusive butterfly, the reserved mystery woman she’d become to him. He smiled as he bounded off the bed, already liking this side of her he’d just witnessed.

“Where’s your liquor?” he asked.

“Under the cabinet directly opposite the sink!” she called.

“Not bad, Chance,” he mused, rifling through her cabinets for glasses and alcohol. “She’ll get along great with the boys at the station. Can definitely hold her own.”

His face clouded. Damn. He’d forgotten about Monday. How could he in good conscience work with her after sleeping with her? It went against company policy—and it definitely went against his own personal code of ethics.

On the other hand, how could he bear letting her out of his sight, knowing she'd be safer working for him than anyone else? Or was that just his ego talking...or his lack of faith in her abilities if she was out there alone without him?

Jesus. An ass cramp? With *him* watching?

Faith hobbled to the kitchen and hung her head in mortification as Chance drifted about the galley, so out of place in the tiny quarters, yet so right. Her mother would have preferred him fully clothed and the room with some form of countrified apples or geese or even equine décor, but to Faith, the sight of the stalwart man's towel-wrapped body was plenty adornment for her apartment.

"How's your tush?" He didn't look at her as he spoke. They may as well have been discussing the weather.

"So tight you could bounce a quarter off it."

"I've never cramped there, but I understand it can be painful."

"Can we discuss something besides my ass, please?" *Look at me and laugh, and you're a dead man.*

"What would you like to discuss? *My* ass?" He finished pouring their wine, a stout red. "Did you recently move in?"

"Been here nearly five years." She caught the surprised lift of eyebrows as he took in the bare walls and pristine countertops. "I'm just not home much."

Chance turned to face her and handed her the wine. Clinking his glass softly against hers, he nodded. "Your apartment is fine, Faith. It just doesn't have that lived-in look. So you're either an extraordinary housekeeper, or you just use the place to sleep and pet the cat."

Her pulse jumped when he lifted a hand to smooth her hair. "You look like you just woke up."



"I feel cheated—we didn't get to finish."

Chance bit his lips for a second. "You told me not to mention your ass again, but if we 'finish', I need to know how you'll..."

"I'll manage." She quirked a finger. "Come with me." She walked to the sliding glass doors leading to her patio. Setting her glass on the outside bistro table, she wiggled her butt, stretched like a cat, then clasped the iron railing before her.

A mild gasp alerted her that he realized her intent. "Out here?"

"Everyone is asleep, and we're out of doors. Besides, the tree branches overhead will hide us from the apartments across the pool and next to us."

"Baby, I won't be looking at anything but you!" He set his glass beside hers. Before long, she felt his hands gently clasping her hips and sliding over the contours of her lower body. "What about the people downstairs or on ground level?"

Faith reached behind her and yanked off his towel. Before he could protest, she spread it over the railing. "That make you feel better?"

Chance's fingers worked her cramping muscles. "This feel good?"

"Mm-hmm."

He nestled his body against hers, his free cock stiff against her buttocks. "You'll have to bend a little more, sweetheart."

"No." She reached behind her and guided him upwards. "Not there." She rubbed her asshole against his rod. "Here."

She arched her back, leaning forward and gulping in the night air, smelling the mimosa beneath the balcony. Chance's hands on her back and ass as he slowly inched his way inside her seemed to awaken all of her other senses. She could still taste the wine he'd given her, hear his voice in her ear as he rode her only moments earlier. The wind caressed her nipples and lifted her hair, pulling it away from her face. When she

closed her eyes, it was easy to imagine them on top of a mountain with no restraints, physical or otherwise. Free...she felt free, for the first time since Rob's death. Shackles of guilt broken, invisible bars surrounding her heart melting.

Chance's cock throbbed as he pushed in gently, pulled out slowly, in an aching tender dance. "Am I hurting you?"

Faith shook her head, unable to speak. She swayed, protected from falling by the railing, secured yet not trapped by her lover's hands. Soaring, free-falling, each crescendo blending with a complimentary, anticlimactic relaxation...until the upsurge of her thoughts and body's responses built to a thundering peak and plateaued.

His breath fell soft against her back and he dropped tiny kisses along her spine. She could tell from the weight of his body leaning against hers that he was exhausted.

Time for a swim. If she didn't break the spell they'd created, she'd find herself falling for him.

## **Chapter Four**

“Oh, dear God, this has to have been the longest night of my life!” She trailed her hands in the pool water, sighing, once the last vestige of butt cramp subsided. It felt good to drift naked in her apartment complex’s kidney-shaped pool with the lights out. “And that is in no way an indication that I haven’t enjoyed the hours spent with you!”

“You sneak down here and skinny dip often?” Chance asked. She’d intrigued him when she used a key to let them into the locked gate, but he hadn’t questioned her about her access to the pool area.

“Every night I can. Does that surprise you?” Faith eyed him calmly.

She looked tired to Chance—hell, who wouldn’t be after the day and night she’d had?

He shook his head. “Nothing much surprises me any more.” Which was a damn lie—Faith shocked the shit out of him every time he turned around and discovered yet another facet of her personality.

“I mow the grass here during warm weather,” she explained, “so I have keys to the clubhouse and the security gates. One of the perks for keeping the grounds is that only the owner, the office manager, and I have keys to the swimming pool. The owner lives out of state, my boss is in his seventies, and I...am left alone.”

“Anyone ever caught you?” Chance asked, only half-teasing, wondering if anyone would catch him naked in the pool.

“Once. Little old man and woman who walk every night passed by here, and they saw the water rippling but didn’t see me. They reported to the manager that they thought someone was in the pool, but by the time he checked it out, I had my suit back on and the cleaning equipment in my hands.” She laughed. “And I didn’t lie—I’d come out that night to clean the sides of the pool before the urge hit to skinny dip.”

Chance noticed that she’d managed to hide beneath the bridge, where even the moonlight didn’t catch her, and he swam toward her, his body hard and tense at the sight of her eyes watching him.

“Sweet set-up you have here,” he commented once he reached her. “But how do you have any kind of social life if you’re working or in training all the time?”

“I don’t.” Two simple words, no explanation.

Chance’s mind somersaulted as he listened to her, watched her lips and eyes, drank in the sight of her glistening body. God, he wanted her again—right here—right now, but first he had to tell her what he’d intended to tell her before they slept together.

“Come Monday, Faith...”

She paddled next to him, her naked body brushing against his, her long legs wrapping around his torso, nudging her pussy next to his shaft. She placed a finger softly against his lips.

“That’s Monday,” she said. “This is tonight, so let’s enjoy it.”

He couldn’t believe it. She wanted him, too, and he wasn’t about to say no to fucking her amidst crystal blue waters with moonlight falling about them. Still, his conscious pricked him.

“Faith, honey...I need to tell you something.”

Faith’s fingers slid down his back and butt then around front to cup his balls. “Chance, do you think you could just be my lover a few more hours instead of one of my instructors? I haven’t slept with a man in two

years, and I'm quite content to leave the office for a couple of days, if you are."

He looked at her skeptically. Her lips teased, but her eyes were sincere. How could this dynamo in bed have gone without sex for that long? But then, she'd told him upfront that her fire training had started two years ago.

An insipid, irrational jealousy claimed him as he thought of the last man who'd been with her. Well, she was his for tonight, and Chance would damn well leave the past in the past and work on making sure she felt nothing but pleasure between now and her first day on the job.

"What about the condom?" he asked as she played with his body, arousing him to the point that he was ready to combust without even being inside of her.

"I have a better idea. Let's play seventy-one. I'll do you, and you'll owe me a couple." She winked then dove beneath the water.

Chance parted his lips to offer a smartass retort, but her body was quicker than his mind; he grasped the cement base of the bridge above him, a groan escaping his lips, and he felt Faith's lips and tongue suckling him.

He rolled his eyes heavenward and thanked the stars, the moon, and whatever deity might be looking down upon them, marveling that two recluses such as themselves had found one another.

Much later that morning, he woke up when the telephone beside her bed rang and he almost answered it, forgetting where he was. He looked down to find her head on his chest, her hair splayed across both him and their pillows.

Faith reached blindly for the ringing instrument, hauling herself upright and pulling the sheet to cover her, as if the person on the other end of the phone could see her.

“Mom?”

The one word in the English language that could kill a hard-on quicker than anything else.

Chance listened as he trotted off to the bathroom, giving her privacy, picking up Faith’s occasional “uh-huh” or “yeah” or “no, not really”, keeping his eyes averted so as not to distract her until she said, “No-no! Don’t do that—I have someone I can ask!” Her eyes met his as he reentered the bedroom.

Her face was flushed, as if she’d just been embarrassed, and her hair had that just-been-fucked look, which made her even more appealing. She’d been mind-blowing in the dark, but in the bright light of day, she was still beautiful.

“What was that about?” he asked when she’d hung up and dove under the covers.

“My family! Aacck!” She groaned, the sheets and thin blanket barely stifling her scream.

Then she popped her head from beneath the covers and said through gritted teeth and a forced smile. “Family picnic at the folks this evening, which is well and good. But they’re inviting *eligible* men—it’s spawning season to Dad, who loves fishing, and mating season to Mom, who wants grandchildren. So any way you cut it, they’re fixing me up.”

Chance sniggered.

Her glance shot daggers at him. “Laugh, and die, Captain.”

Chance bit his lips and nodded, but he knew his face reddened when he kept his laughter in check.

Faith smacked him with a pillow, and the tussle was on.

“Hey!” he said in mock pain, dodging her blows. “I have a family, too, so I know what you mean.”

Faith sat back on her haunches, stark naked, face flushed and eyes bright. “I’ll bet you two hamburgers and all of the hot dogs you can eat that you have never in your life met a couple like Joanne and Larry Sloan.”

“You’re on!” Chance answered the challenge. “You’ve never met Alan, Tabitha, and Missy.”

She frowned. “Who is Missy?”

“My kid sister—she’s a student at Oklahoma State.”

“Uh-oh,” Faith said. “Dem’s fightin’ words to a Sooner fan.”

He gave her a cocky grin. “Then there’s Gloria, Mitch, Kara, Desiree, and Joey—my ex-wife, her husband, and my three daughters.”

“You have a family?”

“Sort of. Gloria and I are on good terms now that we’re divorced, but it must be a female thing. She and the girls are anxious for me to find someone else, somebody who doesn’t mind that Dear Old Dad works a dangerous job and might not come home some times as expected.”

“Oh.” Faith covered her torso with the pillow. “I had no idea you’d been married.”

“How do you think I got all this gray hair?” he joked.

“Silver—your hair isn’t gray; it’s a lovely...” she dropped the pillow and leaned toward him, “...exciting...” she kissed his lips, “...sexy...” she slid neatly into his arms, “...silver.”

“Talk like that will definitely get you fucked again,” he said, kissing her back.

“Good. We have a few hours before I have to be at my parents’ house.” She rose to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“To fix a sandwich. Want one?”

He shook his head. “I’m not hungry.”

Faith stared at him. “I’m starving—how can you not want food after a fuckfest like this?”

He pulled her back onto the bed. “I’m hungry for you.”

Faith dropped her voice to a sultry whisper, her hands reaching for his cock. “So make me *hot*, Chance. Make me come for you again.”

He grinned and started sliding into position. “You sure you’re not just using me, that you’re not after that ‘just been fucked’ look to get your folks off of your back?”

Faith laughed. “Well, if you’re up to it, sure. Why not?”

But this time there wasn’t an answering laugh or so much as a chuckle from him. The look in his eyes told her that this time, he wasn’t after her pussy, he was after her soul.

“Faith,” he whispered her name, his body finding its mark. He burned her with another kiss, slanting his mouth against hers then following her jaw line with his lips, rubbing the tip of his pulsating dick against her clit. Giving, withholding, teasing and tormenting her, his tongue flicked her shoulder and his teeth nipping her neck gently as he slid in and out of her, filling her, driving her wild with need and want.

His fingers wound through her hair, clinging to her, as if his hands, like his cock, couldn’t get enough of her.

“Oh!” A small cry escaped her lips. “Chance...”

“I’m here, baby, I’m here,” he whispered in her ear. “You feel so damned good, Faith! I don’t want to let you go!”

She locked her legs around his hips, welcoming each thrust, her body begging for more...his touch, his caress, his taste, the sound of his voice.

What was happening to her? This wasn’t what she’d planned. She’d just wanted to release some pent up emotions, not fall for the guy.



Tears pooled in her eyes as her brain finally caught up with her body. This wasn't fucking—this was mating, and she had definitely crossed over into unfamiliar territory.

## Chapter Five

"They're nice people," she said, as she and Chance approached her parents' home from the driveway, where she'd parked her SUV.

Chance wasn't used to women driving him around, but somehow he felt safe in Faith's hands, both figuratively and literally.

"I'm sure they are," he said, falling into step beside her.

She stopped for a moment and sighed. "Damnit, Harold is here."

"Who?"

"Harold Denton. They've tried fixing me up with him for years."

Chance slid an arm about her waist, his hand coming to rest in one of the hip pockets of her jeans. "Want me to p—be more than just a date tonight? Would that help?"

He'd almost said *pretend*, but truth was, he didn't feel like pretending anything with her and hoped she'd say yes.

"Would you mind?" she asked, her face brightening, but a tinge of pink to her cheeks. "I hate to ask—I mean, I know it's deceptive."

"Not at all. My pleasure."

*Little does she know*, Chance told himself. He was afraid he'd make an ass of himself as it was, if another male so much as made conversation that lasted too long with her tonight.

"Look at all that food!" Faith said, shaking her head. "My dad has probably been at that grill half of the afternoon. Doesn't that look like ribs to you?" She pointed to a huge platter of beef piled on a plate.

Chance nodded. "Yup."

"You much of a beef eater?"

"I'm not much of any kind of eater these days except pussy!" He popped her unceremoniously on the butt with his palm.

Faith popped him back. "Well, you can make up for it tonight." She stopped and stared at him for a moment. "You haven't eaten much when I've been with you, come to think of it. You didn't have anything at the bar...no sandwich last night or this morning. You sick?"

He had no time to reply, as a short, middle-aged woman with bright blue eyes and long hair wrapped in a bun at the nape of her neck approached.

"Mom!" Faith cried. Turning to Chance, she made introductions.

"Nice to meet you, Chance." Joann's eyebrows lifted a fraction as she glanced briefly at her daughter. "Larry is around here somewhere. Think he's over by the grill, warding off Chris's husband."

"Chris is my little sister," Faith explained, flushing at her mother's quick, intense look.

"How do the two of you know one another?" Joann asked, curiosity flicking her face.

"Work." Faith smiled as she and her companion gave the same answer simultaneously. "Chance was one of my drill instructors—he sat with me in the burning building the other evening."

"Ah, I see. Your last test—literally, the one by fire." Joann smiled. "Well, we're glad the two of you could make it. We don't see much of our daughter except on weekends, and we were afraid she'd be *celebrating* on her own a bit and might not have time to drop by." She tucked a strand of hair behind Faith's ear as she issued the last lines. "Go say hello to your father. He missed hashing over the baseball lineup with you this

week. He won't rest until you've told him what you think of their new third baseman."

Chance laughed as Joann made her excuses and started mingling with the other guests. "She doesn't miss a thing, does she?"

"Nope." Faith's face was still pink with embarrassment. She lowered her voice and spoke out of the corner of her mouth so that no one might catch what she was saying, "Guess I really do have that just-been-fucked look."

They walked through the busy yard, smiling and waving at well-wishers until they reached the massive grill and the tall, slender man standing watch over a variety of hot dogs, hamburger patties, and what looked like several ears of corn wrapped in foil.

"Faith!" her father exclaimed, turning as they approached. He wrapped his arms about her, careful not to touch her clothing with the utensils he'd been using. "Help me keep your sister's family out of this until it's fully cooked." He glanced up at Chance. "Hi."

After they exchanged nods, acknowledging one another, Larry asked with a conspirator's whisper, "So, did you rent him for the day, or is this the real deal, Faith?"

Faith gasped and socked him on the arm. "Daddy!"

"What?" He mocked injury. "Your mother made me a bet that you'd find someone at the last minute to bring here; she's convinced you don't want her help in securing a boyfriend. Of course, I took up for you." He winked. "Told her nah, you'd never do that to her."

"Daddy, this is Chance."

"Don't tell me," her father said, appraising him. "Another fireman. I can tell by those biceps. Why don't you make use of them, son, and help her bring in some more beer from the house—it's on the back porch." He flashed a smile that hid a steely determination and narrowed his eyes.

“Hurt her, and you’ll find your balls on this grill. Treat her right, and I’ll feed you until you pop. Nice meeting you. Now scoot—I’m busy.”

Faith took one of Chance’s arms and steered him toward the screened-in back porch. “Well, that went well.”

“He knows,” Chance said. “Your mom suspects—but *he* knows”

“Don’t let him rattle you,” she said. “If it makes you feel any better, yours are the first balls he’s offered to throw on the grill. I think it means he likes you.”

Chance grabbed two full cases of bottled beer and asked Faith to lead him back to her father’s grilling area and the ice chests.

“What do you want to bet that the old guy is already measuring me for that grill?”

Faith laughed. “Well, I wouldn’t worry. Not like you’re out to hurt me, right?”

Chance winced. There hadn’t been time for him to inform her about Monday, and if he didn’t hurry, she’d find out when she opened her mail that evening. Her assignment had to be in it since she said she’d not received it yet.

He opened his mouth to tell her he had something important they needed to discuss, but the Harold she’d pointed out earlier snagged her as they reached the ice chests.

All in all, Chance had to admit that the accountant was a nice guy, just a geek, definitely not someone who could keep up with Faith in the bedroom. The thought somehow comforted him.

While Faith was chatting with her mother and a couple of her friends, he and Harold wound up sitting next to one another at one of the wooden picnic tables set about the yard beneath strands of twinkling lights laced throughout the pecan trees. As they were talking, Harold said lightly that he was surprised Faith had managed to complete her fire training.

“Not that I didn’t think she would develop physically,” Harold said between bites of his burger. “She’s pretty determined and able to keep up when she’s tired but I was pretty sure that since she hadn’t dealt with Rob’s death, she wouldn’t be able to finish. Figured the emotional aspects of the training would get to her.”

“Rob?” Chance asked, hoping he sounded nonchalant.

“Dunaway.” Harold frowned at him. “Don’t tell me you don’t know about her last year teaching?”

Chance was appalled as the story progressed, shocked and hurt for her, trying to imagine what it must have been like for the slight female to have taken on so much responsibility, knowing that she was standing between a man’s life and death, and ultimately not strong enough for the job. Nor prepared.

A huge sigh threatened to suffocate him unless he let it out one slow stream at a time. Shit. No wonder she was all business on the job, never seeming to get any particular thrill out of her accomplishments, just pressing on as if she were chasing a ghost. Which she was—quite literally—the ghost of a former friend whose life she’d been unable to save.

He looked up to find Faith staring at him, oblivious to the conversation going on about her. He gave a short, quick nod to reassure her that he was fine and managed a weak smile. No use upsetting her and letting her know what he and Harold had discussed. No, but the information would serve him as her captain now.

*Damn.* He couldn’t allow her to remain at his station. After all he’d gone through to make certain she’d be safe, to see to it that she’d be with him on a daily basis, now he, as captain, had to request she be transferred. What in hell would Griff think about that?

“Was she in love with him?” Chance asked, not even caring that his voice broke slightly.

“Don’t think so,” Harold said. “But his death tore her up pretty badly. We doubted she’d ever recover. She finished out the year and was just a shell of a person, lost weight, wouldn’t get out, couldn’t eat. It was really sad watching her self-destruct. I mean teaching was her whole life, yet she felt she’d failed a student, failed a fellow teacher, and failed herself. All of us—her mom and dad, her sister, I—tried telling her that none of it was her fault, but she wouldn’t listen.”

Chance nodded. He knew exactly how she felt. Even now, as a professional, he was never satisfied unless everyone got through it unharmed. Screw the property destruction if he could just ensure safety of his men and the people they were attempting to rescue.

“Then one day she came home,” Harold continued, “told her folks she’d joined up to be a fireman. I think they were glad, if for no other reason than that she seemed to have a purpose—a reason to get up of a morning.”

Well, damn again. Now what was he to do? Chance worked over his options. If he allowed Faith to remain at Station #3 with him, they’d have to stop seeing one another or keep their affair secret.

“How long have you known Faith?” The accountant’s curiosity was quite evident.

“Not as long as you.” Chance heaved a big sigh. Somehow, in the course of hours, Faith had begun to mean much more to him than he’d imagined she would, and now that he knew her recent past, he was more determined than ever to ensure her safety on the job and to do what he could to assuage the guilt she felt...even though she didn’t know he knew her secret.

Harold stopped mid-bite and looked at Chance. “Ya know those arsons on the south end of town? Come to think of it, someone from Faith’s past is suspect, I hear. Yeah.” He wiped his lips with a napkin. “When her friend Dunaway died in that fire two years ago, there was this kid...can’t think of his name. Anyway, grown boy now, and he lives around one of the neighborhoods where most of the fires have been set.”

Chance was alarmed. “Someone from Faith’s past may be setting those blazes?”

“Dunno.” Harold eyed the burger he’d been about to bite. “All I know is that the kid who set the fires went to reform school, and he’s out now. My buddy over in arson told me...fuck...I shouldn’t even be telling you this.” He glanced around warily. “I do taxes for several firemen—met them through Faith. But keep an eye out for her, okay? I’d hate to think that kid is somehow taking revenge on Faith for something.”

The idea wasn’t inconceivable to Chance, just pretty far-stretched. Most arsonists who did time weren’t habitual. He’d hate to think of some screwed up kid with a hard-on for trouble stalking Faith.

“What school was this?” Chance had to know.

“Shady Grove.”

Jesus. That certainly put a new spin on things. “What was Rob Dunaway like?” Chance knew he was probably revealing too much about his feelings for Faith, but that was one more thing he needed to know.

Harold eyed him over the top of his burger, and after he’d chewed his food a bit replied. “Another lost cause, if you ask me. Nice enough fellow, but needy, always wanting someone to talk to, and Faith needs to be needed.”

Chance glanced up as he felt Faith’s hands on his shoulders.

“What are you two up to?” She snagged a pickle off Chance’s plate and slid it into her mouth.



“We’re talking about you,” Chance said, almost laughing at Harold’s alarmed face. “So go away. I’m finding out all of your childhood secrets.”

She giggled before bending to kiss him on the cheek then jumped excitedly and waved. “Oh, look! There must be at least half a dozen of them! I figured they’d be celebrating at their own parties!”

And when Chance looked up, he groaned inwardly. So much for the first option. There was no mistaking the looks that passed across her fellow firemen’s faces. They’d seen her kiss him, and they knew that he was there *with* Faith.

Not a mother’s son of them seemed to mind—in fact, the one recruit who, like Faith, had wound up at Station #3, seemed thrilled to see him.

“Hey, Captain!” Mullins crowed. “Looking forward to Monday!”

Chance rose and clapped him on the back, shook his hand. “Mullins, I’m gonna work you till you drop. You’ll be begging the God Squad to take you after Tuesday. We see our fair share of fires.”

The fellows made a huge deal out of Faith being the top female to have graduated, going so far as to carry her through the crowd on their shoulders. Chance watched them all proudly, knowing full well how difficult their training had been and how deserved they were to have graduated.

But his heart ached at the thought of having to tell her they’d not be able to work together now, even if she did think it was no big deal that he’d maneuvered things so that she was at his station. But he couldn’t put his own career in jeopardy...or her reputation. He’d have to request she be reassigned come Monday, whether he liked it or not.

“I fell for your father in less than a week,” Joann said, as she and Faith gathered paper plates and plastic cups at the end of the evening’s

festivities, while Larry scrubbed down the grill and Chance hauled bags of trash to the curb.

Faith bit her lips. She thought she and Chance had given an okay performance, which hadn't been much of a performance on her part. But her mom thought they were in love?

"Do you think this is such a wise idea?" Joann continued.

"What do you mean?" Faith asked, heart hammering. Dear God, here it came.

Joann popped her on the butt with the dishtowel she had thrown across one shoulder. "Don't treat me like I was born yesterday. What if you got married? Isn't there some kind of nepotism law in the department?"

Faith looked about to make sure the men were nowhere within hearing distance. "You just met the man."

"Yeah? And you didn't. You've known him a while, right?"

"God, Mother, give us some time." Faith reached across the picnic table and handed Joann another stack of plates.

"I'm not asking to read your diary, child. I'm just asking if you're being careful...of your heart. You've wanted this job for so long, I'd just hate to see you need to give it up if the two of you became more than just fuck buddies."

*Fuck buddies?* Faith nearly died of embarrassment and laughter. She'd only heard her mother use that term maybe twice in her lifetime. They stood staring at one another, watching the men out of the corners of their eyes, toe-to-toe, nose-to-nose, beloved older mentor to child.

"I'm being careful," Faith said. "Feel better?"

Joann sighed. "Not really. That was too easy. So what do you like best about him?"

“His strength,” Faith said without hesitation. “He’s everything I’m not. He’s stronger, braver, better at his job than anyone I know.”

Joann looked at her sternly. “Faith, he’s a man. He’s supposed to be stronger.”

Faith shook her head. “I’m not just talking physical strength. He has character—this man would never back down from any challenge.”

“Do you love him?”

“We haven’t been together long enough for me to find out.”

“Bullshit. Okay, have it your way. I’m just concerned.” Joann tied the garbage bag and set her jaw. “He doesn’t eat much.”

“You’re just being a mom now.”

“No.” Joann looked at her thoughtfully. “He really doesn’t put that much food away for his size.”

Faith kissed her on the cheek. “You are the best mother anyone ever had. Do you know that?”

Joann blushed. “Thanks to you and your sister, I’ve had lots of practice.” She turned back to her dishes. “Looks like I missed a spoon. Why are you so quiet these days, daughter?”

Faith was surprised. “I dunno. I thought I’d been pretty chipper.”

“You haven’t been chipper since you quit teaching.” Joann turned to face her once more. “I’m sorry. I know how much Rob meant to you. And that boy.”

“Billy.”

“Yes. I read that he was released a few weeks ago. Have you talked to him?”

Nervous tension zipped up Faith’s spine. “Why would you ask that?”

Joann bit her lips before replying. “Truth?”

Faith nodded.

“Your dad and I went over to your place last week to take you some tomatoes—they’re overrunning the garden. There was a letter sticking out of your mailbox from him. I noticed he isn’t staying with his grandmother any more.” Joann hugged her quickly. “I’m not prying. The letter was practically falling out of the mailbox. Not like I could miss it.”

Faith shook her head. “Mom, you are too much.” She swallowed hard as memories from the past smacked into her abdomen, making her uncomfortable. “Yes, he’s out. He’s of age, so the courts let him live on his own in a ramshackle place down by the railroad tracks. I think his grandmother owns the property, so he’s still in contact with her. But he’s a bit rough around the edges and didn’t want to make her any unhappier than she’s already been, so he’s staying there, working odd jobs on the south side of the city.”

“Is this wise...your keeping in touch with this boy?”

Faith frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Sweetheart, you’re a fire fighter, and he’s a fire bug. Won’t this look odd if anyone finds out?”



Faith was giddy with excitement, despite the damper her mother had thrown on the evening by asking her about Billy. She was happy the past two years were behind her. She’d just had a marvelous evening with her parents and friends, and she’d gone back to her apartment with the most gorgeous man in the entire fire department. Faith was happier than she’d been in her life.

“Faith, we need to talk about something,” Chance said, as she unlocked her door and reached into the mailbox for her mail.

They entered the apartment, and she slid her mail and her keys onto the small table overlooking her balcony and the pool beyond.

"I don't want to talk," she said, already tugging at his belt and zipper. "Chance, I've had the most wonderful time tonight—let's finish it off in bed."

"Faith, there's something I *need* to tell you." He groaned as her hands swept over him, loosening clothing, massaging his shoulders.

She stopped what she was doing and looked him square in the eye. "Chance, if you're going to tell me that we're working together come Monday, I already know. No sweat."

He blinked. "What do you mean, you know?"

"I phoned the main office yesterday when I got home. Couldn't wait to find out."

"You said...but you said..."

"I said I hadn't received any mail about it." She thumped the pile of mail on her table. "I imagine it's in there somewhere, though, don't you?"

His heart hammered against his ribs. "Faith, damnit. I've been worried about this all fucking weekend, how to tell you."

She smiled and wrapped her arms about him, kissing him. "You asked for me. Do you have any idea how many other captains were dreading that I'd wind up at their station? How many other firemen were sweating it because of their wives and girlfriends? Why should I mind?"

She still didn't get it. He threaded his fingers through her hair.

"I don't want to let you go," he said softly, his lips brushing her upturned face.

"Then don't."

"I have to. The department has rules—we can't work at the same station, same shift. Not if we're...involved." His eyebrows waggled.

Faith's eyes grew rounder. "Oh. Well, fuck."

*Lyn Cash*

One more complication in her life.

## Chapter Six

“What do you mean you want her transferred? *Now?!?*”

Griffin’s voice made Chance cringe.

“As I said, I went over just to make sure she was okay, and one thing led to another,” Chance explained. “I never intended this to happen.”

“Well, at least you came forward with it, rather than have someone rat you out.” Griff’s palms smacked his desk. “Jesus, now I have to figure out where to put her. I suppose best thing would be to ask one of her fellow classmates to exchange with her, but everyone seems pretty happy so far.” He narrowed his gaze. “Don’t suppose the two of you could just cool your jets for a while, could you?”

“You mean, just break it off before it goes further?” Chance asked with a grim set to his jaw. “I suppose. Not like she won’t be expecting this.”

“Are your things at her place?” his commander asked.

“No.” *Just my heart.*

“Then don’t worry about it. I’ll do something as quickly as I can, of course, but we’ve got this damn arson thing on South side, and I need every man I can get to stay as they are for a couple of weeks. Right now, they’re all working like a well-oiled machine, and I don’t want to disrupt the flow just because you’re sleeping with a recruit.”

“Firefighter—she passed, remember?” Chance offered.

“Shit. Well, this just blows, Chance.”

Chance knew that the old man wasn't so much put out with him as he was the infernal rash of fires some asshole had decided to grace them with since the previous month. They all started out as grass fires that could be easily contained, but lately the arsonist had been targeting old warehouses, barns, buildings that went up within seconds, and none of it tied together well enough for the arson squad to build a profile.

"I need a favor." Chance rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Probably nothing, but I'd like to see the reports on any fires near Shady Grove School within the past two years."

"Hell, don't need a report for that one—I worked it." Griff shook his head, and his face darkened. "Troubled teen, a real head case, if you ask me, but his teachers all said the community at large was pretty much responsible. No parental supervision, just a fucked up kid wanting attention. Why do you ask about that one?"

"Because I heard the boy was released from juvvie, and I'd like to see where he is now."

Griff's eyebrows raised. "What is it you're not saying?"

Chance waved Griff's doubts aside. "Just a hunch, and as I said, probably a bad one. This kid doesn't sound like a repeat offender. I'm sure arson will catch this current guy pretty soon. Hope so."

"Speaking of arson, Bud's retiring next month," Griff said, changing the subject. "We're honoring him at a banquet on the fifteenth, so don't make any plans. You're scheduled to be off that day. Too bad your little friend didn't accept his offer. She'd probably have made a good investigator."

Chance nodded. "Well, too late to ask her now."

"Is it?"

Chance frowned. "She turned them down before—I hardly think she'll jump on it now that she's on a ladder company, as she'd wanted."



“Well, it’s still an option, if you can talk her into it.”

Chance rose and stared out the second floor windows of his boss’s office. “Do you believe in...?” No, he told himself. *Don’t go there.*

“What?” Griff asked. “Love at first sight? No. But then I don’t believe in much outside of the Cardinals winning the pennant, a good beer buzz, and keeping my head above water. But after nearly forty years of marriage to the same woman who still cries occasionally during sex and watches old fifties romance reruns on the late night movie channels, all I can say is that one of us has to be the Doubting Thomas, and I’m just better at it than she is.”

Chance felt an uncomfortable rumbling in his gut, a pain in his side, as if his boss’s words were fists slamming into him. “I’ve never felt like this before. Ever.”

“Who’d have thunk it from someone your age, huh?” Griff gave him a weak smile. “You’ve got two weeks to think this over. At that time, let me know if you still want her transferred, and I’ll do it.”

He studied Chance. “You alright? I mean aside from this thing with Faith?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Your color looks weird. Like you...oh, never mind. Just take care of yourself.”



Two days. Chance had spent two days working with her, knowing she was sleeping just twenty feet away from him at night. Her coworkers accepted her, her work was fine, and all things considered, the arrangement was perfect except for one thing. He wanted her in his arms so bad he ached.

And he could tell she felt the same way. She loved her job, even though all she'd done in two days was rescue an eleven-year-old and a cat from two separate trees, scrub down the trucks in the bay with the rest of the crew, and help douse a small house fire. But every time she caught him looking at her, she dropped her head and looked away. The tension between them was so thick in their closed quarters above the station that he could barely wait to go home for the next couple of days.

Not like he didn't have other responsibilities, commitments within the department, a visit he needed to pay to his girls. Not like he couldn't just jerk off when his cock became inflamed at the very thought of her. But none of it satisfied the itch he had that only Faith Sloan could scratch.

One more visit, he promised himself. Just one. He couldn't just let things lie as they were—he had to talk to her, ask her if she felt the same way—if she even wanted to see him any more. He also had to ask about her former student.

## **Chapter Seven**

“Have you been spying on me?” Faith looked at him suspiciously. He’d barely been at her place ten minutes before he was pumping her for information about her last teaching job. “That was a long time ago.”

“Faith, someone is setting fires again...so far no fatalities, but if it’s the same guy...”

“It’s not!” She hadn’t meant to snap, but she didn’t want him to bring up Billy, Rob, or her shortcomings in not having seen the situation clearly enough to deal with it before Billy set the fire.

When Chance looked as if he was about to speak, she held up her hands. “If you tell me it’s not my fault—if I hear that shit from one more person, Chance...” Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. Turning to fix a glass of water for herself, she took a quick swipe at her eyes before he saw the tears.

He walked into the small galley kitchen and paused in the doorway. “I’m not trying to open up old wounds.”

“Well, for someone who isn’t trying, you’re doing a damn fine job.”

“There’s another arsonist at large, one who is playing with us. If you have information that might bring...”

Faith whirled to face him, slamming the glass of water on the counter. “Billy isn’t your fire starter.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know him—I taught him. He’s kind, decent, and he wouldn’t do something like that.”

Chance hated himself for replying. “He did it once.”

“He did it to get back at all of us. Me, his folks, everyone who didn’t see the pain he was in, but that was then.”

“How can you be so sure?” Chance demanded again.

“Because I’ve talked to him!” Faith immediately closed her mouth, the unbidden tears trickling down her cheeks. “I’ve been talking to him for weeks.”

She watched Chance’s reaction, his sharp intake of breath, the incredulous look on his face, and she groaned inwardly, knowing what he’d say next before he so much as opened his mouth.

“I’ve been writing to him the whole time he’s been incarcerated. I feel that I let him down, and nothing you or anyone else says will change my mind about that.” She grabbed her drink and swigged the cold, clear liquid. “And, yes, I’ve considered what this looks like to the narrow-minded, but I’ve asked his input on the arson on South side.”

Chance set his jaw. “Tell me that you haven’t fed this kid any inside information.”

“Of course not!” She fumed. “How could you even suggest such a thing?”

“Then why the secrecy about staying in contact with him?”

She pushed him aside and stormed out to the balcony overlooking the pool. “You fucking people...why can’t everyone just leave him alone?”

Chance touched her arm. “You’re lumping me as ‘you fucking people’, Faith?”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Everywhere he goes now, someone will be watching him, waiting, expecting him to fuck up again. He was just a kid, for Christ’s sake!”

"I don't know what to say." Chance reached out to her, palms up, as if he was pleading with her. "All I want to do is help you."

"Help me what?" Her voice was quiet. Tiredness washed over her, and suddenly she didn't feel like talking any more...about anything.

"I've done the job a lot longer than you have, kiddo." His voice didn't hold sarcasm, just sadness. "I've seen a lot of good firemen get hurt because their emotions got in the way of the job."

Now she was not only tired but pissed. "When have you ever seen me let personal problems interfere with work?"

Chance's gaze held hers, but he stood back, as if giving her space to vent. "You blow up all you want at me, but I'm telling you to watch it. Don't let your guilt over what you think you should or could have done two years ago affect how you feel about yourself today. Don't let this cripple you. And for the love of God, don't let all of it blind you to the possibility that this former student of yours could very well be an arsonist and potential killer unless he's stopped."

"Is that all you came over here to say?" She knew her eyes betrayed her, that they were full of anger and pain and that she was disappointed as hell that he'd even mentioned Billy Freeman.

"That's it." Chance slammed one fist into the other palm. "See you at work Thursday."



His plans to discuss their situation with her dissolved in a bath of flames, however, when a half-hour before their last shift ended they got the alarm. This one was bad.

The abandoned warehouse was near downtown, close enough to other businesses that entire blocks had to be sectioned off and guarded.

Chance had every swinging dick from three other stations assigned to assist, plus help from his chief, a federal marshal, the SWAT team, and what looked like at least a hundred street cops.

News crews hit the scene sometime right after his second shift showed up in the spare truck kept behind the station.

“Captain! The restaurant next door is on fire, sir!” yelled one of his crew, pointing toward smoke seeping from the roof.

“Shit!” Chance muttered. The “A” shift would have to stick around and go inside. He glanced quickly at the men putting on their headgear as the emergency crew handled the first responders brought back to the rescue vehicles. One of the two being fussed over by an EMT was Faith.

She turned and rose from where the technician worked on her. “Ready, sir!”

“Sit this one out until she’s finished with you,” he ordered.

“She’s finished!” Faith said, slamming her helmet back onto her head and grabbing her gear.

Chance knew she was needed, and his worst fears came to light. He’d have to send her back, this time into a building that held civilians. He swallowed hard and nodded, biting back the words his heart wanted him to say.

From there, the situation grew even more intense, as two of his men had to be led to ambulances once they’d stumbled back to the street carrying a woman who looked to be in her twenties and two young children.

Smoke, along with the lack of distinguishable landmarks, made it impossible to get any sense of direction from the outside—and he could very well imagine what his crew would be facing inside.

“Get a hose on that roof next door!” he yelled to his lieutenant. “Four men—in twos, up to the top floor. And get that goddamned news crew another hundred yards back.”

He clutched his side as a strange pang hit him. Helluva time to get sick. What the fuck was going on?

“Chance?” Fire Chief Chris Hanson walked up behind him and clapped him on the back. “What do you think?”

Chance surveyed their surroundings and ticked off items formulating in his mind. “Someone who knows fires, but not an adult. Fits the profile for at least three others last month. Someone from this district, most likely a kid trying to get attention, but this firestarter isn’t a youngster; this one is aware of what he’s doing, in other words. Not some five-year-old playing with matches or his daddy’s cigarette lighter. What we need to be looking into is this: the fires have been set close enough together that it has to be someone who lives around here. And I know—I know—we’re ‘working on it’, but this has to stop. Now!”

Hanson nodded. “We’ve scheduled a meeting for Friday afternoon at two to pool what we already have with what the First Watch boys in blue have. We’ll nail this bastard yet.”

Chance shook his head. “Whoever did this one nearly killed a couple of kids—boys. Ambulance took them about ten minutes ago. They’d been walking nearby, one of them said, when the first explosion hit.”

He cocked his head toward the building his crew had last entered. “Got enough people here now that you can spare another one in there? Most of my men...”

“Go!” Hanson barked. “I’ve got you covered.”



Chance remembered his chief's final words moments later as he lay beneath the beams that had him trapped on ground level. *Covered*. He was covered all right. Couldn't see a damn thing, barely heard his own voice as he tried alerting his men that he and Mullins were down and that Mullins was unconscious. And to make matters worse, one of his own legs was broken.

He looked about, searching for something to tell him where he'd fallen. The wall that had given left a huge, gaping hole, and he could see large drums of what looked like flour and sugar. He was near the kitchen, which meant cleaning chemicals, food supplies, all manner of cans that would soon be bursting from the pressured heat.

Just then his guts felt like they were going to explode as one sharp pain after another assaulted him. "Fuck!" he yelled, clutching his stomach.

He clawed through the rubble, fought to escape the fire that licked the beams pinning him. *Save your breath*, he warned himself. *Someone will come for you*.

He just didn't expect it to be Faith.

Blinded by pain and smoke, he peered through his mask as she shoved against the thick, porous wood with her shoulders, wedging herself between him and the flames, as two burly firemen he didn't recognize hoisted, lifted, moved the offending fallen structures and pulled Mullins free. They were all coughing and choking, despite their masks, indications the situation was serious and that they all needed to get the hell out of there.

"Faith?" one fireman called.

"I've got it—go on!" It would take their combined strength to haul Mullins outside, and what could a matter of seconds alone cost her?



She soon found out. Faith stopped, almost as if in some drastic ballet movement, and Chance followed her eyes toward a pile of metal drums. Metal. Chemicals, most likely, not just perishables, but something that would be the end of them.

Her eyes met his, and he willed her to leave, but she didn't. As soon as Mullins was freed, she shrugged off the two beams stacked one on top of the other and reached for him, grasping his suit through her awkward gloves and tugging on his body.

Another beam fell, and this time she screamed. They were trapped. There was no way Faith could lift him—she was tired, weak with exhaustion, in as precarious a predicament as he was, only she was saddled with saving him...or dying with him.

Before he could try persuading her to leave, she lifted her axe and swung near his feet, scaring the shit out of him. She swung again and again, and he sensed what she was doing. She was trying to forge a hole in the floor, and he prayed that this old restaurant was like others in the district, with older wooden floors instead of cement slabs beneath the surface.

She side-stepped his body and swung again, and when he felt the floor beneath him jar and shift, he latched onto one of her legs and twisted his body so that he'd fall feet first. Better to land on something already broken than to land on his damn head.

Boom! The floor gave, and the two of them shot through the deteriorating boards. Chance had one slim window of opportunity of falling beneath Faith if he was lucky. One chance to cushion her small frame as they descended into unknown territory.

Faith's back felt like galvanized rubber; every bone in her body screamed in protest, even though she'd managed to land on top of Chance, so she could only imagine the pain he'd suffered during the fall.

He'd been knocked unconscious at some point, but she'd had the strength to haul him away from the hole where they'd made their escape. Now she had him in a dank, dark corner where cement surrounded them, and where they had a small, grill-covered ventilation port to the outside. The air wasn't fresh, considering the debris outside, but it was better than what they'd had above the crawl space.

That one leg needed to be reset, but there was nothing she could do about it at this point. No room to maneuver even if she did know how to tend him. All they could do was wait.

Chance stirred, and Faith twisted her body so he was resting his head on her chest. "Baby?" she asked hopefully. "Chance?"

"Mm." He shifted his weight slightly then groaned. "Something's wrong!"

"Don't move. You've broken a leg," she said. "But we're safe for a while."

Chance coughed then huffed through measured gasps. "No—not the leg. Something else..."

"They're across the floor near the entrance to the room—I can feel the vibrations from their boots," she said. "It's just a matter of time. Hang in there!"

He nodded. "Thanks. You should have left, though."

She snorted. "And risk the bragging rights for saving your butt? Not on your life."

Their eyes met, and she knew what he was thinking. Literally—not on his life. He'd have died for sure without someone to get him away from those beams that had nearly broken her back as she hoisted them.

“Faith?” he whispered as the footsteps sounded nearer.

“I know.” She bent to kiss his forehead as they heard the first voice above them yell for assistance.

“We need to talk,” he insisted.

“And we will.” She turned her head toward the hole above them, bellowing for assistance. “He’s hurt—broken leg!”

“No—it’s...it’s not that. I don’t think I’m going to make...I think I’m bleeding internally. Get...” He started talking, but before he could say anything else, he passed out for a second.

“Hurry!” she cried. “He’s passed out, but he said something else is wrong—he may have been pierced—he was clutching his stomach!”

Faith watched them lower the belts and seat for her to use to strap him inside and gritted her teeth. “I’ve got you, Chance,” she murmured as she adjusted his body and passed the rescue equipment between his legs, cinching the belts. “You’re not going to die on me, and you’re not getting away once you’re out of here.”

“I’m getting out of here.” She’d apparently reached him before he completely succumbed to unconsciousness, but Chance’s eyes closed.

Faith studied his expression then hollered once more for her comrades to make haste. This didn’t look good at all.

## **Chapter Eight**

“You’ve got a blown knee; your left tibia is fucked for about six to eight weeks; and your expectations of going back on the job are outrageous, Chance.” Griffin gave him a stern but sympathetic look.

Chance tried to sit up and winced as every fiber of his body seemed to crash in on itself. “What the hell?” he asked groggily.

“You can’t sit up—you’re bandaged,” Griff said; then yelled for a nurse.

“What? I don’t understand.”

Griff leaned down and stopped Chance’s roving hands as he sought to discover why his chest and abdomen were bandaged. “Chance...don’t. Please.”

Chance looked at him suspiciously; then became alarmed. “Just spit it out.”

If Chance didn’t know any better, he’d swear the old man’s eyes filled with tears. “You’ve—they’ve...well, they had to cut you open. You almost didn’t make it.”

“I broke a leg—that’s all, right?” He thought a moment to the stomach and side cramps he’d had. “I had my appendix removed years ago, so what the hell did they do to me?”

“They opened you up—they haven’t sewn you back together,” Griff said, looking helpless, more so than Chance would ever have imagined. “Something about your intestines, some damned thing. They had to do

exploratory surgery, and you almost didn't live through it. They said that another fifteen minutes before you reached the hospital, and you'd have been dead. All your vital organs were shutting off one at a time."

"You're shitting me."

"Wish I were."

"Sweet Lord!" Chance digested the news and blinked. "I almost *died*?"

"So just lay here until they come for you, and stop bitching. You've been in and out for several hours, and it was my turn to sit with you. I sent Faith home this morning when I came in."

Chance stared toward the window, and all he could see from his position was a dark sky. This couldn't be happening.

Once the nurse had checked his vitals and phoned the doctor that Chance was awake, Griff told him what he knew about Chance's recovery.

"It's going to take a good two months for your leg to heal. But they want you walking, so go figure. You have to walk or do some sort of cardiac therapy for..." Griff pointed to his chest. "They can't sew you back up until that mess in there heals. You were in surgery about six hours."

His body throbbed with pain, so he didn't attempt sitting up again, but his eyes took in as much as they could. Chance then noticed the colostomy bag against the side of his bed and nearly passed out. "Griff? Oh, my God! Griff?!"

"I'm right here, Chance," the old man said, his Adam's Apple bobbing as he swallowed. "The worst is over—you're going to pull out of this. Do you hear?"

Fear gripped him, and Chance shook his head, barely able to breathe. "What? What is this thing? I—I'm not much better than a vegetable like this, Griff!"

“Don’t be stupid, man. It’s just a wound, like anything else you’ve had—your body will heal, and you’ve still got your mind. You’ll have to learn to clean the inside of your chest by yourself, according to your doc, and then you’ll go home in a couple of days,” his friend told him. “With Faith.”

“They didn’t sew me up? I’m going home with...? No!”

“You need special care, and she’s off work a couple of weeks anyway, so she can heal. She was just released because of her back and smoke inhalation a couple days ago—she had to stay overnight in here.”

“Faith was hurt?”

“Not much. She’s mainly pissed at herself. She got her ass ripped by me for remaining alone with you. She should have called for backup.”

“Wasn’t enough time.” Chance stared at his injuries and shuddered.

Griff shot him a stern look. “Others have gone through this same ordeal, Chance. Don’t tell me that they’re made of sterner stuff than you are, because I’m not buying it. You’re still young, your muscles are in good working order, so all you need to do is relax a bit, walk a lot, and soon they can hook this thing back up. You’ll just be out of commission several weeks.”

“*Weeks?*” Chance felt like an idiot parroting almost everything that Griff said, but he still couldn’t wrap his mind around the fact that his chest cavity had been split open and not sewn up.

“You’ve been in here nearly four days already,” Griff told him.

“I’m not letting Faith nursemaid me for a fucking *day*, much less over the course of two months!” Chance protested. “Not with her own health shot all to shit.”

“Nevertheless, it was either send you with her or to a convalescent home, or get your ex-wife to come pick you up once she and the kids get back from vacation. Faith called her and got a recorded message. So

while you were in surgery, that's what we decided—we, being I, as your superior officer, and she, as your...friend. You can always override our decision, of course."

"And what happens once I'm allowed to go back to the station—if...and that's a BIG IF...I'm even released for such a thing?" Chance asked, tears of anger forming in his eyes. "I'm never going back to work, am I? What if...?" He closed his eyes as he spoke. "What if they can't put me back together?"

"We'll deal with it as it happens." Griff walked to the window and stared out, averting his gaze from Chance's. "Just stop worrying about it. Nothing you can do at this point but get well—which I wish to hell you would." The old man's voice choked with emotion. "I need you."

Chance stared at the cast on his leg, avoiding looking at the colostomy bag, and groaned. "Yeah, right. You really think they're going to okay me for active duty?"

"There are other jobs within the department." Griff turned back to him, twisting his hat in his hands.

"Not for me."

This was getting him nowhere. Chance sighed and dug his shoulders into the pillows propping him. He'd been ready to leave the hospital since the moment he'd awakened, but his lack of mobility forced him to submit to doctor's orders and his commander's directives. Where else could he possibly go but home with Faith or his ex-wife? He sure as hell wasn't about to stay in some sorry-ass home for reluctant retirees or indigent invalids.

As for Faith, what could he possibly offer her now? A good Monty Python song or two? "Sit on my face, and tell me that you love me..."

He could just see it now. A night or two of jokes, a week of keeping him company, preparing his food, and she'd be bored, restless, and

horny, and there wouldn't be a damn thing he could do to remedy any of it.

Griff was right. Provided he was able to live without the colostomy bag, he could always apply for a desk job, something excruciatingly boring but comfortable, stable, reliable. Just like a well-worn, beloved pair of shoes or a couch nobody wanted to throw away. If his knee was truly blown, then he was certainly fucked as far as going back as captain of his own shift at Station #3 or anywhere else.

"Did it ever occur to you that Faith *asked* that you be sent to her home?" Griff asked, preparing to leave.

Chance blinked in surprise. His mouth opened to protest, to deny such a thing, but he knew what they'd shared those few hours over the prior weekend. She was just crazy enough to do such a thing.

"She lives in a second-floor apartment, Griff. I'd be trapped, unable to walk the stairs for several weeks."

"No, you won't, because no, she doesn't."

"I don't understand."

"Seems her folks offered to let her move into her grandmother's old house that adjoins their property. Nice, two-bedroom, frame home, with a walkway between the two places. Her dad suggested that he might play you a game of checkers now and then, said that he'd take you out so you could get some sunshine, and maybe take you to swim in the pool they're building."

Chance's eyes misted over, and he had to swallow hard to keep the emotion out of his voice. "They'd do that?"

"She said it was his idea. They know your situation, that you're going to be laid up a while. Said he and the missuz have plans for some trip to Mexico in a few months, so he thought between now and then he could



help out, and afterwards you could repay them by watching over the place while they're gone."

"He's an ornery old cuss," Chance said, still trying to collect his thoughts.

"As is his daughter, I imagine." Griff offered a weak smile.

"But...I can't...this isn't happening to me!"

"Nothing you can do but hang in there at this point, buddy."

Chance shook his head. "I won't make it if I can't work, Griff. You know that."

Griff patted him on the back and advised, "Consider that maybe it's time you switched gears, stopped running Mach four with your hair on fire. You'd have a good pension if you just retired."

He raised his hands in protest as Chance opened his mouth to speak. "I know—I know. I'm not suggesting you do that—just telling you that you'd be comfortable enough. But as it is, you've been given the opportunity to rest with people around who care about you. Don't blow it by being too proud to accept their offer."

Chance was still dumbfounded. Rest? Retire? Not work...at all? This was so not how he saw his career in the department ending. He'd always thought he'd retire an old man, the last of his ilk, maybe going up the food chain command-wise, but never having it all end because of a fucking medical reason. Sure, he didn't eat properly, often on the go, sometimes not at all. He skipped not only meals, but rest—somebody had to stay in charge when things heated up. But he didn't deserve *this*, did he? Surely, his body wouldn't betray him like this!

"Sometimes when we can't set the world on fire," Griff said with a wry grin, "it's best to just stay in heat. Something tells me that you're gonna still have plenty of that once you're with her."

"What about policy?" Chance asked, finally finding his voice.

“What policy? You’re on long-term disability; she’s on short-term leave of absence—she’s going back to work, as I said. Not like you’ll be at the same station again.”

*Not like you’ll be at any station ever again.*

Griff may as well have said the words aloud, because it was written all over his tired old face. They were going to offer him a choice between taking a desk job or retirement, whether he liked it or not.

“Things will look better in a day or so,” Griff suggested. “Look, your doc will be here in a few minutes, so...”

Chance waved bye, unable to speak.



“Diverticulitis is an inflammation of a diverticulum, usually of the large colon,” his doctor explained.

Chance focused on the badge that read *Rita Wright*, not wanting to look her in the eyes, for he knew that in her eyes lay the truth—he was well and truly fucked if he couldn’t do as she said. He heard her saying something like *sigmoid colon resection* and blanked out all but his fears, which ate at him.

“In layman’s terms, the colon is the sewer system of your body,” she continued. “So if you don’t flush the sewer, what happens? It backs up. Constipation, parasites, IBS, gas, bloating, stomach pain, chronic fatigue, and digestive problems can all be signs of a toxic colon, and it’s my guess that you’ve been dealing with some of those symptoms for some time. You just paid little attention to them, and look where it’s gotten you.”

Chance cut her a scathing look, to which she appeared to mentally shrug. “Don’t look at me like that,” she said. “I’m not the one who

refused to go to the doctor when they felt bad. I'm surprised you don't have ulcers—and you're lucky you didn't develop colitis prior to this."

"I am not having this conversation with her in here," he whispered, nodding toward the door as Faith entered.

"Oh, yes, you will," Dr. Wright told him. "Besides, she's already had this little talk with me while our patient was asleep. So pay attention. Here's how you're going to cleanse your body." She handed him a series of charts and papers. "Just in case you need diagrams once you're home. And you're going to do this once in front of me before I release you."

Chance rolled his eyes skyward, wanting to bellow at Faith to leave the room, but she seemed intent on staying, perched on the edge of the chair nearest the door.

"Three times a day until you come back to me next week," Wright instructed. "Then in three months, if you're healed properly, we'll try to reconnect the tissue and make you whole again. Deal?"

What choice did he have? He nodded dispassionately. Damn, this was so unfair. He'd finally found the woman of his dreams, and now this.



Faith was nonplussed. Chance would damn well eat better, exercise, and get on his feet, regardless of how difficult his circumstances and how deep his pride. She knew something was wrong at her parents' barbecue, but how could she possibly have known the extent of his condition? Not like this was something brought about in everyday conversation with the new love interest. But he was much more than that, and she knew it. Whether or not *he* did, was another matter. But as long as he'd let her, she was going to nurse him back to health and extend their time together.

“Faith, I...it’s not that I don’t appreciate what you and your folks are doing,” he tried to explain, “but I can’t...I can’t go through with this.”

“Shut up, Captain,” she ordered, continuing to push his wheelchair toward their new living quarters from the car, once she and her father had him out and sitting in the contraption.

Chance surveyed the distance between the car and the compact home sitting on the edge of Larry and Joann’s property, close enough to their own home to be a mother-in-law’s quarters.

“You heard what she said,” Larry agreed. “I’ve lived with her—she’s just like her mother. You don’t want to piss her off. It’s not pretty.”

“I heard that!” Joann called from the doorway of her mother’s old house. “Talk like that...”

“Yada yada yada!” Larry said, brushing past them to test the ramp before Faith pushed the chair upwards. “Still feels sturdy. C’mon, Faith—let’s get him up here.”

Once they were inside, Larry grabbed Joann and kissed her. “Now, I’ve been a good boy—just ask them, I never mentioned the fact that he’s stuck with us for the next few weeks, never harped on how I’d be over here every day once Faith went back to work to make sure he kept up with his exercises. Ask ’em. So how about some lunch? I’m starved.” He tugged on her arm, pulling her out of the room and waving to Faith and Chance.

Chance gazed about the room. The house was small but cozy, and someone had gone to a lot of trouble setting things up. A huge area rug on which sat a treadmill, a small row of free weights, some kind of rowing machine, and other gym items. All where a sofa and chairs would ordinarily occupy space.

He looked beyond the living room and noticed that new molding had been installed around what appeared to be a considerably wider doorway

than had been there previously, because there were traces of shavings still on the floor that someone had failed to clean up. They must've worked quickly and without rest in order to prepare the place for him, unless her grandmother who'd lived here had been in a wheelchair.

"Did Larry do all of this?" he asked, his voice choked with emotion.

"Yeah, but don't let it go to your head. He's just setting you up to ask a favor of you somewhere down the line," Faith joked.

He nodded. He was too overcome with something foreign...deep feelings he hadn't felt in years, such as grief, gratitude, and an aching that defied definition.

She carried in his duffle bag of clothing from the car. Clothes, toiletries, items Griff had picked up for him at his own home. Then she went to the kitchen.

"How about some iced tea?" she called. "Mom's been busy. There are enough sandwiches and bowls of Jell-o salads and vegetables in here to keep us all week."

"You're not going into the bathroom with me," he said slowly.

"Alright."

"And you're not to watch when I—when I dress the wound."

"If you say so."

Chance's entire body felt ready to explode from pent up anger, yet there was such a sweetness about her, an acceptance of him in his condition, that she completely stole his thunder.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"Because you need me, and I need to be needed right now." She shrugged, coming back to kneel before him. "Don't do this to yourself—don't even think about doing this to me."

He turned his head so she couldn't see his eyes mist with unshed tears. He didn't feel sorry for himself—he felt sorry for her.

She seemed to sense his reservation, his reluctance to talk, so she rose and went back to the kitchen. He could hear her pulling out plates and silverware.

"I'm not really hungry, Faith." He gripped the arms of his chair, his fists whitening with tension. "Don't go to any trouble on my account."

"Well, I *am* hungry, so you can watch me eat. I'll still fix you something to drink. Rita—your doctor—suggested green tea would be best, so that's what Mom has fixed. You want sugar? Never mind. You'll have the fake stuff. It's better for you, even though it's not natural."

*So this is how I'm doomed to live. To be waited on hand and foot, to have to depend upon my woman I...*

He cut his thoughts sharply, refusing to entertain the idea that he might be falling in love with her. No, he'd accept her help for the next few days or weeks, do what he could to get back to his own place, and just cut all ties. Faith deserved a whole man, not someone like him.



"I love him, Daddy." Faith sat on the front porch later that night as Chance slept, and her father sat beside her, smoking one of the cigars he kept hidden from his wife in his workshed.

"I know." He pointed to the sky. "Look at those stars. Hard to believe many of them burned out centuries before we were even born, isn't it?"

She looked at her father through sad eyes. "Do you want to be around long enough to stare at them longer? You're gonna kill yourself with those things."

"Ah, but a happy death it'll be. I've done what I wanted, loved and raised hell, acquired the things I've coveted. Life's too short to give up everything for the sake of creeping up on death slowly, like we think we'll

escape it.” He let out a puff of smoke then nudged her. “I’m proud of you, Faith.”

“Me? Why?”

“Not many women would have stuck with him, you know. Especially if they weren’t already married to him. He has a long, hard row to hoe now.” He continued smoking, obviously enjoying himself. “You’re also doing what you want—that takes guts, kid. Take it from your old man. When you look back on your twenties and thirties and can smile because you lived life on your terms, despite the risks—that’s when you know you’ve done something with your life. That’s why I’m especially proud of you. You’ll be alright, no matter what circumstances life throws at you. Your mother and I raised you well. I am worried a bit, though.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve never taken care of anything other than that cat. We give you a potted plant—it usually dies.”

“Don’t worry—I can take care of him. You realize, of course, that Chance and I had sex before this accident.”

“I’d be a moron not to. Is that what’s bugging you? You’re afraid the sex will suffer?”

“Wouldn’t you be worried?”

“Faith, I’ve never been in his position, but something tells me that once he gets past some of his anger, he’ll snap out of his depression, and he’ll realize that life goes on and that he’ll adjust.”

Her father grinned.

Faith looked at him so suspiciously. “What’s so funny?”

“You. Worried about getting any nookie. I remember when you were a toddler picking wildflowers in your grandmother’s garden over there.” He indicated a fenced area of the property. “Now here you are fretting over your sex life...and his. You get that from your mother, you know,

worrying that everything will be alright. You get your sexual appetite from me.”

“I am not having this conversation with you.” She shook her head and rose to go back into the house.

“Well, you brought it up!”

Faith looked at her father’s face. The lines were more from laughter and age than worry and burdens. Maybe there was something she could learn from him tonight, after all.



## **Chapter Nine**

Time sped quickly, just as Chance had imagined it would, with he and Faith laughing and joking when he forgot about his current health, her feeding him and helping him up and down, her dad coming over three or four times a day to make sure he did his exercises and took his walks.

“Joann thinks it’s a good idea I should exercise with you,” Larry explained one day when Faith went shopping with her mother. “Says it’ll put lead in my pencil if I have more stamina, and she’s making me eat all these goddamned boiled eggs to boot...something about protein making me get a better log of wood for her. A man can just do so much, though, ya know?”

He glanced at Chance’s face and added, “Not likely you’ll have to worry about that if I know my Faith. She won’t allow you to fall down on the job, if you know what I mean.”

When Chance looked at him in surprise, Larry added, “She gets that from me. We Sloans are a lusty lot.”

Chance wasn’t about to tell Faith’s father that they hadn’t done more than kiss and cuddle during his recovery. Hell, maybe Faith had told her old man, asked his opinion, for all Chance knew. He wouldn’t put it past her.

The night before she had to return to work was one of the worst of his life. He was thrilled for her that she was well enough to return, but he

longed to join her, envied her the ability to pick up where she'd left off, and he wondered about his own future.

She'd showered and come back into their bedroom wearing only panties and a fireman's tee shirt from his side of the closet.

"Do you mind?" she asked with an impish smile.

"Go right ahead. Looks good on you."

She crawled onto the bed and turned her back, handing him the hairbrush with an unspoken request that he finish getting out the tangles.

"I'm going to miss you," she said quietly as he sifted through the damp strands of her hair.

"Why?" he asked. "Not like I'm any good to you right now."

She turned to face him and popped him on the shoulder. "Don't you ever say that to me!"

He was genuinely surprised at her reaction. "Faith, look at me. What could you possibly be getting out of this?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and her lower lip quivered, breaking his heart. "You don't know me at all if you have to ask," she said sadly. "And here I thought we had a better connection than that."

"You are...wonderful!" he said, searching for the right words to describe how he felt—his angst, his desire for her that he could do nothing about, his depression when he thought about his condition, his longing when he thought about a future with or without her. "I am so grateful to you and to your family."

"Then why shut me out of this?" she asked. "You think you're the only one going through this shit?"

"No! That's why I feel so bad! You deserve better than this—than me!"

A low, feral growl escaped her throat, and she pushed his hands aside and straddled him, sitting with her pussy perched directly over his cock, mindful not to touch his abdomen.

"I get turned on every time you look at me," she said, pinning him with a stern but loving gaze. "I get wet when you just smile. Don't you know that?"

He shook his head slowly, unable to register what she was saying.

"I've got news for you, Chance James, your cock is not your only attractive feature, much as I'm sure you like to think it is. You've also got a mind, hands, lips."

"I haven't been able to touch you in over two weeks!" he ground out. "And I know you...you're an extremely sexy woman...with needs...needs that I can't meet!"

She bit her bottom lip and narrowed her eyes before speaking. "Think so?"

He nodded, and she climbed off of him and went to her bureau and opened one of the drawers.

"Now what are you doing?" he asked.

"You'll see."

She kept her back to him and fumbled with something. He heard a soft buzzing noise and was shocked into a grin when she turned back around and held out a pulsating dildo. His smile faded when he thought...

"Stop it!" she ordered, coming back to bed. "It isn't to replace you, it's to help you."

"Faith, if you think you're shoving that thing up *my* ass..."

"No, jerk. It's to help you...help me. Not that I need it, as I've told you. I get off in more ways than one. But since you seem to be so fixated on

not being able to fuck me with your cock yet, I thought maybe..." She shrugged as her words trailed.

She held out her hand. "Come on. I want to show you something."

He threw back his covers and stood shakily, wondering just what in hell she had in mind.

"What?" he asked.

"You'll see. Just do it."

She led him into the living room, which was bathed now only in what light filtered through from their bedroom.

"You want me to exercise?" he asked incredulously.

"Just shut up and do as you're told."

Once she had him seated on the bench where he did his butterfly presses and shoulder pulls, she handed him the dildo.

She adjusted the weights on the T-shaped bar he used for working out his arms and came to stand before him, her lips parted, her eyes sparkling like stars in the pale light.

He didn't need a map to lead him where she wanted him to go. She clung to the bars and leaned forward, positioning her torso directly in front of him, and even though he felt nothing physically at the moment, he finally understood what she'd been telling him in the bedroom. His mind was probably the least used sexual muscle he had up until then, but now the truth engulfed him with shattering truth. He could still make her come, could still pleasure her, and she wasn't taking *no* for an answer to her unasked question: *Would he at least try?*

Yes. And gladly.

He worked off her panties with his hands, molding her ass, bringing her pussy closer to him, inserting first one finger, then another, feeling her slickness and wanting to make her come so badly that his hands shook when he felt she was ready for the dildo.

“Want to know a secret?” he asked softly. “I’ve never done this!” He couldn’t help but chuckle self-consciously.

“I’ll go you one better,” she said seductively. “Neither have I.”

At first he felt awkward, unsure of himself, until he realized that her toy was an extension of himself to her, that she was by all accounts, giving herself to the moment as surely as she would have if it had been his cock inside her pussy. Faith was actually enjoying this and moving her body slowly, sexily, allowing him to set the tempo for the dance she played in her mind.

He couldn’t resist leaning forward and kissing her belly, licking her navel, inhaling her sweet, fresh scent. He knew that he could only bend so far without pain, so he was grateful when she moved closer towards him, practically thrusting her body into his grateful mouth.

His arms longed to hold her, but he knew her legs wouldn’t support her as she came—he’d have to wait until afterwards to squeeze her to him and bury his head in her breasts. But for now, a heavy burden lifted as he watched the montage of emotions cross her face, everything from aching need to scorching desire to blessed release as she cried out his name with each wave of sensation, over and over...his name a sweet chant on her lips, and the words brought tears to his eyes.

She released the T-bar and sank to her knees before him, laughing delightedly. “Still think you’re useless, Captain?”

He smiled. “I’m not sure which one of us is more grateful.”

“I am.” She rose and extended both her hands. “Let’s go back to bed now.”

She slid beneath one of his arms, supporting his weight, even though he could manage on his own.

Chance didn’t mind this time. Somehow, it was fitting that she be Eve to his Adam, fitting beneath his arm for protection, close to his heart.

Once she'd put away her toy and picked up her panties, she reentered the bedroom and found him standing at the foot of the bed.

"Chance?"

He motioned for her to come toward him. "Help me kneel."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"I want to see if other parts of my body that you mentioned still work. If you slide to the edge of the bed, I think you can help me."

"Chance...I don't know about this."

"I do. I've been lifting weights, walking, using that damned equipment you swung from in there. I think I can support your legs on my shoulders. At least try?"

Faith smiled slowly and nodded, doing as he asked, gingerly draping her legs over his muscular shoulders and lying on her back. Soon her hands were clutching the covers, and she thrilled to hear Chance's low moans of appreciation.

"I love you!" she whispered, knowing he hadn't heard, and tears fell as she gave herself to him once more.

She knew that this was only the beginning. They had a long journey ahead of them before Chance would feel he'd regained some semblance of his former self. He'd worry constantly while she was at work and he was here. He'd question his ability to excite her, when often all she'd probably want was comfort. And he'd most likely feel that she was settling if she demanded he become more than just her fuck buddy.

But damnit, she wanted him, burns, scars, and all. There had to be some way of making him understand that he meant more to her than paychecks and promises or rocketing orgasms.

## **Chapter Ten**

“So you’re leaving the ladder company.” Chance stared at Faith when she came home from her first shift. The two short months they’d spent recuperating had bled from early spring into late summer.

“Yeah. Not the same there without you anyway.” She pulled off her shoes and socks as she sat on the edge of the bed talking to him. “Arson had an opening, and the commander gave me a great recommendation.” She shrugged. “Why not? I proved to myself that I could handle the ladder.”

“You sure you aren’t doing this because of that boy you’ve been corresponding with?” Chance watched her carefully.

She blinked. “Where did you come up with that one?”

“Well, I’m not spying on you, so don’t get defensive. I can’t help but see his letters from time to time.” Chance adjusted the pillows behind his back so he could sit up straighter. “I know how you protect your privacy, and I didn’t mean to tread on your toes. I’m just worried about you.”

Faith took a deep breath. “Well, since you have half the facts, I’ll give you the other. I felt responsible after the fire—many of us did. Billy was just this gangly kid in a grown-up body, and he was so ragged and dirty most of the time that nobody paid much attention to him. I was his teacher—I should have noticed these things.”

“What things?”

Faith got up and paced. "Like how he had very few friends, that he kept too much to himself, that he was angry and moody and depressed all the time. I had a responsibility to that child, and I failed him!"

Pain shot through him as he heard the catch in her voice. "Faith, you didn't..."

"Oh, yes, I did." She was adamant. "The hell of it is that it is so damned easy to ignore what's going on around us when we are complacent, when things are going well for us personally. I don't ever want to be that ignorant of what's going on about me ever again."

Chance considered her words. He knew better than to try changing her mind. "So that's why you've corresponded with him?"

She nodded. "He was so alone on the outside, I just couldn't stand the thought of him having no one to talk to, someone he trusted...and he still trusted me, Chance."

Faith sat beside him on the bed. "That's why I want to switch to arson investigation. I think I might be able to profile at least the kids who commit the crime."

She ran her fingers over his cheeks. "So tell me what made you think of Billy."

Chance shook his head. "We've had this discussion—you think he's innocent, I think he's dirty."

Faith bit her lips and stood, and Chance was sorry he'd blurted it out like that.

"If anything, Billy is helping me, Chance. He's not starting those fires."

"Faith, he lives in that neighborhood where the last fire took place."

"So? Doesn't mean he set it." Faith dropped to her knees beside the bed. "I've trusted you for several months. I wish you'd trust me on this one thing."



He groaned. "Faith, baby, I trust you with everything. As I said, I'm just worried. I don't want you hurt—physically or otherwise. Arson is a messy job. There are all manner of whacked out idiots with fire fetishes."

"Billy is *not* one of them."

This time Chance let it go, remembering something else Harold had told him at the celebration at Faith's parents' home. *Faith needed to be needed.*

Chance winced. Well, she certainly found her dream man in him then. He pushed himself from the pillows and tried to sit up.

"What are doing?" Faith rose to help.

Chance brushed aside her hands. "I'm phoning Griff. I want a job, any job, even if it's just doing paperwork from here until I can stand on my own."

"Chance, this is crazy—it's late. He's probably already gone home."

"Then I'll phone him at home!"

Chance hadn't meant to be so gruff with her, but he couldn't abide thinking of Faith fighting flames and putting herself into dangerous situations every day, not while he sat on his ass waiting for a medical release.

It had taken all but an act of God to get the department to let him work part time, but he figured it was better than nothing.

He was also determined, now more than ever, to have his body reconnected, all parts functioning normally, so even though the chance was slim, he was grabbing it. It meant excruciating exercises, hours of pain in his home gym that Larry had constructed, but Chance welcomed the pain, embraced the opportunity that Faith and her parents had given him to heal.

Better to let Faith think he wasn't a charity case, even if what Harold had said was true. Much easier on them both if Chance healed and did it quickly, alleviating his doubts that Faith was with him only because he was helpless in any capacity.

She could hardly leave her own house, though, he thought grimly. So he'd have to be the one to move out. He needed to land on his feet both figuratively and emotionally before he could trust that when she came to him, it was for the whole man, not the cripple who depended upon her.

Faith armed herself with the paperwork she'd collected on the arsons and walked towards her grandmother's old garden. Maybe sitting among the numerous beds of flowers would help her think, or at least let something besides the tension with Chance take up mental rental property.

She hated disagreeing with him, even if they didn't actually fight. He was older, smarter, and knew more about firefighting than she did, but he didn't know Billy as she did.

Sure, a small, niggling feeling stuck with her, the "what if" factor. But what if Chance was wrong? Didn't she owe it to Billy to absolve him? Didn't she owe it to herself to follow her own instincts? How could she possibly be the best at her job if she didn't trust herself?

Chance would just have to understand, to lend her the same respect and trust she afforded him.

## **Chapter Eleven**

“You fucking idiot!” Griff’s voice fairly boomed when Chance took a cab to see him the next week.

“I told you that I was ready to work.” Chance held his ground.

“I got you approved for paperwork...in your home!”

“But it’s not *my* home, Griff. I need to work.”

Chance’s commander threw up his hands and stood, glaring down at Chance. “Then go back to wherever your hat is, park your ass, and work from there. You’re not physically able to be here even half a day, nor do I want you in this building until you have a medical release. End of discussion.”

Chance knew that Griff would pull rank on him if he pushed his luck, but something in his friend’s voice told him that there were secrets. “How do you know I’m not physically able to be here?”

“You don’t have a doctor’s note releasing you, do you?” Griff drew in a long breath. “Besides, Faith told me. I see her every other day or so.”

“Faith?”

“You can’t watch out for her, so...somebody had to do it.” Griff sat back down. “She’s been coming in here, asking what she can do for you to help you so that you don’t go nuts on her.”

Chance was surprised. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her to go home and fuck you blue.”

Chance felt his face flush. He hoped...no...he knew by the look on Griff's face that the older man suspected that their sex life left a bit to be desired. "Well, I hope she at least kept *that* one out of the conversation."

"She did." Griff shrugged. "Knowing you, though, you're probably holding out on her out of spite, with some goddamned, self-righteous Tarzan/Superman/Captain Kirk desire to save the world and her with it."

Chance didn't know what to say. He felt like some school boy called on the carpet by his principal.

"Goddamnit, boy, she loves you. Anybody can see that." Griff pulled a pack of smokes from his desk and shook them at Chance. "Do you see this? I've been quit for two weeks, and now look."

"I'm just another lost soul for her to tend to. We might have had better luck before the accident, but not now." Chance's voice was low, deep.

"You idiot, she probably doesn't even know that you're feeling sorry for yourself. She probably thinks if you don't touch her that it's because she isn't good enough or something." Griff lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply then looked at Chance. "I live with three women—you gotta trust me on this one."

"She deserves better."

"Sure she does. I know you and love you like a son, but even I know that one." Griff smiled as he said it.

"So that's how it is." Chance's words were more of a statement than a question.

"That's how it is. Go home. Here." Griff stood and walked to a file cabinet. "Paperwork on the fire where you got hurt. See what you can make of all this. I've got two secretaries down with the flu and three

firemen on vacation. Make yourself useful, if you must, and dig up some leads for me.”

The first thing Chance did was to pour over the notes of the last fire, the one in which he and Faith had been injured. Nothing out of the ordinary except that the two boys who’d been playing near the fire hadn’t been questioned. As far as he could tell, all they had were the boys’ names, and they only had that because of the police report after the boys had been questioned at the hospital.

He decided to check Faith’s former student’s record—it was just as she’d said. The young man had done his time, been released, and was living in an old house down by the railroad tracks. What troubled Chance was that Billy’s M.O. matched that of the last arsonist, same damn method.

He took another look at the boys’ records from the hospital. One name stood out, James Warren. He looked again. Nah, couldn’t be. He viewed the boys’ addresses again. What were two teenagers from Ranchwood Addition doing so close to Bricktown?

Warren...Warren. He searched his mind. One of the department’s commissioners lived in Ranchwood. He grabbed a telephone directory from the desk and thumbed through it.

There it was. James and Eleanor Warren. The boy was probably named for his old man. Well, that put a fly in the ointment. Not that Chance minded interviewing the kid. Chance didn’t care if he was the president’s son, if the boy had information on the fire, he had to be called in.

As for Faith’s former student, Billy was under surveillance, regardless of the personal cost to Faith and his own personal relationship with her.



Faith ran the plates again, just to make certain, but there it was on the computer screen. Billy had done well, even though the next steps she had to take might cost Faith her career. Why did the car have to belong to someone connected with a commissioner's son?

She'd given Billy a cell phone, paid for out of her own pocket, and asked him to follow the two boys who'd been taken to the hospital after the Bricktown fire. Billy had spotted them wandering around near the ruins where they'd been. The automobile they'd climbed into belonged to one Doug Edwards, whose family lived in the vicinity of Ranchwood but on the outskirts. A poor kid slumming with the upper crust most likely.

But why would three kids so far north of the site be cruising Bricktown?

Oklahoma City's population was miniscule in comparison to the area encompassing it. If memory served, the city was the third largest in the United States regarding square mileage. Not like the kids had to travel outside their comfort zone to find whatever it was kids needed, whether pool halls, teen recreational centers, or even trouble.

Faith browsed the online records and requested further information on the three boys, the owner of the car plus the two who were seen at St. Anthony's Hospital. She'd just clicked into the files the various city departments shared when Billy phoned.

"I think they're scouting for their next location," he said.

"Where are they now?"

"Corner of Walker and south Thirty-Second, but earlier they kept driving by a school."

Faith chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully. "Maybe they're just looking for girls."

Billy snorted. “Junior high and high school boys cruising for underage chicks?”

Faith had to agree. “I’m on it. Stay with them if you can—I’ll take care of your gas.” She sensed hesitation on the other end of the line. “What’s on your mind?”

“You know I’m a suspect, don’t you?”

She hadn’t wanted to admit that little fact to him. “Yeah.”

“Well, I want this guy or these guys, whoever they are, caught. I swear to you, Miss Sloan, that I had nothing to do with any of these.”

“I know. That’s why I asked you to help me. Figured if nothing else it might clear you.”

His voice was rough with emotion. “Thanks, Teach.”

Faith managed to say goodbye before her own voice broke. It was the first time Billy had mentioned their former shared past since she’d seen him as an adult. They had an uneasy, unspoken alliance, one in which Faith suspected neither of them wanted to spotlight Billy’s past transgressions. She knew Billy felt her desire to help him as absolution for her not seeing his pain all those years ago, and on the other hand she realized he needed to prove to himself that he wasn’t a low-life just because he’d done some bad things in the past.

After she hung up, she went back to her records search and noticed that someone else had requested much of the same information she had, and their initials were CJ.

Faith stared at the screen. Couldn’t be. Could it?



“What in hell are you doing working with that young man?” Chance demanded that night at dinner.

“Why are you spying on me...again?” Faith countered.

“I’m not...I’m doing my own investigation.”

“Like hell!” She smacked the table between them. “You’re supposed to be on bed rest, Captain.”

“I can’t sit idly by while you put yourself on the line every day, Faith.” His lips formed a grim line. “But that’s not the reason I’m on this. One of those kids or someone they know caused this.” His hands swept over his stomach and legs. “I want the bastard responsible.”

“So it’s personal.” She stated rather than asked.

“You’re damn right it’s personal, but it’s also the job, and I need the job!”

Faith took a deep breath before replying. “Billy is tailing the two boys who were at the fire.”

“And I have someone tailing Billy, so that should just about square things and keep everyone in line.”

Faith blinked. “You have someone watching someone who is working for me, in other words.”

“I have a man monitoring a suspect, Faith. Don’t get your panties in a twist thinking it has anything to do with you.”

“Oh, right. I’m supposed to do my job now knowing you’re spying on me? *Me*, Chance?”

“All I know right now is that Billy has a new cell phone and has been driving around like he’s looking for trouble.”

Faith chuckled. “I gave him the phone, Chance. I can save you the trouble of finding his records and even give you the telephone number.”

“I’ve got it.”

“Great. When did you plan on telling me that I’m a part of your investigation?”



I'm telling you now, and you must know that this doesn't look good, an arson investigator in cahoots with a suspect." He ran his hands restlessly through his hair and groaned. "We work for the same department, Faith. Don't you think it would be best if we simply shared information instead of playing cloak and dagger like this?"

She bit her tongue before reminding him that he had no department as yet, that he was merely *on the job* doing paperwork to benefit her, according to Griff. Instead, she sighed in resignation and nodded. "You have access to any information I do."

"I don't know what's in your head, though," he responded. "That would help."

"I think Commissioner Warren's son is involved." There. She'd said it. "I think he's responsible somehow for the fires we've been dogging."

"And I think Billy is involved," Chance stated bluntly. "Do you know that two of the calls he's made recently on that new cell phone you're supplying were made to Doug Edwards?"

Faith felt a wave of panic. "That's impossible."

"It's true. Did you also know that Edwards and your former student shared a cell in juvvie?"

Now she was sick to her stomach. Billy wouldn't do that to her. This couldn't be happening.

"Faith." Chance leaned across the table and clasped her hands in his. "Baby, I'm sorry to break it to you like this, but wouldn't you rather hear it from me than one of the boys downtown or from your commanding officer?"

Her mind told her one thing, but her heart another. Billy was a changed man—she knew it in her gut. But why would he have spoken with Edwards and not told her?

## **Chapter Twelve**

They didn't speak before bedtime, the first chilly, unresponsive period in their relationship since they'd known one another. Faith was heartsick that they'd let anything come between them, sicker still at the thought that the boy she'd trusted may have betrayed her confidence.

First thing she did once she was back at work the next morning was to phone the high school that Doug Edwards, James Warren, and the third boy, Todd Meacham, attended. The school principal was happy to oblige when she asked to meet with him and the boys' school counselor.

Mrs. Davis, the counselor had nothing but praise for Warren and Meacham. "Jimmy and Todd cut up, like all boys their age, but they're good students," she said, showing Faith their school records. "Jimmy and his father don't get along, but other than that..."

"What do you mean they don't get along?" Faith was immediately intrigued.

"Nothing major. Jimmy's mother attends most of his parent-teacher conferences. The father never shows up, which seems to irritate Jimmy is all. Oh, he boasts to his buddies that he and his dad go everywhere together and take in ballgames, that sort of thing, but I've never seen Mr. Warren with him. Ever. I think the boy has a hero worship for the man."

"Or great contempt." The wheels spinning in Faith's head sped into overdrive. "How about the other two?"

Mrs. Davis consulted her paperwork. "Todd comes from a broken home, as does Doug. No problems with Todd, but Doug can be a handful at times for his teachers."

"Who does he hang with?"

"He tries to pal with Todd and Jimmy. Occasionally, they'll throw him a bone and act like they're good friends, but most of the time, at least here at school, Doug is an outcast." Mrs. Davis closed the folder. "I'm sorry, but that's really all I have on any of them."

Faith thanked the principal and counselor then asked if she might observe the students without their knowledge. "Just peek in during lunchtime." Faith consulted her watch. "Please...just for a few minutes."

"I don't see a problem with that." The principal stood, indicating their session was over. "Mrs. Davis can show you to the lunchroom, and you can stay for a bit, although I don't see what good it will do. They're just kids, and this is a closed campus."

*Meaning that they can't leave*, mused Faith. She shook his hand then followed the teacher to the copy room, where they photocopied the boys' photographs, then to the lunchroom, where they said goodbye.

Faith knew she'd probably come up empty-handed, but she had to at least watch the boys interact with one another. She'd been a teacher long enough to recognize body language kids portrayed, to tell whether or not they were close or merely tolerating one another.

After the noon bell rang and the lunch period began for the three boys, she stood near the line in the cafeteria in hopes of spotting them. She didn't have to wait long before Warren and Meacham appeared, but there was no sign of Edwards.

Once the boys had eaten, however, they wandered outside and sat on the steps at the school's entrance. Warren pointed towards the parking lot and laughed. Faith followed his gaze and spotted a young man who

was a bit taller than the other two walking purposefully towards a parked truck.

Billy's truck!

Faith walked quickly, not caring that she might be seen and recognized. As soon as Edwards crossed the property line, he ran towards Billy, whose anger was evident by the sneer on his face and the cocked position of his fists. Soon both boys were swinging and scuffling, falling to the ground, still throwing punches.

Two men stepped out of an unmarked vehicle nearby and whipped out handcuffs. Before she could blink, it seemed, both boys were in custody, spread-eagled against Billy's truck as the officers read the boys their rights.

When she was in his field of vision, Billy turned his head, spotting her. "It's not what you think, Miss Sloan!"

Edwards jerked his head around and saw her. "He gave us the whole idea—it was him behind all of this!"

"That's not true!" Billy tried responding as the police ushered him to their car. He called over his shoulder, "Check the house—check Jimmy's house!"

Faith's stomach churned as she watched them being led away and tucked into the car side by side, both boys still yelling. She turned to glance back at the school. Both Warren and Meacham had disappeared.

Her cell phone rang—it was Chance.

"Faith?"

"Chance, I don't have time to explain, but get a car over to Commissioner Warren's house right now—right now! I think I know where the boys have been storing their chemicals!"

"Faith, the boys in blue just notified me that they're in the process of picking up Billy, and..."

"I know—I'm right here watching them. Chance, did you hear me? I know where they're keeping the materials that they've used to make the bombs. If you can't send a car, then I'm going myself!"

She ran towards her car, her heart pounding. Billy had to be telling her the truth. It all made sense—Meacham never belonged, so he supplied Warren with the means to get back at his dad for the lack of attention.

"Faith, on what grounds do I request backup for you?"

"Probable cause, Chance. Either send someone, or I'll be alone, and the boys have the means to firebomb me if I'm alone." She snapped her cell phone shut, opened her car door, and revved the engine. At this point, all she cared about was catching them before they could do more damage.

She'd just opened the paperwork in her car and found the commissioner's address when Chance phoned back.

"Don't go knocking, just wait at the curb," he told her. "I'm on my way."

"You?" She was incredulous. "You're supposed to be at home in bed!"

"Just do as I say this time!"

By the time she arrived in Ranchwood, she understood. Chance had phoned the police, who were already dragging the two boys and the trash bags they were carrying from the double-car garage. Faith breathed a sigh of relief when one officer opened the contents of a bag and brought forth a metal can and a couple of glass bottles.

Soon Chance's taxi arrived, and she rushed to meet him.

"You crazy fool!" Faith threw her arms about his neck, not caring who witnessed the act.

He kissed her hard and hugged her tightly. "You were right—Billy was only doing as you'd asked. The officers taking them downtown overheard enough to exonerate him." Chance chuckled. "Seems the boys got into a cuss fight in the back seat and the Meacham kid yelled 'yeah, prove it' when Billy accused him and the others of aping his own arson."

"Really?" Faith took hope.

"Yeah, and then the Meacham kid made the mistake of letting his tongue loose and said that by now the evidence would be destroyed." He shrugged. "The boys in blue called the station, the desk clerk phoned their commander then us, and...you know the rest."

"And Billy?" Faith's heart sank at the thought of Billy in jail.

"He went to the school to confront Edwards. Evidently, he figured out who he'd been tailing and put two and two together—that's why he phoned him. Guess he couldn't wait until he informed you before pouncing on the kid."

"Then all he's in for this time is assault and battery, breaking the peace, that sort of thing." Faith was still sad that Billy had yet another altercation with the law, but this was better than his being arrested for arson again.

Chance turned her back towards her own vehicle. "I have good news."

She stopped and stared at him. "What?"

"The results of my last X-rays and MRI. They're hooking me back up next week."

She knew by the light in his eyes what he meant. "Next week?"

"That means I'm back to being a bum for a few weeks since I have orders not to do more than walk until the operation. Think you'd mind having me at home?"



That night, after they'd both showered and were lying in bed, Faith ran her hands over Chance's broad chest with her head resting on his shoulder. Even though they were both relaxed, she could feel his stomach muscles tightening beneath her touch as her hand dipped lower.

Wordlessly, she reached beneath the waistband of his loose-fitting boxers and fondled him, delighted when his body responded by stiffening. This time he offered no protests or excuses when she lowered herself and took his cock in her mouth. She made love to him as if she were talking to him, showing him with every tender suckle, each stroke of his thigh how much she cared. Surely, he understood that sex was only a part of their union, that there was so much more.

His cock was rigid, his balls tight with tension. She licked and sucked, her mouth saying what words couldn't convey at the moment. *Come for me, baby!* Her hands moved from his thighs to his ass and held him closer. She loved his body, his scent, his taste.

Chance responded by alternately cupping her head, letting his fingers curl through her hair, and sliding them down to her shoulders, where he massaged her, his fingers tensing now and then as her tongue increased its rhythm.

She was thrilled he was able to maintain, that his body and mind were in sync, because she knew that for Chance, it was important he give as well as he got. Sure enough, he soon asked her if she'd straddle him.

"I can't do much." His eyes were alight with both sadness and hope.

"That's okay, Captain. I'll hold myself aloft—you just keep that hard cock of yours ready for me and I'll make us both happy."

Faith was delighted that Chance was willing to even suggest things for them to try.

His hands rested lightly on her hips at first, and she could see the worry in his eyes as she helped guide him into her body. But once positioned, she knew they were safe. She could feel his engorged shaft spearing her, knew that he'd be able to both give and receive pleasure.

Faith raised her head and breathed deeply, a bubble of happiness threatening to burst. Soon his laughter joined hers, and they were riding a tide of passion like none she'd ever experienced.

"Oh, Faith! Baby!" His voice held so much emotion that Faith thought her heart would burst. "I'm coming!"

She leaned forward slightly, and he captured one of her breasts in his mouth, sucking her wildly. Faith slid up and down on his cock, her pussy muscles clenching each time his lips and tongue did their magic. A deep longing she'd felt for weeks surfaced and shattered, and she knew that he would be okay, that *they* would be all right.

Tears of joy flowed freely as she came. Perfection...almost total bliss was hers at last. Only one thing stood in the way.

"I love you, Faith!" Chance looked into her eyes as she slid onto the sheets beside him and laughed nervously.

"I love you, too, Chance."

"No, I mean I really, really love you. I need to say something. If I wait, it won't be the same as it would now. Faith, I want you to marry me."

The tears that had started now shook her to the bone.

"Baby, we've already been through *in sickness and in health*," he continued. "No matter what happens with this operation, I know that we'll make it. If you'll have me."

She snuggled against him and kissed him over and over, his lips, his eyes, his brow, his cheeks. "Of course! Did you really think I'd say no?"

"I thought about leaving until you realized you loved me."

She blinked in surprise. "Chance!"



“Okay, so it was a selfish thing. I was more interested in finding out whether you felt sorry for me or if you really loved me.” He sighed. “I’m an idiot, okay? So sue me.”

“I’ll leave that to your ex-wives.” She kissed him again soundly.

“Ex-wife, singular. One thing,” he said, kissing her back. “My apartment is on the second floor. Do you mind staying here a bit longer?”

When she frowned and shook her head, he continued.

“Plus, I’ve grown rather fond of living next door to your parents. Just don’t tell ‘em I said so.” He winked.

“You sure?” She propped herself on one elbow and stared down at him. “I know having the in-laws next door isn’t exactly every man’s dream.”

“Not every man gets Larry and Joann.”

Faith leaned back against the pillows. “I want Griff to officiate.”

“He’d like that.”

“I want my father to give me away.”

“Of course.”

Faith reached for his hands and clasped them to her breasts. “And I want you, whether you’re walking or in a wheelchair, no matter the outcome of this operation. You’re not getting out of this, Captain.”

“Not a problem. When are you telling your folks?”

Faith rose naked from the sheets and straddled him again. “I think we’ll give it a few hours. There are other things I’d like to do tonight.”

Chance rubbed her hips and helped her nest against his body. “This may take a while.”

Faith rubbed her pussy against his cock teasingly. “I’ve got all night, Captain.”

## **Lyn Cash**

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## Taking the Cake

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Mollie Mason is sure her night can't get any worse. Stuck in an inflatable rubber cake, she overhears her fiancé slamming her to the entire guest list of his bachelor party—and then she catches him cheating! But discovering her high school crush has witnessed her humiliation is the icing on the cake.

Cade Gallagher has wanted Mollie for years. And when she asks him to help her prove to the world—and herself—that she's not

just a good girl, he knows he'd be a fool to say no. But she wants a temporary fling. Will two weeks be enough time to convince her to take a chance on him—forever?

*Enjoy this Excerpt:*

Mollie straightened up, brushing the tracks of tears off her cheeks. She refused to leave any sign of weakness, hated that she was crying over that pitiful excuse for a man, but sometimes emotions couldn't be helped.

Though come to think of it, the primary emotion she felt right now was rage. She was furious at how he'd described her, fuming mad at the

disgusting antics he had been engaged in when she finally escaped her bachelor-party prison. But she wasn't sad or grieving.

Shouldn't she be? After all, tonight had spelled the death of their relationship.

Maybe that would come later. What were the five stages of dealing with a lying, cheating, conniving ex-fiancé?

Ex. Oh, man. The wedding was in a week. How in the world was she going to cancel everything in one stupid week?

Because there was no way in hell she was going to go through with the wedding now.

She pushed up from the concrete step and straightened her outfit, wishing she could get her real clothes before heading home. But they were stuck in the bathroom of the hotel suite, and she wouldn't go back in that room on a bet.

Which was what had gotten her into this mess in the first place.

Caroline was going to pay.

Swearing under her breath, Mollie reached for her purse, then swore again as her hand swept through empty air. Of course her purse was still in the hotel suite. No self-respecting stripper would pop out of a cake carrying her Dooney and Bourke. And she was nothing if not self-respecting.

She leaned against the door, dropping her head back with a satisfying clang that echoed through the stairwell. She was going to have to go back in that damn room—because without her purse, keys, and cell phone, there was no way to get home.

Groaning, she banged the door again—then yelped as it opened behind her, sending her tumbling out into the open hallway and onto the carpet.

Right in front of a pair of black leather motorcycle boots.

“Thought I’d find you here,” a very low, very familiar voice said.

Oh, no. No no no... Wincing, Mollie slowly raised her eyes, skimming up a pair of well-worn, well-fitting jeans, past a chambray button-down shirt, all the way up to a face out of a thousand fantasies.

And tonight, one hideous nightmare.

Face flaming, she scrambled to her feet, crossing her arms over her chest in a futile effort to hide her pseudo-outfit. “Cade,” she mumbled, looking down at the ground. Of all the people who could possibly find her like this, why did it have to be him? “What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Mollie,” he said, as if he saw her wearing a spangled bathing suit every day. “Thought you might need these.”

His hand thrust into her field of vision, holding her neatly folded clothes and, thank heaven above, her purse.

“I—uh—thanks.” She grabbed her things out of his hand. “How did you know...”

This time, she looked at him in time to catch a negligent shrug. “I asked one of the other girls where they had changed, and grabbed your stuff on the way out. Figured you wouldn’t be in the mood to go back in.”

She grimaced. “Not in a million years.” Still utterly self-conscious of how little she was wearing, Mollie pulled on her sweatshirt right over the showgirl outfit. The girl she’d borrowed it from would just have to wait to get it back.

Or maybe she’d just burn it and send some money for a replacement.

“So, are you, um,” Mollie waved her hand in a vague gesture, “did anyone say...”

“No one else recognized you.” Cade glanced over his shoulder at the hotel suite. Loud music and raucous laughter pulsed through the closed doorway.

"I'm not sure if I should be relieved or insulted." She hiked her jeans up over her sequined butt. After a few failed attempts, she finally managed to secure the button. "Not even Blaine?"

"Sorry." Cade reached down and snagged her panties off the carpet where she'd dropped them in her haste to get dressed.

Mollie snatched them out of his hand and stuffed them into her pocket, along with her bra, which was draped across the toe of her spike-heeled shoe. "Okay, my humiliation is complete. Could you go now?"

"If that's what you—" He turned around abruptly, grabbed her by the shoulders and thrust her to the wall. Threading his fingers through her hair, he stepped into the vee of her legs and pressed her up against the wall with his body.

Dimly, she was aware of the sound of a door slamming, quickly swallowed up by the sensation of Cade's delicious body pressed against her from knee to chest.

God, he was built, with pecs that brushed against her breasts, causing her nipples to tighten almost painfully. His thighs held her legs apart, keeping her upright, which was a good thing since otherwise she suspected she would be a whimpering puddle at his feet. His fingertips traced tiny circles on her scalp, sending a tingle down to her toes.

He tilted her head just a little to the left, then crushed his mouth against hers, sweeping his tongue inside on her gasp of surprise.

And then it didn't matter that her rat of a fiancé had just betrayed and belittled her to all of his pals, or that her dream of a perfect marriage crumbled into ash, because Cade was kissing her with all the heat and passion and finesse that she'd dreamed of since adolescence. Heat spiraled through her and she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him even closer, until the hard ridge of his arousal nudged her belly.

Oh, my God. Cade wanted her. She tilted her hips inward, rocking against him in a rhythmic motion that echoed the dance of his tongue stroking hers. Lifting one leg, she wrapped it around his waist and pressed against his rock-solid hard-on.

He growled into her mouth and slid his hands down to cup her buttocks, urging her other leg up to join the first until she wrapped completely around him, sex to sex, heat to heat. He gripped her tightly with one hand, the other sliding underneath her sweatshirt to cup her breast, teasing and tantalizing her aching nipple through the thin fabric of the leotard. It beaded even tighter under his ministrations, and she tangled her fingers in his hair, pouring years of desire into the kiss.

Suddenly, he pulled away, breathing erratically, his forehead pressed against hers. "I think they're gone," he whispered harshly.

Gone? Mollie looked over his shoulder at the empty hall. The elevator at the far end slid shut with a click.

"Sorry about that." Cade eased her down to a standing position. "It was all I could think of."

All he could think of? The best, most intense, most—arousing kiss of her entire life, and he was telling her it was just a fake?

Mollie stumbled a few steps away, clenching her hands at her sides to control the trembling. Or maybe to keep herself from touching him again. Of course the kiss was a fake. Just like the cake she'd jumped out of. Just like the engagement she'd thought was the real thing.

But nothing about her now-dead relationship with Blaine had ever come close to the passion she'd felt in one all-too-brief encounter with Cade Gallagher.

"I've got to get out of here." She hitched her purse onto her shoulder and pushed the stairway door open.

"Sounds good to me." Cade reached out and held the door for her.



She looked back at him in surprise. "You're coming?" Then blushed as a wicked grin spread across his face. "I mean, don't you want to go back to the party?"

"Are you kidding?" He followed her into the stairwell. "Let's hit the road."

*What would you do?*

## **Trophy Girl**

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You're a NASCAR fan...pretty into it, thanks to your dad. You know a lot about the drivers, the tracks, the cars. Even though you try not to, you hear the rumors and see the off-track interviews. You know the reputation of the series champ, bad-boy Zander Torris. You know he's devastatingly good looking, and charming to boot, but with a different piece of voluptuous, blonde eye candy on his arm every weekend, you have zilch respect for him.

The only good thing you see in him is that he's a very generous benefactor for the camp where you're a nurse volunteer.

So when he walks into your clinic, unannounced and unexpected, and asks you—girl-next-door, unglamorous you—to that evening's benefactor's dinner, what do you do?

Hint, he's not taking no for an answer, so be ready at 6...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Trophy Girl:*

Zander's hand rested on the curve of her lower back, making it very difficult to continue fighting against his insistent control of the situation. The heat from his hand flowed through her, heating her skin, boiling her blood. He looked way too delicious in that dark suit. He'd shaved as well,

a citrusy waft of his aftershave teasing her nostrils, making each of her senses beg for their own samples of this much too virile male.

Why couldn't he be a regular guy? Then she could enjoy, even anticipate building on the attraction she felt. But no, he had to be an untouchable. Someone she could lust after from here 'til doomsday and never have. Not for real anyway.

As it was, nobody was going to believe he not only asked her to be his date, but he'd taken her shopping for clothes. Sexy clothes. What the heck did that mean anyway? And how could she not respond? She wasn't dead, after all. Still, a small part of her was grounded enough to know that regardless of his final purpose, he needed for her to look good on his arm.

Ah hell. He was right. She hadn't had a man buy her clothes like this before.

The scent of vanilla greeted her as she stepped through the doorway. Her pump clad feet sunk into the plush cocoa-colored carpet. An immaculately dressed woman rushed up to them, smiling. Yeah, she recognized Zander. That had to be it. Either that or she simply read money in his tailored jacket and charcoal, brushed-silk shirt with same color tie. He could dress, there was no doubt about that. He wore success well.

After the woman had thoroughly ogled him, then made eye contact, attention was turned to Molly. She was simply going to go along with this, unless, of course, he intended to put her in something sleazy.

"Black, yes?"

Molly shrugged and looked up at Zander. He nodded and gave her one of those looks that made her feel like she'd already removed all her clothing. She shivered as his hand brushed her arm, but followed the saleswoman down to the dressing room with careful steps.

The fitting room was the size of a master bathroom, complete with mirrors on two walls, wall hangers for her own clothes and marble counter for her purse. Amazing.

"Mr. Torris has already suggested this for you." Molly followed the woman's long pink fingernail to the very elegant dress hanging on the far wall. Draped on the counter were silk stockings, panties and just below it, a pair of strappy heels. Had he thought of everything?

"He wasn't sure of your size," she said and smiled, her eyes twinkling. "I think he was pretty accurate describing. But if something doesn't fit, let me know."

"I will."

Okay, she was excited. Hard not to be when being treated like royalty. She slipped into the stockings and dress, sighing as the silk whispered against her bare flesh. Her nipples puckered as the material cupped her breasts, draping elegantly over them. She smoothed the narrow straps over her shoulders, then let her fingers trace down the sides of her curves and rest on her hips as she surveyed her appearance in the mirror. She should have trusted him.

The skirt was layered; the hem uneven. It reminded her immediately of the sketches of faeries in the children's books she kept in her office. It hugged her waist, lying smooth over her stomach. She even adored the neckline, an elegant draping of material that made it sexy, but without showing even a hint of cleavage. One couldn't find dresses like this in regular department stores, that was for sure. The straps in the back crisscrossed. Shame she'd left her hair down so she couldn't show off the elegant string of black beads that lay draped along her shoulder blades.

"Molly?" Zander called through the door. "What do you think?"

She twirled around, half in wonder, half in disbelief. "Oh my God, this dress is gorgeous."

Without preempt, Zander opened the door and joined her in the room. Suddenly, it didn't seem so big. She sucked in her breath, wondering if she'd ever get used to how powerful his presence was. His eyes roamed over her, the color darkening even as his mouth spread into a satisfied smile. He looked like the cat who had the canary trapped, and was about to have lunch.

"You're not supposed to be in here!" she cried, backing up and checking to make sure the dress covered everything it needed to. Her bra lay on the floor between them where she'd dropped it in her haste. She hated the heat in her cheeks as his eyes lazily roamed over her, then her discarded clothes, then back to her again.

She may have known who Zander Torris was for damn near a decade, but she'd only met him today. It was far too soon to be sharing this moment—one bordering on intimacy—in a fitting room, no less. Yet she couldn't deny it. Her nipples had pebbled beneath the soft material the moment his gaze had rested there. Anticipation spun in her stomach, and lower. Never had she felt turned on from a man simply looking at her—fully dressed, at that. Her heart pounded, worried he could see her arousal through her clothes.

"We don't want to be late," she said, or rather, choked out. What was wrong with her body? Around him it seemed to behave so uncharacteristically.

"I'm not sure I want you wearing that dress." Voice low, matter-of-fact, and sexy as hell. Despite the meaning of the words, her body responded as if was an invitation to strip.

Molly had to pry her eyes from the way the shoulders of his shirt strained when he crossed his arms over his chest. He'd removed his jacket. Yowza. *Concentrate, Molly, look him in the eye. You're eye candy, not dessert. He's told you as much.* "Wh-why?"

"Cause it'd be dangerous."

Lord, she knew it was a trap, knew he said it as pure flattery but damn it, it worked. The wicked half smile on his face, the gleam in his eye. He should have been an actor instead of a driver, the man was amazing. "Well, thanks. So, Mr. Hot Shot, what will it be, the dress or my suit. Frankly, I don't care." She shifted her weight, and set about picking up her clothes, hoping to personify the confidence she lacked.

"The dress. What panties are you wearing?"

Her hands instinctively slapped onto her thighs, holding the skirt down. "None of your goddamn business." The tingling in her body pooled between her legs, making her well aware of the silk pressure of the thong's material against her most intimate parts.

Sexy, rich, who cares, he didn't need to know anything about her panties...or lack of. She repeated that to herself at least three times as he studied her.

"Well, I thought I had them pick up a garter and thong, but you're not wearing a thong with that. I'll be right back."

He stepped out, shutting the door behind him with a gentle click.

Words she usually saved for stubbed toes or drivers who cut her off tumbled from her mouth. What had been so wrong with her own black French cut bikinis? Seriously. She was slipping out of the thong—which he'd undoubtedly have to pay for just because she'd tried it on—and was just reaching for her own undies when he came in again.

"Here, I like these better."

*These* were low-cut, satin boy briefs with a nearly sheer lace front. He held them like he handled women's panties all day. Hell, he probably had enough experience. Good reminder, she decided as she snatched the scrap of fabric from him and nodded toward the door. "Just because you're buying doesn't mean you get to see them."

He turned around.

Her heart thundered in her chest. She clamped her thighs together, amazed her body found his presence in the room while she was naked under that skirt all the more arousing. "Out."

"Just slip them up under your skirt."

"Don't you dare move or I'll scream rape." She was really more afraid of screaming in other ways, because if he moved, it meant only one thing. Her body shuddered as she imagined him pinning her against the wall, shoving her skirt up and burying his face in her pussy. She bit her lip to keep from gasping. Her legs felt like putty. Oh, God, how was she going to survive the night?

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