



**Hearts Afire: March**

Jade Morrison and Shaunta Grimes

(c) 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-513-8

## **Hearts Afire: March**

Jade Morrison and Shaunta Grimes

Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-513-8

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2009, Jade Morrison and Shaunta Grimes. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books  
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:  
[raven@LSbooks.com](mailto:raven@LSbooks.com)

Editor  
Terri Schaefer

Cover Artist  
April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Blurbs**

### **Find ‘em Hot, Leave ‘em Wet**

... is a contemporary suspense novella about firefighter Logan Wylde and police officer Madison Rose. Sparks fly when they meet during an insignificant kitchen fire at criminal Jimmy Dawson’s town house. Taking advantage of the opportunity that Dawson’s out of town, and his housekeeper fled the scene after dialing 911, the cops arrive along with the fire department to do a quick unwarranted search of the premises. But Jimmy is a careful man, and the search reveals nothing suspicious. However, after the fire, cops and firefighters begin mysteriously dying.

For unknown reasons, Dawson is taking out those who responded to the 911 call. After Logan’s apartment is burned by a Molotov cocktail, he and Madison join together to find what Dawson is looking for, and why it’s important enough he will kill for it.

The attraction between Logan and Madison is instant. From the moment they literally run into each other at Dawson’s townhouse, to the heated, and intimately personal, tour of the fire station where Logan works, they can’t seem to keep their hands off one another. Despite the danger they find themselves in, the real danger comes from within. Because, when a fire burns this hot, there's only one way to quench it.

\* \* \* \*

### **Ena’s Fire**

Ena Shannon has a secret she can't let any of her fellow firefighters in on. She's one of four witch sisters, each having command of one of four elements. Ena lives with fire inside her, which makes her the most effective firefighter at Ember, Inc. during wildfire season despite her diminutive size.

The sexual tension between Ena and her captain, Charlie Reese, is high, and as much as Ena would like to walk away from it, it's too powerful to deny. After their boss benches Ena with some ridiculous story about her safety, consummating her relationship with Charlie seems the only way to cool the fire burning in her.

As they make love, it becomes startlingly clear that the intensity of their attraction is not merely pheromones. Ena's magic has recognized its mate in Charlie, and has begun to weave a web between them. With no other choice but to tell the truth, following a battle with yet another arson-started wildfire, she tells Charlie that she is a witch and he is her mate.

Before he has the chance to process this unbelievable information, all hell breaks loose.

## **Find ‘em Hot, Leave ‘em Wet**

Jade Morrison

### **Chapter One**

Of course I’d fall for the bad boy of Station Five. I have radar when it comes to the kind of men my mama warned me about. And I fall. Every time. Logan Wylde was no exception. He didn’t walk so much as he strutted. A symphony of well-tuned muscles and attitude, wrapped in a six-foot frame with wide shoulders, narrow waist and a to-die-for-ass. Yeah, Logan Wylde was definitely my kind of man.

He was a heartache waiting to happen.

It gets worse.

Of all the places for a fireman and a cop to meet, we collided at the bottom of a staircase in Jimmy Dawson’s elegant townhouse. Jimmy wasn’t home at the time and his housekeeper had fled the premises after calling 911. I suspected she was heavily indulging in a little of the Colombian powder Jimmy had stashed in a silver bowl on his bedroom night table. At any rate, she caught the kitchen on fire, dialed 911, and then ran, thoughtfully leaving the door unlocked for the emergency personnel.

Jimmy was probably out of the country. He was a man who had several successful businesses. None of them legal. He brokered some weapons, sold designer drugs and was just an all round criminal kinda guy. He was also dangerous as a viper.

It was a three-ring circus in Jimmy’s townhouse. The fire department was doing their thing and the police were screaming that evidence was getting destroyed. Of course, if there hadn’t been a fire, we’d have never gained access to the premises in the first place. Jimmy was very careful about what he did on home turf. He’d never given the cops any reason to search his house.

So now there was a jurisdiction war going on between the police department and the firefighters.

My boss, Captain Salyers, told me to guard the steps.

“Don’t let anyone get upstairs,” he ordered me. “This is the chance we’ve been looking for. I don’t want any evidence contaminated.”

Personally, I seriously doubted Dawson would be dumb enough to leave evidence in his home, but...you never know. I was scrambling for control of the stairs at the same time Lieutenant Logan Wylde was running to check the second floor in case the fire had traveled upward between the walls.

We collided with an impressive crash, both of us going down on the polished hardwood floor. It would be hard to say who got the worst of the deal. Logan knew we were falling, so he grabbed me, trying to save me from the trauma. His helmet thumped the bottom stair and he cut loose with a string of words my mama would definitely disapprove of.

Considering I’m not a very big woman, he did well not to squish me like a bug with all the gear he was wearing. He deliberately took the brunt of the fall, with me ending up

slightly under him, my face buried under his chin, just above the tight blue fire department t-shirt he wore under his turnout coat. He smelled like smoke, aftershave and man. I could feel him down the length of my body...all muscled and hard beneath the heavy bunker gear.

Pulling his head back to look at me, he registered surprise at first, and then he smiled. "While you're down there..."

I scrambled out from under him quicker than I went down. My heart was beating about twice as fast as it needed to. He got to his feet, giving me a look that could ignite flames without a conductor.

"You can arrest me any time you like," he offered suggestively, holding out his wrists for the cuffs.

"I will if you try to go up those stairs."

*Oh yeah, I was being the tough cop.*

He grinned and his hazel eyes crinkled at the corners.

*Dear God in Heaven, he has dimples.*

"I've got to check the upstairs."

"Not without Captain Salyers approval, you don't."

I was impressed I could manage coherent speech. The man belonged on one of those cheesy firemen calendars. If he were the centerfold, I'd buy two.

"Look, I'm going up those stairs," he said. "You do what you have to do."

I was in a quandary. Of course he had to check upstairs, but Salyers was going to have my ass if I let him up there. The city would have my ass if I didn't. I was saved from making a wrong/wrong decision. Salyers came into the hallway before I could destroy my career.

"Go up there with him," he ordered, looking like he belonged in a French bistro despite his captain's uniform. He looked a little like the actor that played the Pink Panther, soulful dark eyes, a long narrow face and just about the same amount of good judgment as the character. I wondered how he ever got to be captain; maybe like Inspector Clouseau he'd bumbled his way to the top. Or maybe he just had the political savvy it took to climb the ladder. Whatever, I found myself following along behind the hunky firefighter, wishing his bunker coat didn't cover his ass.

At the top of the stairs he turned to look over his shoulder at me as he walked down the hallway to the room that was directly over the kitchen. "You shouldn't be here. In case there's a fire."

"You shouldn't be here either," I retorted to his back. "In case there's evidence."

"What? Do you think I'm going to destroy it?" he sounded genuinely upset. "Pick it up and steal it. Or what?"

"No, I think you might contaminate it." His footsteps hesitated and I could actually see his shoulders stiffen under his coat. I'd pissed him off.

"By accident. You're not a cop," I added quickly, trying to explain myself. "You might not even recognize it as evidence." I winced at my choice of wording. Now he'd think I saw him as too dumb to recognize evidence if he tripped over it.

Little did either of us know there was indeed theft going on, but it wasn't on the second floor. And it was going to cause more grief than anyone could have imagined.

At that moment, at least ten people were traipsing through Jimmy Dawson's townhouse. I didn't know the ratio of fire department personnel to police personnel until

later. Until the two forces joined rank to stop the killings. But that was later; for now, I was enjoying watching the fireman at his job.

I trailed along behind him, watching him check in every room before I entered to search for anything suspicious. It was one of those deals where he knew there wasn't any fire on the second floor, and I knew there wasn't any real evidence, but we both had to go through the motions.

He stopped in the doorway of the last bedroom, leaning against the doorframe to loosen his bunker coat. He unhooked it and pulled it open, fanning the sides, letting the cool air find its way to his body.

I'm sure my face gave my thoughts away. I was never good at card games. And even through the cotton material I could see that he had six-pack abs and a nice chest. I wondered if he had chest hair, and decided of course he did.

He gave me a moment to stare at him before glancing at the name badge pinned above my upper left breast. His eyes lingered far longer than necessary to read M. Rose. Embarrassingly, my nipples hardened in response to his appreciative stare.

He flashed those dimples again and I was lost. Utterly and completely, lost.

"Are you satisfied with everything you've seen so far, Officer Rose?"

I didn't think for one minute he was talking about the inspection we'd made of the second floor. No, his eyes were focusing on something much more personal.

"Quite satisfied," I answered, giving him a long and leisurely appraisal that covered him from helmet to boots. I could pass along my own unspoken messages when necessary.

"You want to go out for a beer later and talk about the *mounting* evidence we've seen here, officer?" he asked, pointedly glancing down to the bulge in the front of his bunker gear.

My eyes followed his. Oh yeah, definitely mounting *quality* evidence there.

"What evidence?" Capt. Salyers asked from the top of the stairs, and I jumped guiltily.

Logan rolled his eyes and it took all I had not to laugh in Salyer's face. The fireman didn't miss a beat though. Giving me a wink, he pushed himself off the doorframe and turned to the captain with the sincerest face I'd ever seen. "There's a silver bowl on the bedside table in the master bedroom. It has white powder in it. Officer Rose was just coming downstairs to get the CSI team."

"I was?" I mouthed behind the captain's back.

"Good work, Madison," Salyers said, brushing against me in his hurry to find the suspicious substance. "But remember, you can't talk about evidence with non-police personnel."

"Yes sir," I said, wondering if he'd pick up the silver bowl and sniff the powder to make sure it was harmless. No kidding. Salyers was quite capable of doing a stupid trick like that.

Logan watched him disappear into a bedroom down the hall, and then he concentrated on me once again.

"Madison Rose. Nice name. I like it. It suits you. So, are we going out for drinks after my shift, or not?"

What good would it do me to postpone the inevitable? Lt. Logan Wylde was my future ex-boyfriend and we both knew it.

\* \* \* \*

I agreed to meet him at O'Toole's, an Irish pub on Third and Mulberry. It was one of those quaint little places that either made you feel claustrophobic, or right at home. The bar was a leftover from a previous tavern, in a time when woodworking was still an art. It was impossibly detailed by today's standards, with ornate carvings, cutouts, and stained glass inserts. I suspected the mahogany bar was worth far more than the building it was housed in.

The inside of O'Toole's was long and narrow, just about big enough to hold the antique bar, a few tables, a miniscule dance floor and the pub's fiercely loyal patrons. Which, by the way, consisted mostly of cops and firefighters. The tavern could get rowdy at times, and tonight was no exception. A popular local band was playing classic rock and had the dance floor filled way beyond capacity.

I found Logan at the end of bar waiting for me, saving me a seat in the otherwise full tavern. He slipped off the stool when I approached. I have to admit, standing there, he took my breath away. It wasn't that he was dressed up, or anything. He was wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a faded fire department t-shirt. His dark hair lay in tousled curls around his face; still damp from the shower he'd recently taken. Without the heavy turnout gear his body was a showcase of lean power and long muscular legs. At five-five I felt positively tiny standing beside of him.

Being a cop throws you into a position of power and authority. You start thinking you're responsible for protecting the world. Sometimes, you forget how nice it is to have someone protect you for a change. Logan Wylde made me feel safe and protected. Don't ask me why. I just knew he was one of those men who would take care of anything I needed taken care of. You learn to read people when you're a cop.

He ordered me a beer without asking and helped me climb onto the barstool. When I got comfortable, he leaned up against me from behind, lowering his head to my ear so he could talk to me without shouting over the noise in the pub. I wondered if it was just a good excuse for him to look down the blouse I was wearing. But then, what did I expect? It was low cut and suggestive, inviting him to look.

And on the off chance he didn't notice the efforts I'd made on his behalf, I wore my tiniest scrap of a bra. The lacy black one. I thought it looked good with my auburn hair and lightly tanned skin. You can never go wrong with classic black.

Logan rested his hand on the back of my neck, occasionally playing with my hair. I'd recently cut it into a short inverted bob and loved the style. Apparently he did too, because every once in a while he'd run his fingers through the layers, causing me to shiver at his touch. It was an incredibly sensual experience, innocent as it was. Something about the way he gathered my hair in his hand told me he was the kind of man that fisted a handful of hair when he kissed. I couldn't wait to find out.

His voice in my ear was driving me crazy. Did he graduate with a degree in seduction? Logan made it look effortless as he turned me into a puddle of goo. His voice. His hands. The meeting of our eyes reflecting back at us in the mirror behind the bartender. It was all slowly building inside me. And now, his strong fingers were massaging my shoulders.

The hell with mama's advice, I couldn't wait, I wanted him to fuck me blind tonight.

## Chapter Two

By one a.m. the crowd had diminished somewhat. O'Toole's was like that. A blue-collar multitude had to report to work the next morning, so they didn't stay out too late on a weeknight. The band had slipped into a familiar oldie that was made for slow dancing. I watched Logan's eyes stray to the dance floor then meet mine in the mirror. He didn't have to ask, I slipped off the barstool, putting my arm around his waist for support.

*Whoa! How many beers had I had?*

I felt like I was floating to the dance floor and I wasn't certain if it was his nearness or the alcohol causing the pleasant effect. He gathered me into his arms without leaving a seam between us. We were melded together. The only thing keeping us from joining was the clothing between us.

Damn!

I'm a little hazy about the dance. I'm not sure we moved two steps from the point where he gathered me into his arms. However, I wasn't hazy about the feeling of his hands running down my back, shoving me just a little closer when they got to my hips. I could feel his hard-on. It felt...large. I looked up into his face and he gave me a smirk that could only be considered a challenge.

Oh yeah, he was a big boy and he knew it.

I'd had just enough beer to be uninhibited. My hands did some exploring of their own. I pushed against the skin of his shoulders as I ran my fingertips down his long back. He felt like satin over steel. His skin was pliant beneath my touch, but the muscles were solid and unyielding.

Tracing the roadmap of his body, I traveled from the width of his back to the tightness of his waist. And for a tempting moment, I thought about running my hands up under that t-shirt to feel his skin without the cotton barrier. But I traveled on; there were more enticing areas left to explore.

When I reached his jeans, I slipped my hands over his hips and tugged him into my body. Turnabout and all that, you know. He groaned softly, spreading his legs wide enough that I could feel his appreciation stiffen between us.

"Go on," he whispered into my ear, his breath hot against my skin. His fingers tightened on my waist but he put a little distance between us so my hands would fit.

I didn't disappoint either of us. I slipped my palms to his stomach, resting them against him for just a moment. His abs tightened and shifted with every movement he made. I thought I was going to hyperventilate right there on the dance floor.

God he was hot.

It would have been cruel of me not to check out the package when it was wrapped so prettily. I dropped my fingers below his belt. He was right there. Swollen. Straining against the denim. One of my fingertips followed the bulge downward, downward, down...I swallowed hard and looked up at him. I hadn't had *that* much to drink.

"I won't hurt you, baby," he whispered. "You just need a little instruction on how to handle a high-pressure hose." He winked at me, proud of that bit of fireman's humor.

Okay, that did it. I clawed his head down to my face for a kiss. I had to taste him or I'd die. Just die. Simple as that.



If sin had a flavor, he was it. Hot, cinnamon sweet, and promising. His lips were soft, and he made a satisfying sound when his tongue brushed across my mouth. I opened for him and he groaned. He wasn't shy about letting me know what he liked. Logan Wylde would be a vocal lover and I could only imagine the sound of his release.

We drank in the essence of each other long enough that I was beginning to see stars from lack of breath. Then, I felt the difference in his kiss, and it took me a minute to realize we had an audience. I heard the words first, but it took a while for them to register through my oxygen-deprived brain.

"Looks like he's practicing his life-saving technique again."

"Yep. Mouth-to-mouth. He's had some practice at that."

"You'd think he'd get it right by now."

Logan drew away from me leisurely, keeping his arms around me as he broke the kiss.

"Get lost guys," he said over the top of my head.

I couldn't see who was talking because Logan had me firmly against his chest and, in any event, I was too weak to protest. I held on to him like a pillar in the wind, gulping air as if I'd just finished the Boston Marathon.

"Can't. We've gotta pull you back on duty. Robinson was in a car wreck. He's hurt pretty bad."

I felt Logan straighten up and put a subtle distance between us. His hand gave my back a reassuring pat, but I knew he was going to leave me.

"Is he going to make it?" Logan asked, releasing me enough I could turn around to face the two men who were standing there.

"Don't know," the shorter one said. He was older than Logan, somewhere in his late thirties, I guessed. Maybe early forties. He had a buzz cut and hard blue eyes. I'd have guessed him as a military man if he hadn't been wearing his station uniform.

"I've been drinking," Logan admitted, moving us all back to the bar. He fished his wallet out, handing a credit card to Cass, the bartender.

"You sack out for a few hours and I'll take any calls tonight, but we need you at the station until the shift comes on tomorrow," the second man said. "The captain is reworking the shift schedule. He's going to try to get a temporary assigned till we know what's going on with Robinson."

There was something about him I distrusted instantly. He looked shifty, and he kept glancing at me when he thought I wasn't looking. As a cop, (even drunk) I know sneaky when I see it. Firefighter C. White had a secret he didn't want anyone to know. I made a mental note to check him out when I was sober.

\* \* \* \*

I took a cab home from O'Toole's. My apartment wasn't far, but I didn't feel up to walking and no way was I competent to get behind the wheel. The fire station where Logan worked wasn't really that far away. I resisted the urge to have the taxi driver run past Station Five. How ridiculous would that be? I shook my head, with just one dance, Logan Wylde had reduced me to thinking like an infatuated teenager.

He'd really gotten to me in a physical sort of way. But then thinking about it, for the past several years, I'd based all of my relationships on physical needs. It hurt less that way when they were over. And if I'd learned anything being a cop, it was that no

relationship could withstand the agony of seeing someone you love go out the door every damn day and never know if they were coming back.

I could have fallen into a bit of melancholy thinking about it, but the memory and the taste of Lt. Wylde's kiss still lingered in my mind. He was a fireman; surely he'd understand. The thought of a lover that could handle my job brought a smile to my face. Truth be told, just thinking of Logan brought a smile to my face, he'd felt so freaking good out there on the dance floor. It was all I could do not to jump him right then and there.

There was also the memory of the package.

The "bulge".

And I have to admit, I was curious.

I'd felt for myself it was real. No rolled-up sock there. The fireman was packing a big hose. High-pressure hose, he'd said. I laughed and the taxi driver glanced at me in the rearview mirror to make sure he hadn't picked up some wacko that would shoot him in the back of the head for a hundred bucks.

I met his eyes and smiled, reassuring him it was nothing more than a memory that had crossed my mind. When he let me out at my apartment I gave him a generous tip. I was feeling exceptionally charitable, albeit a little frustrated. Okay. A lot frustrated. But there was also the anticipation of things to come.

As soon as I got through the door I checked the answering machine and saw the blinking light. My heart sped up. I pushed the play button, peeling the shirt I was wearing over my head. I tossed it on the sofa, feeling a little dizzy from the movement.

"Goodnight."

That was all.

I hit play again.

"Goodnight."

I was glad no one could see the stupid smile on my face.

I hit the button one more time.

I didn't have to work the next day, but I was about to pass out from all the beer I'd drank, so I opted for sleep instead of my usual late night movie. I didn't have the energy to make it to the bed. I sat down on the sofa, taking off my jeans. Wearing nothing but the skimpy lace bra and panties I settled on the sofa, pulling a cover over myself to break the chill of the air-conditioning.

My hand crept down between my legs and I replayed Logan's kiss while releasing a little of my frustration.

\* \* \* \*

The buzzing of my cell phone woke me at 8:30 the next morning. I squinted at the number. The station. My head was pounding and I hoped they weren't calling me in to cover for someone. I'd say I had the flu, or cramps, or something. But it was probably all over the precinct by now that I'd been making out with Logan on the dance floor last night. No one would believe I spent the night alone. I didn't want to hear all the jokes about fucking till I couldn't walk, so I resigned myself to working with a killer headache.

"Hello?"

"We may have a problem." The voice was Inspector Sam Bennett, the real brains of the department. "I'm sending a squad car to pick you up, Madison. Don't open the door

to anyone you don't recognize and don't leave the house until the car gets there."

I was suddenly on full alert, adrenaline killing my headache. "What's going on?"

"Could be coincidence, but one of the firefighters that was at Jimmy Dawson's house had a fatal car accident last night."

"Yeah, I heard about that," I said, heading to the bathroom to grab a shower before the squad car arrived for me. "What's that have to do with me?"

"This morning, Tim Bledsoe was found dead in his apartment. Shot in the head with his service pistol. We might have thought it was suicide, but it just doesn't feel right. Both men were at Dawson's house yesterday."

I hadn't known Bledsoe very well. He was a newcomer to our precinct and our paths hadn't crossed very often. He seemed like a nice enough guy. I felt sorry for his family.

"Is Dawson in custody?" I asked, turning on the shower and adjusting the spray somewhere just short of scalding.

"No. We haven't been able to locate him. The townhouse was clean except for the cocaine you found. Hell, that's not even enough to be serious. Dawson will be out before we can get him booked. That's why I'm calling everyone in. There must be something we overlooked. Something Dawson believes is important enough to kill for."

I couldn't think of anything off the top of my head. The house had been squeaky clean except for the cocaine. "I'll think about it and talk to you at the station," I said, shutting off the phone and slipping under the hot spray while there was still time.

I tried hard to remember everything I'd seen in the townhouse. It didn't make sense. Dawson had to know if we'd found incriminating evidence we would have gotten a search warrant and tore the place apart. Maybe it was just coincidence that two men who'd been in his home only hours before were now dead. But it didn't feel like coincidence to my cop's instinct. It felt like murder.

I'd wanted to ask if fire department personnel would be in on the briefing, but I restrained myself. I didn't want to look too obvious. Still, just on the off chance they were, I took extra time on my makeup and hair, adding a little more mascara than I normally wore. The guys at the precinct wouldn't notice. I hoped. If they did, I'd never live it down.

I gulped down a glass of orange juice and ate toast with strawberry jelly while I was tugging on jeans and finding a shirt that brought out the color in my eyes. I have unusual eyes, whiskey colored, flecked with hazel green pigment. Depending on what I wear, or the mood I'm in, the green becomes more pronounced. Today I picked an emerald button-down shirt that complimented both my hair and eyes.

Just as I finished the last bite of toast the doorbell rang. Like Cinderella, my carriage had arrived.

I hate to say it, but my heart sped up at the thought of seeing Logan again so soon. I was betting they would have us all at the station to go over what we'd seen in the townhouse.

Grabbing my jacket, I took time to shove my service pistol in the pocket before I went out the door to the waiting cruiser.

### Chapter Three

The station was still housed in the original precinct building, built in 1938. It had a quaint air of antiquity about it. Oh sure, it had been renovated inside, but it still looked old. The floor was pink marble tile, the kind no one uses any more because they can't afford it in public buildings, and there were a lot of iron posts with chains between them to herd the convicts and visitors in an orderly fashion to whichever desk they needed to report to.

Tiny offices with antique wooden doors lined the outer edges of the floor, effectively blocking all outside windows. Not that there were many to begin with. Only the highest-ranking officers had windows. I noticed that today most of the doors were shut and interior window blinds were pulled for privacy.

I followed the dull roar of voices to the briefing room where, sure enough, both fire department and police personnel were seated. The fire department had taken a position in the back, like they didn't trust the cops sitting behind them.

Considering the annual cop/firefighter "Guns and Hoses" football game was only three weeks away, that paranoia might have some validity to it. All sorts of pranks were pulled on each other during the big showdown of macho superiority.

I glanced at Logan and he gave me a suggestive wink, shifting his hand to drape across the interesting bulge in his uniform that had me tossing and turning last night. I licked my lips before turning away and he snickered, covering it with a cough when his captain glared at him.

I could feel his eyes on me the whole time Inspector Bennett briefed us on the situation. It seemed that Robinson, the firefighter who died from the single vehicle accident, had suspicious bruises on his body, along with a lump on the back of his head. The medical examiner doubted his injuries were from the accident. In layman's terms, it looked like he'd been beaten senseless sometime shortly before the wreck.

By itself, that might have raised eyebrows, but when Officer Bledsoe was found at his kitchen table with a gunshot wound to the head, warning bells started ringing. Both men had been at Dawson's house.

Inspector Bennett briefed both forces on what they were dealing with. Jimmy Dawson was not your average criminal. That is to say, the man wasn't stupid. He had a degree from an Ivy League school and enough money to buy a lot of leeway. As far as anyone knew, he didn't commit crimes in the local vicinity and he'd never been arrested. Oh sure, all sorts of evidence pointed toward him, but nothing tangible enough to make an arrest on. And other than the small amount of cocaine on the nightstand, there was no incriminating evidence in the house. Dawson would say the cocaine belonged to the housekeeper. The housekeeper would verify the story. End of arrest proceedings for Jimmy. Major headache for the police department as harassment charges were filed.

We were grilled for nearly an hour on what we'd seen inside the townhouse, but no one came up with anything significant enough for Dawson to kill for. In fact, no one came up with anything significant at all. It was a frustrating hour, and in the end, we were told to watch our asses. The department couldn't put protective personnel on everyone involved and no one was certain it was even warranted. Still, everyone felt uneasy about

the whole deal.

Inspector Bennett shrugged as he dismissed the group. "Sorry to keep you. I was hoping we'd think of something in here this morning that we might have overlooked yesterday. My office is open if you need me. And don't hesitate to call for backup if something doesn't feel right. Trust your instincts."

There was a lot of low voiced conversation as the two departments filtered out of the room simultaneously. I took my time standing up, hoping Logan would catch me as I left. I wasn't disappointed. He caught up with me just outside the briefing room.

Leaning down to speak into my ear so that our conversation would remain private, he whispered. "I like the idea of watching your ass. In fact, I'm watching it now, and I'm thinking..."

I whirled around to face him with a warning glare that dissolved into a grin at the teasing look on his face. "Stop that." I glanced around to see if anyone was close enough to hear. "This is *not* the place."

Before he could answer, one of the firefighters called back down the corridor. "You coming with us, Wylde, or getting a police escort back to the station?"

"Gotta go," he said quickly, his eyes focusing on my mouth. For one panicked moment I thought he might kiss me right there in the hall. And I was so far gone I would have let him. "My replacement will be on duty in half an hour, you want a tour of the fire station?"

"Meet you there," I said with a wink, watching his ass as he strutted down the long hallway to catch up with the boys.

\* \* \* \*

Station Five was on the corner of Grant and Main Street. It was tall and narrow, made of red brick with two apparatus bay doors filled by huge red fire trucks. I know, I know, firefighters call them apparatus. I still call them trucks. I knew Logan was assigned to the ladder apparatus. Or is that ladder truck? Sometimes their terminology confuses me.

He was waiting for me in the bay when I pulled into the parking lot. He didn't step out into the sun. Instead, he motioned me inside to him. There wasn't much room between the truck and the wall. Especially when it was filled with turnout gear ready and waiting to be shimmied into at a moment's notice.

As soon as we were further in the shadows, Logan pulled me into a hard kiss. His hand gathered a handful of my hair (like I knew he would) and his mouth conquered mine. That was all that could be said for it. There was no give on my part; it was all take on his.

Did I say I was complaining?

Something about a man kissing you senseless in the shadows of a busy fire station had a certain forbidden appeal. Like a couple of teenagers trying not to get caught by an angry father. Only we were two professionals taking a chance with our careers. Not much difference when you think about it. Either way, getting caught would be a disaster.

Our hands roamed everywhere we could reach, and with a bit of willing and helpful contortion, some places we couldn't. We were all over each other until neither of us could breathe.

"You said your replacement will be here in half an hour?"

“She’s always late,” Logan breathed heavily, pulling me back for another kiss. He cupped the back of my head and taught me things with his mouth I was sure had never been done before. When I was at the point of collapse, he kissed the length of my jaw and whispered into my ear, “You ever make out in a fire station?”

I dropped my head back against my shoulders and let him kiss my neck. “No.”

“This will be a new experience for you then.”

He pulled me behind the ladder truck, down a short hallway off the bay, and half shoved me into the shower room, locking the door behind us.

I don’t know if it was his urgency, or mine, but, “fuck me,” was the first thing out of my mouth and it didn’t surprise either one of us. I wanted him so much I was trembling.

He took me seriously, slamming me against the wall with a desperation I felt down to my toes. One of his hands gathered my wrists, holding them against the tile, stretched high above my head. The other hand unbuttoned my blouse while he kissed me some more.

He didn’t fumble with the buttons. I was open for business in the time it took him to need a breath. He pulled his mouth away from mine and looked at me. His hazel eyes were glazed with lust. He looked dangerous. I realized he was one of those men who get all ramped up on testosterone when they’re having sex. They become animals. He was feral, and I was wet, I needed him more than I could remember needing anyone before.

His attention dropped to my bra; it was a front fastener. With an experienced flick of his thumb and finger, the lace was hanging open, and he peeled it off my breasts like taking candy out of a wrapper. He gave a primitive growling sound so raw with need it made me gush in my panties before his mouth settled around my swollen areola.

I was whimpering, I think, when his mouth connected with my nipple. He clamped his teeth over the hard nub and raked his tongue roughly across the puckered skin, flipping the tip back and forth. At some point, he’d let go of my wrists and I was supporting myself by clinging to his wide shoulders.

“What the hell did you wear jeans for?” he complained around a mouthful of my breast as his hands worked at the zipper.

I pulled his face away from me and started to tug on the bottom of his shirt.

“Not this time, babe. One of us has to stay partially dressed in case company shows up.”

I understood. But I didn’t like it. I wanted skin to skin. I needed to feel him against my body.

He unzipped my jeans and yanked them down over my thighs until they pooled on the floor. I kicked off my shoes and stepped out of the denim. We didn’t have the patience, or the luxury, of a lot of foreplay and at this point it really wasn’t necessary. I was as ready as I was going to get.

He already had his pants unzipped and was digging a condom out of his wallet. Despite his boxers holding him captive, his cock pushed out through the open zipper of his uniform.

I wanted to see him, so I tugged his pants down a little further and pulled the boxers down.

Oh sweet Mary. He was big.

The shaft of his penis was thick and long, the head dark and swollen with his need. His genitals were full and hung heavily against his muscular thighs. I couldn’t resist

reaching out to cup them in my hand. They felt heavy and hot to my touch.

He ripped the foil pouch with his teeth then handed me the condom.

“Put it on me.”

My hands were shaking so badly he had to help steady my fingers. I didn’t want to hurt him by forcing it, but he rolled the condom down his erection with experienced fingers, letting my hand glide along with his. We rolled the Trojan together while we kissed and moaned our need into each other’s mouths.

When my fingers hit the coarse hair at the base of his erection, I circled him with my fist, unable to get my hand fully closed around him. He ran his hands over my ass and picked me up like I was a featherweight.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he ordered, lifting me to waist level.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, anchoring myself to him and he began to ease me down. One of his hands slipped under my hips to feel between my legs.

I was drenched.

He ran his fingers inside the folds of my pussy, sliding easily down the crack from the creamy lubrication I’d produced for him. With a little tease he tugged gently at the pubic hair, then nudged the slick folds apart so he could circle my clit with his thumb.

I was so sensitive, I whimpered again when he touched me, burying my face into his neck, licking the salty sweetness of his skin as he strained with the effort not to force me down on his fully erect cock. I jerked when his thumbnail grazed lightly over my clit. That was too much for the condition I was in. It felt like an electric wire was grounded to all my sexual points and he’d just flipped the switch.

“Please, Logan, just fuck me,” I begged. “Put it in and fuck me.”

I didn’t have to ask twice. He spread me apart with his hand, thrusting his hips upward at an angle to make penetration easier. I was so wet he slid in easily, at least to the entrance, where he met with some resistance. I felt him strain to push the engorged head just a little deeper.

“Push,” he said through kisses, leaving it to me to impale myself on his cock. “Take me in, babe. I want you to bury me.”

I nodded, trembling with the effort to push him into my tightness. He jerked when I pushed the head fully in, sinking my fingernails into his shoulders with the effort. I felt him tensing up and knew what was going to happen next. He put his hands on each side of my hips and yanked downward, covering my scream with his mouth, drinking my pleasure-pain like a fine wine.

And all the time his hips were moving, setting a rhythm of short powerful strokes that were burning me alive with the need for more.

When he felt my ankles lock tightly around his hips he drew back and looked at me, keeping his arms around my hips to anchor us together with him buried deep inside my pussy.

“Okay?”

“Fine.” My voice sounded husky and breathless. I deliberately clenched my inner muscles in a rapid motion so his cock would feel the rippling tension down the full length.

He groaned like he was in pain, arching his hips forward and pushing into me with short little motions that grew harder and faster as he rode toward his climax.

“Harder,” I encouraged him, and felt his legs tremble with his oncoming release. His

back stiffened and he grew rigid, pulling me against him until there was no space left to fill.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, straining against him, loving the feel of our sweating bodies sliding against each other as he shot wads of cum into the condom. I was dancing on the edge of my orgasm when his finger, slick with my juices, found the entrance to my backdoor and slipped inside. He wiggled his finger around and I exploded, my vaginal muscles involuntarily clamping around him so tightly we both groaned at the rawness of the release. I'd never come that hard in my life.



## Chapter Four

I'd like to say I was satisfied, but that would be a lie. I wanted more of him. More of everything about him, but like anything I crave, the universe seems hell bent on keeping me from it. We walked back to the bay and straight into the fire chief. He looked at us hard, shooting Logan a warning glare. He'd been in on the briefing at the precinct but hadn't said a word throughout the discussion.

"Showing Officer Rose the station, I see."

"Yes, sir," Logan said. "I'm off duty and Officer Rose stopped by to give me a ride home. I gave her the guided tour."

"Right," he said in a flat tone of voice that let us both know he didn't believe the lame story for one second. "I want you to go home, Wylde, to take care of business. It doesn't belong in the station. You understand me?"

"We're on our way out the door right now," Logan answered, taking my hand in his. He gave my fingers a reassuring little squeeze.

The chief nodded solemnly, then turned to me.

"Officer Rose, I take it you won't be needing any more "guided tours" now that you've seen the place?"

I could feel myself blushing. I hoped the chief would keep his silence, or I'd never hear the end of this at the precinct. "I won't be back, sir."

"Then we'll pretend this didn't happen," he said, following us out of the bay and watching until we got into my little red Mitsubishi.

"That was close," Logan said with a lopsided grin, fastening his seatbelt. He leaned back against the seat and yawned, stretching his long legs out as far as he could in the compact car.

"Will he keep his mouth shut?" I asked, glancing into the rearview mirror to see him still standing in the open bay door watching us leave the parking lot.

"Oh sure, the chief's a great guy," Logan assured me. "He won't say a word."

We drove in silence a few minutes while the enormity of what I'd done sunk in. First off, I'd practically begged a guy I didn't know to fuck me. And secondly, I'd put my career on the line to do it. Even I didn't understand me at that moment.

"I can't believe we almost got caught by the Chief," I said. "We could have lost our jobs."

Logan reached over to smooth a wisp of flyaway hair out of my face and his fingers trailed down my jaw line before he dropped his hand casually back on his lap. "It was worth it, Madison."

Glancing over at him I could see he was serious. I was a little shocked by his revelation. Maybe he was talking about the thrill of almost getting caught by the chief.

"Worth losing your job for a quickie?"

He shrugged. "I thought it was a little more than that."

"More? What do you mean?"

Logan looked out the window. Guys hate those type of questions. He took so long to answer, I wondered if he was going to ignore me, but after a few seconds he turned back.

"I can't explain it. Don't you ever get a gut feeling once in a while that something's

wrong? A cop's instinct that saves your life?"

"Sure," I answered, nodding my head, curious to see where this was going.

He looked at me hard before looking away again. "Well, this is the same thing in reverse."

I wasn't sure what to say to that little bombshell. So, like the chicken I am, I changed the subject to a safer topic of conversation.

*Cluck. Cluck. Cluck.*

"What would you do if you couldn't be a fireman?" I asked, noticing the relief he tried to hide when he realized I'd let the matter drop.

"I'd do something easy, like be a cop," he teased.

"Yeah, right," I laughed. "And here I was thinking about getting a job at the fire station where I could just lounge around reading erotica all day until I got a distress call."

He flipped me the finger, but he was grinning. "Take a right at the next corner," he instructed. "We're almost there. Besides, I prefer practicing erotica rather than reading about it."

\* \* \* \*

Logan's apartment was in a renovated Victorian snuggled between a coffee shop and tiny branch library. Someone had taken their time restoring the old home. It was tastefully painted in matching shades of blue, complete with white gingerbread trim and curved glass in the towers.

Towers?

And private balconies on each floor with French doors?

I mentally calculated what it would take to get an invitation to move in with him. In fact, I was so busy looking at the house I missed seeing an empty space down the block between a Volkswagen and Mini Cooper.

"Whoa," he said, motioning me to the curb. "Park it here, there's never any room on the back lot."

He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket, steering me to the door on the left. "I live on the second floor. You in good enough shape to make it? Or do you sit around eating donuts all day?"

"Ha ha!" I waited for him to open the door then deliberately ran up the steps to show him I could do it.

*Oh yeah, that was really bright.*

He'd set me up, knowing I'd take his challenge.

I'm telling you, those Victorians were masochists. The stairs were angled as steep as the architect could possibly have made them. The steps weren't wide enough to put my whole foot on (and I have a small foot). I pretty much ran the whole flight of stairs on my tiptoes. At the top, I was out of breath and fighting leg cramps.

Logan smirked at me while I rubbed my calf. "Steeper than they look, aren't they?"

I nodded, too out of breath to answer.

"So, are you going to challenge me at everything we do?" he asked, his hazel eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Oh yeah," I gasped, "Besides, you challenged me." He laughed, scooping me into his arms, and striding across the room where he dumped me on the nearby sofa. It was a show of his superior strength, of course, and I pretended to be indignant. But he smelled

wonderful and his body rippled with muscles every time he took a step. Secretly, I wished the room were wider so he could carry me further.

He followed me down on the sofa, his face only inches from mine. "Now where did we leave off?"

"I was telling you to take your shirt off, and you said one of us had to stay partially dressed," I reminded him.

"Not now we don't."

"*Damn!*"

"What's wrong?" he asked, his brows furrowed with instant concern.

"I forgot my handcuffs."

Logan's mouth twitched. "I know how to tie knots."

"Oh no, I'm not getting tied up," I protested. "You're the one getting restrained."

He looked at me with a wink. "Wanna bet?"

I put my hand on his chest pushing him away. "Is having sex all we're going to do every time we get together?"

Logan looked into the distance like he was thinking about it. "Ummmm, yeah, for a couple of months at least."

I laughed, feeling lighter than I could remember in a long time. He was right, something about us felt comfortable, even though we were still virtually strangers.

"Okay, I'll give you a break, you wimp," he teased. "I thought it would take more than a 'quickie' to wear you out."

"Feed me," I suggested, "then we'll see who wears out first."

He lifted my chin with his finger, brushing a quick kiss over my lips. "You got it, babe."

\* \* \* \*

Logan was at ease in the kitchen. He moved with a smooth efficiency that gave me an indication he'd probably been on his own for a while. Unlike a lot of guys, his kitchen was neat and well stocked. After giving me several choices, we jointly decided on breakfast for lunch. He whipped up a couple of omelets and a fresh pot of coffee while I sat at the kitchen table and watched him.

"Do you think Bledsoe and Robinson are just coincidence?" I asked as he mixed up the eggs, then washed the mixing bowl while the omelet cooked.

"I don't know," he answered with his back to me. "Maybe."

His shoulders were so invitingly wide it was all I could do to remain at the table. I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and lean my head against his back, using his muscles for a pillow.

"I can't think of one thing that would send Jimmy Dawson after us, can you?"

He turned around slowly to stare at me, weighing his words before he spoke. "Not unless someone took something he wants back."

I thought about that for a minute. It was the only thing that made any sense. "If someone did have sticky fingers, whatever they took had to be small. Otherwise the crews working the house would have noticed."

"You can get a lot under a bunker coat," he said quietly. "And you can hide a lot in a CSI kit, or..."

I held up my hand to stop him. "I get the picture."

Logan turned the heat off and scraped the omelets onto two red plates decorated with fire engines around the edges.

*Where do you even find stuff like that?*

"Nice plates," I commented.

*Right. If he were two years old. Even then they would have been tacky, but understandable.*

"Gift from my granny," he laughed, too comfortable with himself to embarrass easily. "She still buys me toy fire trucks too. I have a whole collection of them."

"I don't even want to hear her pet nickname for you," I said, instinctively knowing he had one. "It would ruin this macho image I have of you." His ears turned red and I knew I'd hit pay dirt, but I'd pursue that line of questioning later. Right now I was focused on Dawson's motivations.

"If Dawson's after something that was stolen, do you think Bledsoe or Robinson actually had it in their possession, and that's why he killed them? Maybe they were working together. Maybe one took it and the other one knew about it."

"Let's hope so."

His response surprised me so badly I nearly choked on my mouthful of eggs. "What?"

"Well, if he got it back," Logan reasoned, "then he's probably going to leave the rest of us alone." He played with the eggs on his plate, pushing them around with his fork. "If he didn't find whatever he's looking for, he's going to keep coming after us until he finds it."

"What idiot would steal something from Jimmy Dawson?" I asked.

"Who's the biggest idiot on your force?" Logan asked me. It was a funny question, but he was dead serious.

I thought about that. Other than Captain Salyers I couldn't think of any outright idiots. I knew Salyers wasn't the problem, he might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but he was a good man. He'd never steal anything from anyone.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Who's the likely candidate on your team?"

Logan had a suspicion. I could see it in his face, but he shook his head no. He wasn't giving up a fellow firefighter without proof positive. I could understand that. Those guys saved his ass every day on the job. If he were wrong, it would cause a whole lot of problems for him.

"It's the guy that came into the bar to get you last night, isn't it? C. White."

"Charlie. Charlie White," Logan admitted. "He's been known to light finger a couple of things from the guys at the station. Just cheap shit, nothing worth causing a problem over. He's a real hero though, Madison. He'd walk through fire to rescue anyone in trouble and he's got a sick kid."

"Has he ever taken anything at the scene of a fire?"

Logan looked me straight in the eye to prove he was being honest. "Not that I know of."

"Then we don't say anything. See if you can find out any details on your own. I'll wait a few days, but if something else happens, then we talk to people. Agreed?"

Logan leaned across the table to kiss me. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," I answered, thinking his smile was worth taking almost any chance.

We finished our breakfast in companionable silence. I was surprised how comfortable we felt together. I could get used to this much too quickly. It took an effort to remind myself this was purely physical.

## Chapter Five

After dishes, we returned to the sofa.

“You’re fed now, are you satisfied?” he asked.

“No, I’m still hungry,” I said, easing myself over to climb on his lap. I cupped my hand around the back of his neck, feeling the coarse texture of his black curls and the warmth of his skin.

He splayed his hand over my back while his other hand rubbed my hip, climbing up my side until his fingertips pressed into the soft flesh of my breast.

I nuzzled my face into his neck, nibbling my way up his throat to the underside of his jaw. Even though he’d shaved that morning, I could feel his stubble against my lips. Like a cat, I rubbed myself against him, licking the roughness of his jaw.

He shivered, his arms drawing me tighter against him. “Damn, woman.”

I didn’t give him a chance to say more. I covered his mouth with mine, my fingers still cupping his neck, enjoying the feel of his strength as I pulled him to me. It had never occurred to me how muscled a man’s neck was until I touched Logan Wylde.

His hand found its way under my shirt, sliding up to push my bra out of his way so he could palm the weight of my breast in his hand through the silky material of my blouse. For a moment, he softly jiggled me up and down, before dragging his thumb across my nipple.

I marveled at the way his touch ignited a series of small explosions in my body that tightened the walls of my vagina with a liquid rush of pleasure. The warmth continued to curl throughout my body, making my nipples harden into sensitive pebbles of need.

Logan felt the change under his fingertips and he drew his mouth from mine. Leaning down, he fastened his Cupid’s bow mouth over my right nipple and sucked hard against the responsive flesh.

I groaned, taking his face between my hands, holding him to my breast, arching my back for his convenience. He bit me with a lover’s passion, then soothed the sting with his tongue.

I pulled his hair, arching my body hard against him, pressing into his mouth. He stroked me and sucked me until finally I was pulling him away. The need had grown unbearable—the skin too sensitive to take any more of his attention.

When he sat back, I pulled at the bottom of his shirt until I got it over his head. Then I stared. He was the essence of maleness. His chest had a light smattering of black curls that spread out to make a crisp nest for his dark male nipples.

I combed my fingers through the wiry curls, tracing the arrow that ran down the length of his tight abdomen into the waistband of his jeans. He had just enough body hair to be sexy.

He let me explore him for several minutes, tensing when my lips closed over his flat nipples and my teeth raked him hard enough to get his attention. His fingers clutched my hips so tightly I was certain I’d have the imprint of his hands on my body tomorrow.

“Let’s take it to the bedroom,” he suggested, pushing me gently off his lap.

With my hand in his, I followed him into the turret room where his queen-sized bed took up most of the space.

We undressed quickly, Logan donning a condom, before finding ourselves entwined on the bed in a human pretzel of arms and legs. For a few minutes we rolled around fondling and kissing, testing our weight on top of one another.

I ended up under Logan, of course. His weight settled down on me and I opened my legs to cradle him, slipping my legs over his thighs. While he lay there, I ran my hands over the solid bulge of his shoulders, skimming my palms down the smooth distance of his sides to the curve of his muscled ass. I cupped his buttocks with my hands, pressing him into me as I arched upward in an ancient invitation.

I could feel his erection pressing into me. He put his hand between us to position his cock at the entrance to my vagina. He didn't shove hard, although I sensed he was holding himself back. Instead, he began a steady forward pressure that parted the outer folds, allowing me to feel the long penetrating glide of his hard flesh parting my wet softness.

I dug my heels into the bed and arched upward, urging him deeper, until he filled me completely. I held my breath, afraid to breathe, afraid I'd move him out of the zone, because whatever nerve he was touching was exactly where he needed to be.

Odd, I wanted to both laugh, and cry, it felt so good.

He tensed and I clutched at him. "Wait," I whispered, trying to absorb the pleasant vibrations he was producing within me. I could feel his heat, his heaviness, his incredible hardness.

"I can't wait," he groaned, beginning to stroke back and forth, hitting the same spot with gentle deliberation. He was trying to ease his need while feeding mine. My inner muscles clamped him, desperate to hold him in that perfect place.

I could feel myself clenching and releasing in an instinctive effort to draw him deeper, while at the same time controlling his strokes and position. I wondered if I was squeezing him as hard as it felt to me.

He groaned, going rigid, holding my hips still with his hands. It was a primal sound of a man pushed beyond his capacity. "Stop," he ground out between his clenched teeth. "I want this to last a while."

He pulled out of me, unwilling to let me bring him to climax so quickly. The emptiness actually hurt. I needed him that badly.

He didn't leave me hanging; instead, he picked my legs up, draping them over his shoulders before he entered me again. This way, he controlled the depth of his penetration. I was helpless. I couldn't push, couldn't shove, couldn't even reach him with my hands.

He had total control.

His hips rocked back and forth rhythmically, pushing his hardness into my body with a determination that bordered on obsessive. He kept a perfect tempo going. In and out, in and out, subtly shifting his angle until he caught the sweet spot again.

He gave one hard shove and I exploded. My hips jerked, I shot upward. He immediately let my legs go, letting them slide down to surround him while I writhed and moaned from the intensity of my orgasm.

He leaned down to kiss me, his hands pulling me against him tightly, as I totally unwound like a wispy silk ribbon being tossed recklessly on a playful breeze.

Logan was an educated lover. He let me ride my climax to its full completion. His hands stroked me while he watched my face, his eyes heavily lidded with satisfaction at

my pleasure.

As soon as my quivering stopped, he pushed my hair back from my face, leaning in for a kiss.

“Ready to go again?” he asked.

I nodded, pushing him off me to roll onto his back.

He lay there, waiting to see what I would do for him.

I took him in my hand, giving him a few experimental pumps up and down while my thumb brushed across the mushroom like head of his penis. I wished he wasn’t wearing a condom. I knew the end of his cock would feel as silky as a rosebud. It was a phenomenon that always amazed me. How could something so hard be so smooth to the touch?

He arched his hips upward, reminding me he hadn’t reached his goal, and he was waiting...albeit impatiently.

I straddled him, sliding over top of him, resting my hands on his broad chest to anchor myself until I was positioned over the head of his erection. I’d barely got myself in place, lowering my hips downward until his hard-on was parting the folds of my body and that’s when he jerked me downward, his hands were clasped on my hips. I stopped when my clitoris bumped against his body, grinding into his pubic hair.

If I hadn’t been so aroused, I know it would have been painful, but I felt the crinkly hair hit my sensitive spot and I ground myself into him even harder, arching my head back to shout with the joy of him filling me.

He wasn’t wasting time. His hips moved like pistons to meet my bouncing up and down. Even though I was on top, I had no control over my movements; he was still holding my hips, literally lifting me with his arms and pulling me back into his upward thrusts.

It didn’t take either of us long to climax. He dug his heels into the mattress and pushed hard. I could feel his thighs trembling, his arms straining and he’d lost all semblance of order to his strokes. Logan was simply burying himself in my wetness. Burying himself as deep as my body would allow him access.

He finally gave a harsh cry and stopped pushing. Logan groaned from somewhere deep in his chest, jerking and rocking against me playing out his climax in a shattering sensual storm that brought me gushing around him for the second time.

I dropped to his chest and he cradled me in his arms, holding me against him, wrapping his legs over mine so I couldn’t leave him too quickly.

He stroked my hair, dropping kisses on the top of my head while he caught his breath. We were both panting like we’d run a marathon.

When he felt himself softening, he reluctantly drew me away from him and headed to the bathroom to discard the condom. I heard water running and he was back in a minute with a wet washcloth, thoughtfully warmed for my comfort.

I reached for it, but he smiled, putting his hand between my thighs to part my legs. With reverent tenderness, he cleaned me with the washcloth, then dropped it over the side of the wastebasket that was beside the bed. He drew me into his arms again, positioning my head on his shoulder. He was ready for a nap and so was I.

\* \* \* \*

We were both drowsing in each other’s arms when we heard the shatter of glass in



the downstairs apartment, quickly followed by a muffled 'whump' sound. Logan sat straight up in bed, suddenly wide-awake. He pulled me up with him, my face still stuck to the damp hair on his chest.

He listened for a second before giving me an urgent shove off the mattress. "Get dressed," he ordered. "Quickly."

I shoved my arms into the shirt we'd hastily discarded on the floor, buttoning only one button, and leaving the rest of the material hanging open while I tugged on my jeans without benefit of hunting for underwear, which I suspected was tossed in the other direction. I did manage to find my shoes under the edge of the bed and took the time to put them on.

Going commando too, Logan yanked on a pair of jeans, shoved his feet into tennis shoes, then pushed me out of the bedroom and down the narrow stairs. He was holding onto the collar of my shirt so I wouldn't trip as he hurried me along in front of him.

I could hear a low roaring sound, like a furnace, or large pottery kiln. It seemed to be in the downstairs apartment, somewhere behind the stairs.

"What's going on?" I asked, watching my footing, but running as fast as I could without breaking my neck.

"Firebomb."

I almost stopped dead on the stairs and he pushed me ahead with his body.

"Is anyone in there?" I asked desperately.

"I don't think so. I hope not," Logan panted. "As soon as you're out safe, I'll go back in and look."

"How do you know it's a bomb?" I asked.

"Molotov cocktails have a distinctive sound." He gave me a gentle nudge at the bottom of the stairs. "Out!"

We tumbled out the door coughing and choking from the smoke that was beginning to fill the narrow stairwell. Logan started for the front door of the bottom apartment and I grabbed the back of his waistband. I could see flames engulfing the room.

"It's too late," I shouted. "You can't go in there without gear."

He strained against me for a second, then threw his head back in frustration, letting loose a string of angry curses. He knew I was right, but it didn't make it any easier for him to wait.

I buttoned my shirt while I walked around the house, checking for anything the perp might have accidentally left behind. Someone had walked up to the back window, broken the glass and tossed a bottle with gasoline inside. I was careful to stay on the sidewalk so I wouldn't trample evidence, but then, I doubted there was any evidence to trample. My guess was the bomber had also stayed on the sidewalk and tossed his bottle from there.

The fire department arrived with a growl of sirens and I stayed out of their way, letting them do their thing as I talked with Inspector Bennett on my cell phone. "We've got a situation here," I said, watching Logan borrow bunker gear to help fight the fire.

"The sonofabitch is softening everyone up," Bennett said. "He killed Steve's dog, threatened Tom's wife and children, and I'm getting calls from the fire department that everyone who responded to the fire at Dawson's is being threatened in one way or another."

"Let me guess," I said, my eyes tracking Logan as he grabbed an axe from the truck then headed for the back of the house. "Dawson's nowhere to be found."

“You got it,” Bennett said, “As far as we know, he’s still out of the country.”

## Chapter Six

For a man who'd just lost everything he owned in a fire, Logan was surprisingly calm. We went shopping to pick up a few articles of clothing and toiletries he'd need until he could replace everything that had been destroyed.

I brought a couple of ice-cold beers from the kitchen, handing one to him as I sat down close, but not close enough to crowd him. I thought he might need a little space right about now.

"I'm sorry."

It seemed such a lame thing to say, but it was all I could think of at the moment.

He reached over for my hand, laying his head back against the sofa. "It could have been worse. He could have blocked the exit. We were lucky."

"You think it was a man? Not some irate ex-girlfriend of yours?"

That elicited a grin from him. "Arson is mainly a man's domain. Not many women set fires, at least not the kind you're talking about."

I thought about the conversation I'd had with Inspector Bennett and turned my head to face Logan. He drained his beer in one long swallow, and without a word, I handed him mine, figuring he needed it more than I did.

"Dawson's going after everyone that responded to the fire. What the hell could be so important to him? And why doesn't he just ask for it, instead of playing this sick game? Whatever it is, we could never use it as evidence against him."

Logan thought about the question. "I don't know. But I'd like to get my hands on the sonofabitch that took it."

"I'm thinking like a cop," I said, hearing the frustration in my own voice. "Maybe it's not evidence. Maybe it's something personal and sacred to him."

"Then why would he leave it out where it could be picked up?" Logan frowned with concentration, trying to make sense of it all.

"Because he didn't expect anyone to be in his home," I said. "He must trust his housekeeper implicitly."

"More like the housekeeper's too scared to steal from him."

"That too," I acknowledged, running through the lay of the townhouse again in my mind. I couldn't remember seeing one thing worth stealing from a man like Jimmy Dawson.

"How do we even know it's something stolen?" Logan asked after a short silence, staring at me for a reaction.

"Damn it!" I shoved my hair back impatiently. "That's just it. We don't know what the hell is going on."

"I'll talk to Charlie," Logan said with a weary sigh. "He's the only person I can think of that might have lifted something from Dawson. I don't think he did, but I'll ask."

"You call him now," I suggested, standing up to get us two more beers. I thought he'd do better without me listening in. People tend to get antsy around cops when they're discussing stolen property.

Logan was already off the phone when I returned with the beer.

"That was quick," I said, handing him another bottle.

“Charlie’s coming over. I hope you don’t mind. He’s babysitting his daughter and her friend. I think he just needs some adult company.” Logan looked apologetic. “He said he’d bring a movie for them to watch while we talk.”

I wasn’t happy about the intrusion, but I really wanted to chat with Fireman Charlie White.

\* \* \* \*

Charlie arrived less than an hour later with two cute four-year-old munchkins in tow. He settled them on the sofa with a bag of popcorn; two large sports bottles with the kind of tops you have to suck on to get the fluid to come out, and a half dozen movies. It looked like he might be settling in for a long stay. I glanced over at Logan and he gave me a shrug.

“I don’t want to watch a movie, Daddy,” one of the munchkins said with a pout, screwing up her face for what I assumed was an attempt to cry.

Charlie looked smug, taking a hidden movie out of his jacket. “Look what I found. Mr. Fleabag and Friends.”

Both little girls screamed with delight, clutching for the video at the same time.

He handed them the DVD and remote. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me,” he said. “Don’t interrupt while we’re talking.”

I debated whether to offer him coffee, or beer, but Logan took the choice away from me by opening up the fridge and placing three beers in front of us.

“Mr. Fleabag and Friends?” I asked with a laugh, peeking around the door to watch both kids on their knees carefully loading the movie into the DVD player. It began playing with a coming attraction of some animated disaster that had flopped at the movie theater months ago.

Charlie looked a bit embarrassed as I sat back down in my chair. “Yeah, damned movie is nearly impossible to find. I looked everywhere for it. Every kid in the county must have bought it. I found a used copy at the flea market.”

“Appropriate,” I said, wondering if he’d catch the irony and decided he wouldn’t when he shifted around nervously in his chair, directing his full attention to the bottle in front of him.

I thought for the second time since I’d met him how devious he looked. I hadn’t had a chance to do any background checks, but like Logan, I was willing to bet if anyone took something from Jimmy Dawson, it would be Charlie White.

The kids were giggling so much I couldn’t hear the sounds of Mr. Fleabag, although occasionally I was getting grunts that somehow sounded more appropriate for a porno flick than a cartoon about a dog. It must have been hilarious for the younger set, because with every grunt the two little girls giggled so loudly I couldn’t hear anything else. I tried to ignore the distraction even though their giggles brought a smile to my lips.

At least this provided a casual atmosphere to question Charlie in. He might be less guarded this way. “Did you see anything, anything at all, in Dawson’s house that might cause him to commit murder?”

It would be useless to ask Charlie if he’d taken anything and I didn’t waste time by putting him on the defensive immediately. I needed him relaxed, and receptive to my questioning.

As he was talking, it occurred to me the giggling in the front room had now turned

into urgent whispers. The kind of secretive sounds that warn you kids are up to something, and you'd better pay attention. I tuned Charlie out long enough to hear an outraged childish voice whisper, "That's not Mr. Fleabag."

I held up my hand to stop Charlie. "Excuse me just a second."

Standing up to peek around the doorway again, I nearly had heart failure when I saw what the girls were watching. It wasn't Mr. Fleabag, but it was definitely a Mr. Scumbag and he was steadily working his way to doing the nasty with what looked like an underage girl. Worse, I recognized him; he was a prominent senior senator with a conservative following.

The video had all the markings of a blackmail tape as I watched the young actress make sure her face was turned to the camera and she maneuvered the senator so his features were easily recognizable too. So far, they still had their clothing on and were indulging in sloppy kisses and a lot of heavy breathing, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to see that she was setting him up for a fall. Now I understood the grunting.

*"That is not Mr. Fleabag!"*

By this time, Charlie and Logan had both got out of their seats to stand behind me so they could see what was going on.

*"Daddeeee! That is not Mr. Fleabag!"* One of the munchkins twisted around on the sofa to yell toward the kitchen.

"Oh shit," Charlie said under his breath.

Logan shoved past us to grab both girls off the sofa, swinging them up over his shoulders without warning. He made a growling sound like a dog and pretended to bite at them. "I'm Mr. Fleabag," he growled, causing both children to screech with delighted terrified giggles.

"Do it again," they urged simultaneously when he quit growling.

Logan gave an obliging snarl, galloping around the room more like a horse than a dog, but what the hell; it distracted the kids long enough for me to shut the video off.

He made a few more loops of the room before dumping them back on the sofa. With a gentleness that squeezed my heartstrings he got on his knees in front of them so he'd be at their level. His face looked serious.

"I think Mr. Fleabag's movie broke, but if you'll watch one of the other movies, I'll get you a new copy, okay?"

They looked at him with wide, trusting eyes, nodding their heads.

"Both of you," he hurried to assure them. "Both of you get a new Fleabag movie."

"Mr. Fleabag," they corrected him in one voice.

*"Mr. Fleabag,"* he repeated carefully, sounding contrite.

With a new movie in place we all returned to the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

I looked over at Charlie who was sitting with his head hung low, unable to face either of us. He stared at his hands and I almost felt sympathy for him. He was the picture of emotional weariness.

"Why don't you tell me where you really got the movie," I said in a carefully nonjudgmental voice, even though I already knew the answer. I didn't want to spook Charlie into running. Dawson wouldn't care that he had children with him. If he found out it was Charlie who had taken the DVD he would kill him, and the kids would end up

as collateral damage.

He wiped a tired hand across his face. "Okay, okay. I fucked up big time on this one. I don't know what the hell is wrong with me. I see things and I pick 'em up." He looked up at me, his eyes beseeching me to understand. "I don't even know why the hell I pick stuff up. Most of the time its crap I don't want."

He looked over at Logan apologetically. "I'm sorry man. This time I knew what I was doing. Missy's wanted that freaking Fleabag movie for weeks now and she's not doin' so well, you know. Her doctor bills have me against the wall..."

"What's the matter with her?" I asked interrupting him.

"She's got cancer," he explained. "They're gonna start with the chemo in a couple of weeks."

I shut my eyes. Why couldn't it be simple, just once?

"Go on."

"Anyway," he said, picking up his beer and putting it back down before he took a drink. "I looked over at the shelf of videos, curious, you know, what a man like Dawson would watch. And there's this whole damn shelf of kids movies. *Kid's movies!* So, right on top was Mr. Fleabag and Friends. I didn't even think about it. I just popped it in my bunker coat and left."

"Why didn't you say something at the station when you knew two people had been killed?"

Charlie shook his head. "There's no evidence Dawson was the one that killed 'em. Plus, what was I gonna say? I stole a fucking twenty-dollar movie and now I'm gonna get fired and my kid won't have the medical treatment she needs to stay alive."

He looked up, holding my gaze for a long silent moment.

"I don't think so, Officer. If you ever have a kid you'll know what I'm talking about."

"Where's Missy's mother?" I asked, wondering what would happen to the child if Charlie went to jail.

He shook his head, knowing where the conversation was headed. "She left us when Missy was six months old. And she never got back in touch. There's no one but me."

I glanced over at Logan. He'd pushed back from the table, sitting there silent with his arms folded over his chest. It was my call and he wasn't going to influence me, but from the expression on his face he sure didn't like where the conversation was headed. Well, neither did I.

"I know, you gotta take me in," Charlie said, "but what the hell is happening here? It was just a freakin' kid's movie. I never thought anything like this would happen."

"Blackmail," I explained. "Dawson is blackmailing the senator. He's probably got a lot of these videos around starring other prominent people. My guess is that they're all stored on the children's videos you noticed."

"Would Dawson really kill for that?" Charlie whispered glancing toward the front room.

"Oh yeah," I said, keeping my voice a whisper too. "He's finally implicated in a crime we can charge him with. He's either blackmailing the senator, or he's providing underage entertainment and keeping a record in case he ever needs to blackmail him. Either way, we know how to take him down now."

"You think he does this a lot?" Charlie asked. His forehead was wrinkled with

concern; he wasn't used to dealing with people like Dawson. He didn't like the thought Dawson was using underage girls to blackmail influential people.

My heart warmed toward Charlie just a little. I had a feeling he'd lived a hard life and was a product of that environment. It wasn't like I hadn't known a few cops that occasionally bent the rules. People were people; they made mistakes, bad judgments and acted on impulse. Human nature at its base core.

"I have no way of knowing, of course, but if I had to guess, I'd say Dawson is providing a ring of underage prostitutes to prominent people; not necessarily all men either." I looked at Charlie and Logan before continuing. "He records these 'escort' services for future use and when he needs a favor, or needs to lean on someone, he produces the video."

"I always was a dumb sonofabitch," Charlie admitted. "Now look what I got myself into." He turned up his beer to drain the bottle; and his eyes were filled with weary acceptance of his life. When he finished, he put the bottle down with a dull thud. "I never meant to hurt anyone." He looked at me for the first time, meeting my eyes. "Give me a minute to think of something to tell Missy and then we'll get this over with. It's been comin' a long time, I guess."

## Chapter Seven

"Can we go home, Daddy? I don't feel good," Missy said, coming into the kitchen to put her arms around Charlie's neck. She rested her face against his shoulder, clinging to him the way a sick child does for comfort. I watched her guide her thumb to her mouth before she thought about it and pulled it away. Too big to suck her thumb any longer.

Charlie held her tightly, burying his face against her hair, but not before I saw him blink back the tears he was trying to hide. "I've got to go somewhere with Madison. Okay? Logan will watch you girls until Sandi's mom gets here. Maybe you can stay at Sandi's house tonight."

Missy shook her head. "I don't want to, Daddy. I want to go home. I need my medicine."

Charlie looked up briefly, meeting my eyes again. "Pain medicine," he explained, his voice so husky I could barely understand him.

What lousy freaking luck.

How the hell could I possibly arrest Charlie White with a critically ill child to care for? If I was certain of nothing else, I knew Charlie loved his little girl more than his own life. I also knew she needed him. Under the bright florescent light of the kitchen I could see how translucent Missy's skin looked and how dark the circles under her eyes appeared now that she was tired. I couldn't live with myself if I took him away from her. Not now, when she needed him the most.

I became a cop to help people and God knows I didn't think I'd ever sleep again if I arrested Charlie and something happened to his little girl. Sitting there, watching him soothe his child, was the exact moment I understood I was going to be just one more cop to cross the line.

"You'll have to pick up her medicine and go somewhere for the night," I said. "You can't stay at your house, it's too dangerous."

*Well, hell, what was I supposed to do?*

Charlie seemed to deflate with relief. He sagged back against the chair, holding Missy even tighter in his arms and the look of gratitude he gave me was as genuine as it gets. "I'll never take anything again," he said with all the conviction of a man who thought his stealing was nothing more than a bad habit.

"Yes, you will," I sighed. "You're a kleptomaniac. You're sick, Charlie. You need a doctor."

"Daddy's sick too?" Missy asked with worried blue eyes that were dulled by her sickness.

"No, baby. It's nothing," he hurried to reassure her.

"Just a little cold?" she asked with a four year old's concern.

He kissed her forehead. "Yeah, just a little cold. I'll be fine."

I blinked back tears of my own at the injustice of any child being critically ill. Watching them together, I knew I was making the right choice, but how the hell would I ever fix this situation without all of us ending up in jail, or getting fired from our jobs?

I looked at Logan, so far, he'd been silent, watching the drama play out without comment. He gave me a hard lingering stare in return and I didn't know if he approved or



not.

“What are we going to do?” he asked, at last. “Dawson is going to kill someone else if he can’t find that video. We can’t let that happen.”

“Of course,” I said quietly, glancing over at Missy, hoping to warn Logan not to say anything that would frighten her. “We’re going to make sure Charlie and the girls get home safely. Then I’m going to make a phone call that might buy us some time.”

\* \* \* \*

“Tell Dawson I’ve got something he wants,” I told the housekeeper. “He’ll know what I’m talking about. Tell him I’ll be back in touch, but not if he hurts anyone else.”

I got the feeling the housekeeper was used to taking cryptic messages for Dawson. She didn’t question me, or ask my name. Instead, she repeated the message word for word and hung up the phone.

“Do you think he’ll go for it?” Logan asked.

“He doesn’t have much choice,” I replied. “Not if he wants his video back.”

Logan reached out to take my hand as we walked back to the car. I’d called from a pay phone, just on the off chance Dawson could get a trace on the number. And truth be told, so there wouldn’t be any records if the police (other than myself) got involved. I’d also used a little device to distort my voice. It was supposed to make me sound like a man, but since I’m not up on the James Bond stuff, I didn’t know if it would really work or not, and it seemed like a prudent thing to do until I figured everything out.

“That was a hell of a brave thing for you to do,” Logan said, bumping his shoulder playfully against mine as we walked. “Letting Charlie go, I mean.”

I looked up at Logan with what I hoped was a disparaging expression on my face. “You do understand that by keeping silent, you’re now an accomplice too. Which means instead of Charlie being the only one that gets jail time, you and I will be sharing a cell right along with him.”

Logan shrugged. “I can’t hurt that little girl. I feel bad about Robinson and Bledsoe, but it’s too late to help them anyway.”

“Yeah,” I agreed with a heavy sigh. “If Charlie hadn’t taken the video they might be alive, but in his defense, he couldn’t possibly know something so insignificant would lead to murder. Dawson is responsible for murdering them. It wasn’t Charlie’s fault. That would be like blaming the sales clerk who sold a gun that ended up killing someone in a robbery.”

“Another way to look at this,” Logan said, obviously trying to make me feel better, “is that if Charlie hadn’t picked up the video, no one would be the wiser to Dawson’s little scheme.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “At least we know what to look for now.”

We held hands until we got back to the car, both of us keeping an eye out for anyone that looked out of place, or was too interested in our actions.

“How do we get ourselves out of this mess, babe, without anyone else getting killed?” Logan asked, stopping at the car. “We need to take care of this before it goes any further.”

I pushed the remote lock to open the doors, looking at Logan over top the car. “I’m fresh out of ideas, fireman, so if you’ve got any suggestions—let’s hear them.”

Buckled in and heading back to the apartment, Logan stayed quiet for most of the

drive. When he did speak he asked a question that took me by surprise. “What can you live with?”

I glanced over to look at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what will save your cop’s conscience? I can tell its hurting you, so, what will make this okay?”

“Nothing will make this okay,” I said a little bitterly. “I broke the law. I know what I did was the right thing to do for that little girl, but I still broke the law I swore to uphold.”

“Damn it, Madison,” Logan said with heat. “The law isn’t written in blood. You and I both know there’s so many loopholes in the system it’s like a leaky sieve and only the career criminals come out ahead. You did the right thing for a sick kid. I hope to hell you never become the kind of cop that goes by the book so strict you forget to be human.”

I wasn’t expecting his little outburst and I didn’t quite know how to respond to it. I stayed silent waiting to see what he’d say next.

“If you turned Charlie in, what would happen after that? He’d get arrested for stealing. Lose his job, maybe face jail time and Dawson would be untouched because the video can’t be used for evidence in a court of law under the circumstances. Right?”

I nodded my head.

“So, the only fucking thing you’d accomplish by arresting Charlie is that Missy wouldn’t have her daddy with her when she needed him the most. Dawson would get rid of all the evidence and make sure he didn’t get caught a second time. The senator would be embarrassed if the details got out, but let’s face it, this is probably his last term in office anyway. And it didn’t look to me like the girl in the video was scared, or being forced.” He shrugged. “I don’t see any reason to feel bad over what we’re doing.”

“No, I agree, she was a little pro. She was definitely setting the senator up while she was playing for the camera, but that still doesn’t make it right.”

“Hell no. I’m not saying it’s right. I’m asking you what you expect for justice. If we can’t do this by the book, what do you want to get out of it?”

I didn’t even have to think about my answer.

“To bust the senator’s balls so he doesn’t fool around with underage girls and to get Dawson off the street. I guess that would do it for me.”

Logan wiped his face. “Okay. Then we find a way to make those two things happen.”

“Just like that?” I asked, grinning despite myself. He looked so determined to save my integrity, but he’d made a good point. The only one with something to lose was Missy. I knew Logan was justifying my actions for me, but nevertheless, I felt a little better about my decision.

\* \* \* \*

Back at the apartment, we melted into each other’s arms. “Should I console you? Or should you be consoling me?” Logan asked, and I got the feeling he was only partially kidding.

“Why don’t we both do a little consoling?” I suggested, amazed that under the circumstances, I still needed his body, needed to feel him against me, inside of me. It seemed I had formed an addiction for Lt. Logan Wylde and not even the threat of jail or death would keep me from wanting him.

He was definitely not the traditional fantasy lover, not a romantic man. He didn’t

whisper pretty words of seduction. Instead, he was raw and needful. Experienced in giving and receiving physical gratification, and he used those skills to make my body ache for his touch.

Taking only enough time to lock the door, he pulled me to him, kissing me with the single-minded intensity of his that broke everything down into a simple element of physical need. The desire for sex.

He grasped my hair in his hands, cradling my skull with his fingers, as he commanded I surrender to him. He held me tightly, with my body wedged against him so that his hard-on was pressing into my stomach, demanding attention. I pressed back, rubbing against his erection, feeling him jerk and harden impossibly at the friction our bodies were producing.

At last, enduring enough of our foreplay, he picked me up, throwing me over his shoulder in the traditional fireman's carry. His hand rubbed suggestively over my ass as he took us into the bedroom and dropped me onto the bed. There was no ceremony to his undressing me. He did it as fast and efficiently as he could manage, immediately followed by his clothes landing on the floor in a heap with mine.

He was going to take me quickly. It was in the tightness of his face, that feral look again. Dangerous. Edgy. Needful. His absolute maleness drew an instinctual feminine response from my body and I groaned, clutching desperately at his shoulders as he shoved me further into the middle of the bed.

With one of his large hands he pulled my legs up so that my knees were bent and my legs were spread wide enough he could crawl between them to position himself at my pelvis. With one hand he ran his finger down the slit of my body, swirling around the clit, moving to my entrance where he dipped two fingers inside testing my readiness. Oh yeah, I was ready. Logan gave a groan of satisfaction, grasped himself in his fist and guided his erection into my fold, pushing inside with a hard thrust that buried him deeply.

I felt my fingernails sink into his skin and he shuddered, pushing harder. I was sore from our previous lovemaking and unconsciously pulled back, burying myself in the mattress as he continued forward, driving his cock into my body until there was nowhere left to go. My stretched muscles tightened painfully for a moment, then relaxed, accepting him, welcoming him with squeezing motions that brought another moan of pleasure from his throat.

"How the fuck do you do that?" he whispered into my ear as his tongue traced the outer shell and his teeth nipped my earlobe. "Do it again," he coaxed, giving a short hard stroke into my pussy, knowing my muscles would tighten involuntarily at his invasion.

He sucked in his breath through clenched teeth at the sensation of my vaginal walls massaging his penis. Then he began pushing his hips in a steady forward motion that left me poised on the edge of an orgasm I couldn't quite complete. I wrapped my legs around him, drawing him closer, anchoring myself by digging my heels into his upper thighs.

Buried to the limit, he drew back to look at me, frozen in place, his muscles tense. He let the need build, and build, as we stared at each other. My body melted around his erection with a liquid gushing heat. Then I couldn't take it any longer, I nudged him with an upward thrust of my hips in a needful reminder he wasn't moving enough to suit me.

He waited until he saw something in my eyes that drew a response from him and with a shuddering breath, plunged into me and didn't stop moving. I moaned with the force of my release. It crashed over me violently, tearing my sanity away with a mindless

delight that swept away every rational thought in my head, leaving me riding the waves of physical pleasure that depended solely upon Logan's movements. He rode me hard, thrusting without apology, shoving and demanding his own pleasure as I lost myself to him in a sexual bonding that could never be broken.

And then he came.

It was a raw release of male power. He groaned so deeply it sounded like a growl, and his body shook, arching with the roughness of his surrender. I could feel the fluid pumping from his body in thick hot spurts of liquid gratification that left us both limp and gasping for breath, clinging to each other in a desperate attempt to hold the magic a few seconds longer.

Exhausted from his efforts, Logan lay on top of me, letting me run my fingers lazily up and down his back while we came down from our high. We were sweaty but satiated, at least for the moment.

"I'm done for," he whispered. "I need a nap."

"Me too," I confessed, letting him roll off to lie beside me.

Logan pulled my head onto his shoulder and clasped my body tightly against him, like a child snuggling a stuffed animal. I think he was asleep before his head hit the pillow. It took me a while longer. I lay in his arms, still tracing his skin with my fingers, listening to him breathe deeply as he slept off the exhaustion of our sexual escapade and the awful events of the last two days.

Now I understood what he'd said in the car about that unexplained feeling. That instinctual hunch. We *were* right together. For however long it lasted, our bodies were in tune. Some primitive compass had aligned our desires, and through fate, we'd met.

My last conscious thought was that I hoped fate would be kind to us.

## Chapter Eight

“What if we posted the video on the internet?” Logan asked. “It would bring the senator down, and accomplish one of our goals, but I’m not sure what effect it would have on Dawson in the long run. Nothing on the video connects it to him.”

I took a sip of coffee, and yawned, stretching delightfully sore muscles while I thought about the residual effects of posting the video on the world wide web. “It would probably stop Dawson from going after anyone else, but he’d only destroy the rest of evidence. The biggest drawback I see will be finding a way to keep it from being traced to us.”

“We’d have to do it on a public computer. Preferably in a different town.” Logan answered, helping himself to more sugar for his coffee. I shuddered; I hate sugar in coffee but he loaded his down to a nearly syrupy thickness.

“We could show enough of the video that there’s no doubt what’s going on.” Logan chuckled, thinking about the details and consequences. “And we could do a text script to add to the video. A storyline. Something like: Once upon a time, a clever criminal named Dawson kept a record of every transaction he made. He saved those details on children’s videos where cops, friends, and business partners would never think to look for them.”

I nearly choked on my coffee. Simple. Brilliant. The general public would be clueless, but anyone involved would understand immediately. It could work, especially if we gave the news crew and the police an anonymous tip before the video aired. If the cops already had a warrant in hand, they could storm the house the second the video became public knowledge. They might even get to Dawson before he destroyed all the evidence, if he hadn’t already.

“I could e-mail a copy of the video to Inspector Bennett, warning him it’s going to be on the Net,” I said. “That way he could get a warrant ready in time. Bennett is going to need some kind of proof to show the judge.”

Logan scratched his head, further messing the dark bed-head curls that gave him an endearing little boy look. His hazel eyes were still heavy lidded with sleep and I had to resist the urge to kiss him.

“Okay,” he said. “First we have to find a place where we don’t need to show identification, and then we’ll have to set up an e-mail account. The library won’t work; you have to own a borrowing card and show ID before you can log on to their computers.”

I walked over to Logan and sat down on his lap, facing him, putting my arms around his neck. “Did I ever tell you that you’re brilliant?”

He gave me a little nudge with his semi-erect cock. “I think you might have said something like that last night.”

I laughed, pushing back against him, grinding myself into his hardness. “Does that thing ever go soft?”

“Not when you’re around,” he said.

I glanced down at my watch, then looked back at Logan. “We have a couple of hours before anything opens.”

He raised his eyebrows in a suggestive motion. “Oh no we don’t,” he contradicted. “I

can think of something that's going to open in a very short time."

And he was right. In bed again, we claimed each other with the same passion that accompanied our first encounter.

It was as if I couldn't get enough of the fireman. I'd always had a healthy sexual appetite, but it was different with Logan. He claimed my body and soul. I couldn't remember what it was like not to know the feel of his body, his penis inside me, his arms around me and his guidance taking me to sexual heights I'd never reached until he pushed me to my limit.

I was so sore I could barely walk by the time we left the bedroom but I was aware our relationship had evolved to a higher level. As he explained the plan he'd come up with to expose Dawson, I realized the effort he'd taken to keep me safe. Logan was more possessive of me now. I was his. He'd branded me as his woman. Not a plaything. Not a one night stand. I was his woman and he would protect me if it cost him his life, or his career.

The feeling was both unique and terrifying. Being a cop, I had always been the protector in my relationships. Always the defender of the mate. Now that I think about it, what does it tell you about the quality of the guys I dated previously? Most of them were professionals, lawyers, or men involved in the criminal justice system that I met while on the job. Courtroom warriors without an ounce of real courage in their souls. Men who would protect themselves before they ever gave thought to anyone else.

On the flip side of the coin, the few cops I'd dated seemed to be all about competition. Oddly, it was mostly the cops who didn't want me on the street. Of course, they understood the danger better than anyone else. And then there was the authority issue to deal with.

Lt. Logan Wylde was a novelty to me; he didn't challenge my authority, he just took charge, and I let him. How did that happen? I think because I understood that deep down, he respected me, knew I was capable of taking care of myself. And I needed someone to watch out for me for a change. I was willing to let him lead as long as he understood my independence.

"Let's get this over with," he said, dropping a kiss on my forehead.

He didn't have to say it out loud; we both looked back at the bed, then at each other. If this blew up in our faces, we might never share another chance to make love. We'd either be dead, or in jail.

\* \* \* \*

As it turned out, Logan was a genius at editing videos for the computer. He had the DVD loaded, edited, captioned, and saved on a flash drive in the time it would have taken me to figure out how to load it. I watched over his shoulder as he added his own plot to go with the senator's actions, just in case those viewing weren't smart enough to figure it out for themselves. For the internet, he edited a version that was detailed enough to leave little guesswork as to what the senator had in mind, but he made sure the jailbait wasn't recognizable in any of the frames.

"That's perfect," I said when I watched the movie. He'd kept it to a mild R-rated adaptation of the original. Likewise, he was careful how he worded Dawson's involvement, only hinting at his motives enough so Jimmy would be sweating it when other victims realized what he had been up to.

“We need something more graphic for the video you send to Bennett,” Logan said. “If he needs to convince a judge to issue a search warrant on the spot we’ll have to give him more details.”

“And it wouldn’t hurt to help with instructions of where to find the children’s videos, and what they should expect to find on them,” I added. “That way the first officer through the door can secure the evidence before it mysteriously gets destroyed.”

“Good idea,” Logan agreed, typing out the location of the videos.

He hit the save button and pulled the flash drive out of the USB port. “This should do it, Madison. Let’s hope to hell it will put Dawson behind bars for a long while.”

“We can always hope,” I answered, not sure any of this would work, but I didn’t see an alternative to the situation and we needed to get Dawson behind bars before he killed again.

\* \* \* \*

An hour out of town we stopped at a small internet café, tucked in the basement of a once elegant hotel that could now best be described as seedy. From the looks of the premises, the upper levels were currently being used as low-rent apartments, and the bottom floors were rented as office space to privately owned businesses.

We entered the café through glass doors that were so dirty it was impossible to see inside. As far as I could tell, there was no coffee brewing, and only two of the ten or so computers were turned on. My guess was the café did more business in behind-the-counter drugs than it did in coffee or internet time.

The only person in the room was a bored teenager with Billy Idol-era spiked hair and a truly amazing variety of facial piercings that made me wonder what the rest of his body must look like. I could only assume he was what passed for the hired help at Comstock’s Computer Cafe. When we let the door shut behind us, he glanced up from the graphic novel he was reading long enough to give us a malignant stare.

Waiting a heartbeat for the kid to acknowledge us, Logan and I looked at each other with a shrug when he returned to his novel without a word of greeting. It was obvious he wanted us gone in a hurry. I wondered how long it had been since the café had seen a legitimate customer, if ever.

“Can we use any of these?” Logan asked with a general sweep of his hand toward the empty tables.

“Sure,” the kid mumbled without looking up.

I was betting if he ever prayed, he was praying about now that we wouldn’t do something stupid, like ask for coffee. I thought about ordering a cup of espresso just to see what kind of a reaction I’d get from him.

Logan picked a spot where I could watch the street while he set up accounts at the sites we needed to log into, and uploaded the video onto the miraculously up-to-date computer. Ignoring both him and the kid, I kept an eye on the surroundings while Logan worked his magic. In an alarmingly short amount of time, he’d destroyed the senator’s bid for reelection and emailed the graphic version of the video to Inspector Bennett, along with instructions for finding the videos.

“That’s it,” he said, shutting off the computer and pocketing the flash drive. “Let’s hope this works.” He made sure the teenager was still buried deep in his novel. “We’d better get back to Dawson’s place as soon as we can. I have a feeling it’s going to get real

interesting around there in the next couple of hours.” He gave me a grin. “Besides, I don’t like the service in this joint.”

“What service?” I asked, trailing behind him as he tossed a couple of bills on the counter while we were leaving.

We were about half an hour from Dawson’s townhouse when my cell phone rang. I checked the incoming number out of habit, but already knew it was going to be the inspector with news about the e-mail we’d sent. I was a little nervous about how to handle the information without giving myself away.

“Hello?” I said, putting a finger to my lips to keep Logan quiet.

“Madison, where are you?” the inspector asked, his voice high with excitement. “We’ve got a new development on Dawson. He’s been blackmailing prominent people with an underage prostitution ring.”

“How did you find that out?” I asked, hoping my voice had the right mix of surprise and curiosity.

“Someone e-mailed a video to me a few minutes ago, along with a head’s-up they’re going to post it on the internet. The DVD shows an underage prostitute with a United States Senator. I don’t have to tell you it’s a little busy around here at the precinct, but we’ve got a warrant for Dawson’s townhouse this time. Judge Wilson issued a search and seize as soon as he viewed the movie. We can tear the place apart if we have to.”

“Did this someone happen to explain how the video came into their possession?” I asked, causing Logan to give me a warning look.

“I think that’s what was stolen from Dawson’s place during the fire,” Bennett said, ending his sentence with a loud indulgent yawn. “Sorry.”

At times, I think the inspector is psychic. He has an instinctive feel for the way things go down at a crime scene, and he’s seldom wrong when he plays his hunches.

“What makes you think the DVD was stolen at the fire?” I asked curiously. “It could be the housekeeper setting Dawson up for all we know. She would have had access to the video and she may have used the fire as a cover to throw him off balance. To make him think someone else took the video.”

“True,” Bennett said, yawning once more.

I guessed that the inspector must have spent the night at the precinct again by the hearty yawns he wasn’t trying to hide. No wonder he was on wife number three.

“But what I really think,” he continued, “is that someone picked the DVD up and didn’t know what they had. Then when they figured it out, they didn’t know what to do with it. Explains why Dawson came after everyone at the fire, and why someone needs to get rid of it in a hurry.”

“Yeah, that would make sense,” I agreed. “Dawson has no idea who took the video so he’s beating the bushes to try to flush someone out.”

I could hear Bennett yawning again. He had his hand cupped over the receiver to muffle the sound, but I could still hear him. I felt bad about not saying anything, but it was too late to confess now. What would be the point? Other than to put the three of us in prison.

“We’ve got teams ready to go in as soon as this goes public. I hope that sonofabitch hasn’t destroyed the evidence already.”

“Do you think there’s more evidence in the townhouse?”

“According to the e-mail I received there’s a whole series of children’s videos



with..." The inspector's voice trailed off as someone interrupted him. I couldn't hear what was being said, but I could hear the urgent tone of a male voice.

*"Sonofabitch!"*

I didn't think the inspector was talking to me, or about me, but my stomach knotted anyway. That's what guilt does to you; it eats at you from the inside out and makes you paranoid as hell. I imagined all sorts of scenarios in which the unseen speaker was explaining my duplicity to Inspector Bennett.

The voice stopped speaking and Bennett came back on the phone.

"Madison, get over to the townhouse, we need all available officers for crowd control. There's going to be one hell of a media circus at Dawson's in a very short time." He disconnected the phone before explaining what he was talking about, leaving me dry mouthed and trembling.

I hoped they weren't laying a trap for us.

## Chapter Nine

Logan drove fast, ignoring the blaring of horns and upraised fingers as we cut in and out of traffic. By the time we got there, Dawson's townhouse was already a circus, complete with cops, paramedics, news crews and the obligatory crowd of curiosity seekers. An ambulance was parked in front of the house with its lights flashing. I wondered if Dawson had taken the easy way out and shot himself, or if he'd had a heart attack. Because of the surrounding police personnel, I didn't notice the white sheet covering a human form until we'd walked a little closer.

"What happened?" I asked, flashing my badge at a rookie cop that had been assigned to keep the crowd back.

"Dawson shot someone. I don't know the details yet."

Logan and I looked at each other. Dawson shot someone? Who? God, I hoped Charlie didn't get another case of stupid and show up to confront Dawson. I could tell by the look in Logan's eyes that he was considering the possibility too.

Captain Salyers was on the scene, happily talking to a camera crew at the side of the yard. I imagined that Bennett was thankful for that. It kept the news off his back and Salyers too busy to accidentally destroy evidence. We managed to slip by without being noticed. I found Inspector Bennett just inside the door talking to the forensics team.

"What happened? I asked again, glancing at the body we'd passed. "Who did Dawson shoot?"

"He shot the senator."

"The senator? How'd that happen? And where's Dawson?"

The inspector inclined his head toward the kitchen where I could see the paramedics frantically working over Dawson's motionless body. There was a lot of blood on the kitchen floor pooling around the vicinity of Dawson's chest.

"A double shooting?" I guessed. It wasn't as strange as you'd think. Cops see it happen all the time.

Inspector Bennett nodded. "According to the housekeeper, the senator showed up on the doorstep ranting and raving about Dawson destroying his life and his family. The housekeeper was dialing 911 when she heard a loud blast that sounded like a gunshot. When she ran back to see what had happened, the senator was lying across the doorframe and Dawson had been shot too. She dragged him onto the tile so he wouldn't bleed on the carpet."

"*You've got to be kidding me!* Her boss had been shot and she was worrying about the freaking carpet."

"It *is* a light color," Inspector Bennett said, glancing down at his feet. "Have you ever tried to clean blood out of a beige carpet?"

"No, I try to kill all my victims on dark carpets. It makes things so much easier that way," I answered, knowing if civilians overheard our joking they would think we were callous. In reality, a dark sense of humor helps us deal with the things we see every day.

"We lost him," one of the paramedics called out before the inspector could answer me. "Heart failure due to blood loss."

Inspector Bennett sighed heavily looking at the structured chaos around him. "I

guess that's it then, unless we've got something interesting on those DVDs to follow up."

"What about the theft that took place during the fire?" I asked, wishing I could bite my tongue off the minute the words were out of my mouth.

Bennett studied me through narrowed eyelids. "You got proof anything was stolen?"

I didn't like that calculating stare. He was thinking, feeling, and he knew something wasn't right. "No, no proof," I said, trying to keep my voice neutral and my face expressionless. "I was just curious."

"I didn't think so," Bennett answered gruffly. "We let the matter rest right here, right now. Without proof, we don't need internal affairs breathing down our necks for something that may, or may not, have happened. You understand what I'm saying? This is not locker room discussion material."

\* \* \* \*

Sometimes you're meant to break the rules, and to beat the odds. In effect, that's what happened to Charlie, Logan and me. We beat the odds. I'm not saying what we did was right, or justified, but we did what we thought was best for a little girl that needed her daddy. Did we make the right choice? I don't know.

Our lives have changed since the fire. Charlie took time off work to be with Missy during her chemo treatments. And while he was at the hospital waiting for her, he got in some time with a psychiatrist. He called the other day to tell Logan that Missy is now in the first stages of remission and hoping to start kindergarten in the fall. As for Charlie, he hasn't picked up anything since the day he took the DVD at Dawson's. I think there may hope for him yet.

Logan didn't spend much time looking for an apartment. He just sort of moved in with me by mutual consent. It was so much easier than having to replace everything right away.

So far, he hasn't asked me to give up my job because it's too dangerous and I don't complain about his long shifts at the station. We have a good life together and sometimes we talk marriage like we really mean it.

Logan's still the bad boy of Station Five. He bought a shirt the other day that says, *Find 'em Hot, Leave 'em Wet*. So I retaliated by buying one that said, *Call 911. Make a cop come*.

Logan does a lot of the above, making me hot, making me wet, and making me come.

I think I'll keep him around for a while. Like maybe the rest of my life.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Jade lives on 75 acres of beautiful forested land in rural Ohio. Writing takes many forms in Jade's life, from working as a stringer for the local paper to published poetry and non-fiction articles. Her love of photography has lead to several awards and two terms as president of the local camera club. Other hobbies include spelunking, travel and

art journaling. She spends most of her free time planting flowers which the deer and rabbits eat before she gets back to the house.

Jade's friends describe her as Lucille Ball, though not for her red hair. She is constantly finding herself in unlikely mishaps. So far she's survived them all (and hasn't lost a friend yet, although it's been a close call on occasion).

## **Ena's Fire**

Shaunta Grimes

### **Chapter One**

Every breath Ena Shannon managed to drag in pulled thick, black smoke with it. Even without flames licking at the dry shrub and cheat grass all around her, the August desert heat would have been unbearable in shorts and a t-shirt. As it was, her brain cooked under her helmet and her eyes burned behind the wide goggles she wore to protect them. Fire retardant NoMex completed her grubby ensemble.

"Ena, come with me."

She looked up at Ross Wright, her team leader, and managed a smile as she moved down the line alongside him. "I don't know. Sounds pretty kinky."

He shot her an amused look, lifted a spade full of dried grass and rock-hard earth, and tilted his head toward her shovel. "You gonna let me outwork you?"

She wasn't tired, although she knew that's what he thought. What he always thought when he caught her gazing into the fire. "Not a chance, Hot Shot."

"Good girl. Let's get this done."

Behind him, a row of men hauled combustibles away from the blaze that marched like an army toward them, making a gutter that would contain the flames and keep them from spreading. An airplane carrying water and fire retardant buzzed overhead. Ena was good at her job, but any one of those men could shovel circles around her. And they all knew it. Some of them had moved reluctantly from resentment to grudging respect. And others, like Ross, looked at her like a mascot.

"Ena!" She spun and faced the man who approached. Her heart thudded in her chest and every one of her senses went on high alert. The world was burning around her ears and a matching heat burst into her blood when Charlie Reese said her name. An avenging angel in bright yellow emerging from the smoke, he took her arm and yanked her from the line. "Are you sure about this?"

She nodded. Her helmet weighed a thousand pounds. At least. Okay, maybe she was a little tired. They didn't make gear small enough to fit her properly, so while she was protected, she was even more uncomfortable than the men.

Like Ginger Rogers: doing what the boys did, only backward and in heels.

"We need to build the gutter here, and around to the west and then cut south."

She'd always found it amusing that, despite her efforts to keep her secrets to herself, the men had all come to regard her with the kind of grudging respect reserved for someone you thought might put a hex on you if you didn't watch your back. Those who knew her well enough to know she was never wrong when it came to fire deferred to her expertise, but only after she'd proven her competence over and over.

She couldn't tell them she was never wrong because she'd been born an elemental witch, with the magic of fire churning inside her. No, she'd gained their respect the hard way.

And Charlie, gorgeous Charlie, was one of those that required a lot of convincing.

“We can handle it from here, Ena. You’re not looking real good.” He put a hand on her arm and started to lead her away from the rest of the team. She pulled away from him, tugged sharply until he released his hold on her. “Christ woman, do you argue about everything?”

They’d argued at dawn, before the team was sent to manage this fire, about whether or not Ena should be in the field. Charlie had only been with them this season, since May. Brought in from the outside to captain their team. Ross had actually laughed out loud when Charlie demanded Ena give her recommendations remotely.

“Only when men insist on being such stupid—*men*.” She stomped back to her spot next to Ross and lifted her shovel. Her arms shook from overuse, but she dug a clump of earth and tossed it aside anyway. Screw Charlie Reese.

She looked up at him, hovering over her, his face set in hard lines.

She’d be the one screwed if he ever realized how irrational her body became whenever he was near her. Just the sound of his voice—even when he was being a total dick—made her wet and tingly.

She shook off that thought. She couldn’t afford to be such a girl out here.

Under other circumstances she might have considered getting him out of her system the old-fashioned way. The idea of indulging in a bit of the hair of the dog who’d bit her intrigued her more than a little. But these were not normal circumstances. And not only because Charlie was her captain.

Her body didn’t respond to him the way it did to other men, and that scared the shit out of her. She’d never wanted a specific man before in her life. And she wanted Charlie hard enough to hurt. Best to keep her distance until she figured out what the hell was up with that.

She worked for fifteen minutes, pushing herself hard so none of the men saw her falter. They had an informal babysitting rotation. She saw it, even though they thought they were sly. Ross stepped back after a few minutes and another man stepped forward to take his place. She let it happen because the only other options were to quit or let them all be distracted at the same time by their inability to believe she could work just as hard as any of them.

This fire was a real bitch. Worse than most. Ena knew immediately that an accelerant was involved. She could taste it at the back of her throat. Kerosene. Not necessarily arson. It could have been an accident with a camp stove. But this was the third fire where she’d sensed kerosene in this area in a week.

The smoke curled around her, the heat seared into her, all of it whispering to her of its need to *eat* everything in its path. Hunger Ena felt in her own belly. In her blood.

She knew the blaze had started about half a mile in front of her and to the East. Three fires were enough to see a pattern. Each had been closer than the previous to civilization. If they didn’t get this gutter put in fast, she’d have to call for reinforcements.

That was *so* not going to happen.

She jammed her shovel blade into the ground and struck a rock. The reverberation ran up her arm. A jolt of pain deadened her nerves and she dropped her tool and stumbled forward. Unfortunately, Ross swung his shovel around at the same moment and she caught its sharp edge in her belly. She gasped and landed hard on her ass, catching the edge of a rock on her hip.

*Goddamn it!*

She'd meant to yell that out loud, but the wind had been knocked out of her.

"Ena? Ena!" *Ena?* She heard her name inside her head, in response to her silent oath, and called out from somewhere in front of her. She ignored the concerned voice in her head and squinted up at Charlie.

"I'm fine. I just hit a rock." Except she didn't sound fine. She sounded winded and injured. *Goddamn it!*

"Like hell." He wrapped his arm around her back and put the other under her knees. She glared at him, but let him lift her because she wasn't entirely sure she could stand on her own and submitting seemed the least embarrassing option at the moment.

Ross came up on her other side, even under his goggles, Ena saw he was devastated. "Oh God, Ena. I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Get back on the line." Charlie growled it at him, and Ross took a step back. "Now." Ena managed a weak smile at Ross. "It wasn't your fault. I'm fine."

*Ena. Talk to me.* She did her best to tune out her sister's voice. She knew that in a minute she'd have three voices ringing inside her head and right now all she could do was hold onto Charlie's neck and try to remember how to breathe.

Even burning with embarrassment, she couldn't help but notice his muscles shifting under his gear, or appreciate the hard, strong arms wrapped around her. Damn. She was *responding* to him. Here? Now? Really?

As Charlie trucked her out of the fire zone, Ena's anger, bolstered by her irritation at her body's reaction to being so close to him, smoldered as hot as the inferno they left behind.

The wind changed. Not subtly either. It did an abrupt, unmistakable one eighty. She looked up at the sky and saw thick black clouds gathering above them. Shit.

*Stop it! You stupid, stupid witches, stop it right now!*

"Put me down." Charlie ignored her completely and she beat against his shoulder with one fist. "Damn it, Charlie. I can walk. Put me down."

He let her heavy boots touch the ground, but didn't release his hold on her shoulders until he was satisfied she wouldn't fall over. She looked up at him with her feet planted wide, and opened her arms as well. "Solid as a rock, okay? I'm going back to work."

"Enough." He took her elbow and pushed her away from the fire. "This is going to stop, Ena."

As if he had a snowball's chance in hell of making that happen. "The wind's changed."

Charlie looked around, startled. She waited with exaggerated patience for him to realize she was right. "We should finish. The wind is fickle."

"It's going to rain, too."

He pulled his goggles over his helmet and looked up. Where five minutes ago the sky had been smoke-filled but clear, now heavy clouds closed in. "Christ. If we get lightning, this is going to get bad real quick."

"There won't be lightning."

He peered at her through narrowed green eyes. Sexy eyes. "Damn it, Ena."

He looked over his shoulder at the men, and then back to her. She did her best to appear as competent as possible. He was frustrated, she knew, because while he might direct one of the men to hoof it back to the trucks if he'd been injured, he wouldn't send

her alone.

He glared at her like she was a naughty ten-year-old and she had the absurd urge to stomp her foot. She was pissed, her skin felt two sizes too small for her body from her close contact with this jackass, and she was damned tired of being underestimated.

She was irked, goddamn it.

*Ena, don't make us get all Mama Bear on you. Get out.*

Now she did stomp her foot, and grunted out a frustrated half-screech. She didn't even care that under all his protective gear, Charlie Reese was probably amused. Fuck them all. She spun on her heel and stalked away from him. "Tell them to start digging north instead of south."

As soon as she got her hands on her sisters, she was going to kill someone. They'd changed the course of the fire without even thinking about all the work her crew had already put in. Precious energy expended to contain a fire that was now headed directly away from Ena.

*I cannot believe you did that.* She sent the message to Wren, her sister who owned a mastery of air, and Moira, who controlled water. She sent it to Blair, who had not utilized her command of earth as far as Ena could see, but who was guilty by association. Blair was not beyond causing a small earthquake to drive Ena back from a fire she deemed out of control. *You are all dead meat.*



## Chapter Two

"If you value your balls, you will never, ever do that to me again." Ena's red-gold hair tumbled in a river of silk waves nearly to her waist, and the intoxicating scent of clean, fresh *woman* nearly brought Charlie to his knees.

She stood toe-to-toe with him, even though she had to look nearly straight up to see his face. Her audacity made his cock twitch. He would have wanted her even if she didn't have perfect breasts.

"You don't belong out there, Ena. We both know it." He looked around the classroom he'd been given as an office, searching for something, anything to say that might convince her. He found nothing. "Hell, we all know it."

"The. Fuck. I. Don't." She made each word a sentence, punctuated with a smack of the heel of her hand against his chest. His heart rate ratcheted up a notch with each connection and for some reason even her cursing turned him on.

"How did you know there wouldn't be lightning?" It was either change the subject, or bend the woman over his repurposed teacher's desk and plunge his cock deep into her. Or at least take her into his arms, where he could kiss her until she begged for mercy.

"It's my job to know." She took a step back as if she sensed how close he was to acting on his desires. "And it's my job to be out there."

"You have a reputation, you know." He closed the small gap she'd opened. He could see the peaks of her nipples through her t-shirt, and she ran her small pink tongue over her full lips.

"Is that right?" Her voice was husky. She wanted him too. Their mutual attraction was an open secret.

Adrenalin coursed through his blood, as it probably would until he finally managed to fall asleep on his cot in the tent city the county had set up for them on the high school field. He wanted to slide his hard-on into Ena Shannon with a ferocity that caught him by surprise nearly every time he saw her. "They say you're never wrong."

She had such a tight little body. Out of her gear she was almost unbearably small and feminine. He knew she had a steel framework of muscle under her silky skin. She packed fifty pounds of gear for miles just like the men. But she damn well cleaned up better than any fireman he'd ever seen.

She cleaned up like a goddess.

"I am never wrong. And you would do well to remember that, Charlie Reese." Her face was radiant when angry, and he brushed a stray strand of hair off her forehead. He surprised himself with the intimate touch, and she surprised him more by tilting her face to follow it. She shook herself when he took his fingers back. "Better men than you have tried to bundle me in bubble wrap and keep me in an office. And they failed just like you will. No one is going to keep me out of the field."

She was right, which is what killed him. He couldn't even say she held them back. Or put the other men in danger. They took turns staying near her, which under normal circumstances might slow them down enough to demand her removal to a nice safe desk. But she was so damned good at what she did. Her competence more than made up for the extra care the men insisted on giving her. She made them the most effective crew he'd

ever seen.

“Goddamn it, Ena. I need you safe.” His truth. And one he wasn’t particularly happy to share with her. He did his best to mitigate it by adding, “You’re too valuable to risk.”

She raked her hand through her freshly washed hair and he caught a nose full of her shampoo. No one should smell as good as she did. It was criminal. Ever since he’d first seen her, standing with her hands on her hips ready for a fight as he was introduced to her, he’d wanted her. He’d never met a woman like her. And he’d sure as hell never met one who could make his dick hard just by being *angry* at him.

“I know what I’m doing, Charlie.” Her voice had softened, and he knew she hadn’t bought his add-on about her value to the team. “And you’ll just have to take my word for it when I say I’m never in any real danger out there.”

“We’re all in danger out there.”

She gave him a look of pure exasperation. “That’s why I have to be with you.”

He was touching her again, and he hadn’t even realized he’d done it. He’d grabbed her upper arm. Her bicep shifted under his hand. Even that infinitesimal movement sent sparks of electricity through his blood. “We could get killed and you’re invincible. Do I have that right?”

“Something like that.” She didn’t move out of his grasp, just looked up at him with huge eyes the color of a stormy sky that pleaded with him to understand. He pulled her into his arms. “What are you doing?”

He inhaled her sweet scent. “I’m going to kiss you.”

Her eyes went even rounder before she blinked, twice. “What?”

He bent his head to her and took possession of her mouth. She was a firefighter, and strong for such a small woman, but goddamn she was a woman. His body recognized her as *his* woman even if they hadn’t worked out the details yet and it terrified him every time she put herself on the front lines of a wildfire.

She stiffened against him, but then her body molded to his, her mouth opening so he could sweep his tongue into it and taste her minty freshness flavored with a tinge of smoky danger. He moaned into her mouth as his cock went painfully hard.

\*

Charlie’s hand tightened around a fistful of Ena’s hair as she breathed in his moan, and pressed her pussy tight against the leg he thrust between hers in a mindless effort to ease the terrible ache of need that had obviously stolen her sanity.

She caught the echo of amused laughter in her head and slammed her mental barriers up hard. Hoped her sisters’ collective heads spun. She got her hands up between her and Charlie and pushed at the heavily-muscled wall of his chest until he let her come up for air.

She wasn’t a virginal princess any more than she was a China doll. Her very insistent instinct was to take what Charlie clearly wanted to give her, hard and deep. His cock lay thick and straining against his jeans, prodding her belly. He was a foot taller than her, and outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds of solid muscle, and she knew he would stretch her body to its limits.

*Fuck.* She wanted him. Had wanted him since she laid eyes on him, even though it made little sense. He was just another macho, egotistical man who thought it was his *duty* to protect her from something she had more control over than he could conceive.

She was so wet, so ready to take him inside of her. But something held her back.

Well, not physically, because even as she had the thought, her hips were grinding forward against that bulge and she arched her neck so he could kiss it. She put her hands on his jaw and forced him to look at her.

His green eyes searched her face. Waiting for permission, she suddenly realized. Having a man like Charlie Reese in a vulnerable position should have been a powerful aphrodisiac. Instead, it scared her.

Damn it. She didn't *do* scared. She rose up on her toes and kissed him. He burrowed his hand into her hair again and held her immobile. She'd initiated this kiss, but he took control of it.

His aggressive behavior made her panties wet. His fingers twisted in her hair, and she moved, tugged against it. Not to get away, but because she knew he'd grip her harder, demand more. And she couldn't stop herself from needing that.

What the hell was happening to her? The fear came back with such a vengeance she almost dropped her shields and called out for her sisters. Charlie Reese didn't know how close he'd come to finding out exactly why she didn't worry about her safety when she went to fight a fire. She beat against his chest with her hands and turned her face away from his kiss. He loosened his grip on her hair, but didn't let her back even an inch away.

"What do you think you're doing?" She did her best convey control, even though he held her hostage and she had to look straight up like a child to see his face.

He chuckled. The sound and movement of it tickled over and around and through her, and pissed her the hell off. About a thousand times better than fear, so she grasped the emotion like a life preserver, encouraged her fire to whip it to a frenzy.

"You've been kissed before." His voice was coolly calm. "I'd think you'd recognize the gesture."

It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway. "Yes, I've been kissed before."

Not the complete truth. She'd never been kissed like *that*. She'd never allowed it.

He moved his hand from the back of her head to the side of her face. His thumb drew along her cheek in a slow, intensely sexy caress. "You want me to kiss you."

She came pretty damned close to stomping her foot on his. The arrogant ass. She didn't because she would have hurt herself more than him. He wore heavy work boots in contrast to her thin-soled sandals. "I do not."

He lifted his eyebrows and ran his free hand over her stomach and then dipped his fingertips under the waistband of her low-slung jeans. She drew in a hard, gasping breath.

He wasn't holding her to him at all now, but she couldn't move away.

It was a tight fit, but his hand kept moving, and even when she squeaked in protest didn't stop until his wide palm cupped her lace-covered sex. Her eyes popped open wide in shock, in indignation, and mostly because his touch sent a sudden and very wet rush of desire through her.

"Oh," he said. "You definitely do."

He tilted his head. She knew him well enough to know that if she told him she didn't want him, he'd take his hands off her immediately. She welcomed the return of a modicum of personal power the knowledge brought with it.

Charlie had a hard edge to him. That, at least partly, was what drew her to him like a moth to a flame. Sometimes she felt like she was all edge, and nothing finely honed either. Rough and raw, not polished like her sisters.

She worked so damned hard at convincing everyone around her that she wouldn't

break. Charlie wasn't any different. Hell, two minutes ago—two hours ago? She'd lost track of time—he'd tried to convince her to be a desk jockey. She didn't go for men like him. Ever. Charlie was an alpha dog with a capital D who would never see her as anything more than a little girl playing fireman.

"Stop it, Charlie. I mean it." She bit hard on her inner cheek to stop the moan of disappointment when his hand moved away from her. He rubbed his fingers together, slick with the evidence of just how much she wanted him.

"Do you fight everything? Or is it just me?"

She took a step back and fisted her hands at her sides to stop from pressing them against the parts of her he'd left aching and desperately needy. "Do you grope all your employees, or is it just me?"

"You aren't my employee, Ena."

She looked at the ceiling, searching for patience. It wasn't hiding in the popcorn-textured tiles. "Fine. Do you always grope your *colleagues*, or did I win the lottery?"

"I've never had a colleague who smelled as good as you do." He didn't reach for her, had relinquished his hold on her. So why was she still standing rooted in front of him, her pussy swollen and creamy with need, her breasts full and achy, even her skin screaming for his touch? "I've sure never had one that made me want to fuck them up against the wall before."

That visual nearly did her in. She glared at him, trying to muster up enough anger to walk away, and found she had more toward herself than him.

Later she'd blame whatever happened here on her nature. That way she'd be able to sleep tonight. Ena held the element of fire inside her, and while her sisters had long ago mastered their gifts, she still struggled every single day with every single emotion, every desire, amplified by the heat in her blood.

When the urges got too strong, she found a man to ease them. A man content to let her take what she needed, often one who wanted nothing more than to please her. Some of them even got off on her using them and leaving them.

But while there was something to be said for cracking the whip, she'd never left those occasional encounters with any satisfaction beyond the temporary damping of the constant need living inside her.

She wanted more, always more, and somehow she knew Charlie offered it to her. And that she wouldn't be the one holding the whip this time. She lifted her chin, forced her spine to tighten, and winced at the sudden twinge of pain in her injured abominable muscles. Her insides felt like Jell-o.

"How badly did that shovel hurt you?" His voice was low, the tone deep and smooth. Before she could answer, Charlie lifted the hem of her t-shirt and exposed her bruised stomach. He sucked in a hard breath through his teeth. "Goddamn it, what the hell was he thinking?"

Ena tugged her top back down. "Ross was doing his job. I got in his way."

"Ena." His voice was soft, held too much concern. Too much emotion. He clenched his fists and she had the absurd desire to use her fingers to open them. To put his hands on her skin. She stopped herself.

"I'm not a child, Charlie. I'm a firefighter, the same as you or anyone else on the team. Occasional injury comes with the territory."

He raked one hand through his dark hair and a low, dangerous growl filled the room.

“Not for you. Not on my watch.”

Ena sighed. “Look, big guy. Some girls might swoon when you flex those muscles and make them think you’ll take care of them. But I’m a woman, and I can take care of myself. All you’re doing is pissing me off.” A half-smile replaced his scowl, and it occurred to Ena too late that he liked her pissed off. “If you need me, I’ll be trying to catch some sleep before we’re up again.”

\*

Charlie watched Ena’s round ass sashay as she walked away from him. Son of a bitch. He could not want her this much. But he did. And more. She opened the door and nearly collided with a woman standing on the other side. Charlie lifted his eyebrows when Ena turned back to him, and incredibly his cock went even harder at the idea that Gloria Parker had nearly walked in on him fingering Ena’s tight little pussy.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Gloria owned Ember, Inc. She was both his boss and Ena’s. Her husband had built the business decades earlier, and Gloria had taken over when he died. Ember, Inc. employed and trained firefighters to work on government contracts, or for logging companies who needed controlled burns to ward off the chance of wildfire.

“Ena. I’m glad you’re here.” She gave a strange look to Charlie, and for a heart-stopping second, he was sure she knew what they’d been up to. Ena’s musky arousal seemed to fill the air. “I need to speak to both of you.”

Ena came back into the room, studiously avoiding Charlie. She had worked for Gloria for five years, and had a much easier rapport with the woman than he did. She perched on the edge of a desk, and Charlie smiled when he heard the tiny gasp as the movement brought the seam of her tight jeans up against her crotch.

She was turned on. *He* had turned her on.

“Ena, I’m sorry to do this to you, but I’m going to have to pull you out of the field.”

Charlie blinked, pulled abruptly out of his sexual thoughts. He’d been trying to convince her to stay out of the field himself, but to have her yanked by the boss sent a sympathetic streak of anger through him. “What’s going on, Gloria?”

Gloria kept her gaze on him, careful to avoid Ena, who was now seething behind her. He lifted an eyebrow when Ena made eye contact with him. “I’m sorry, but it has to be done.”

“Has to be done? What the hell are you talking about?” Ena hopped off the desk and came around to stand next to Charlie so the older woman was forced to look at her.

“I’m sorry, honey. It can’t be avoided. It’s an issue of liability.”

“Liability?” Anger actually came off Ena in waves. Charlie felt her vibrate with it.

“Liability? I’ve passed the same fitness tests as the men. I’ve never been hurt on the job.”

Gloria finally looked down at Ena. “You were today.”

Ena spun and suddenly her fury was focused squarely on him. He backed away, hands in front of him in surrender. “What the fuck have you done?”

“Ena. That’s enough.” Gloria put her hand on Ena’s arm. “This isn’t Charlie’s fault.”

“I can’t do my job from a desk, Gloria. I can’t.”

Gloria took a breath and then squeezed Ena’s arm. Charlie knew what she was going to say before she said it, and wished desperately, for Ena’s sake, that he could stop her.

“Then you can’t do your job at all. It’s up to you, honey.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Gloria shrugged one narrow shoulder. "It's my decision, Ena. I'm sorry if it hurts you."

\*

All the air had been sucked out of the room. What other explanation could there be for why Ena couldn't draw a breath? Charlie was so close to her, just inches behind her, and even as her mind reeled with Gloria's words, her damned hormones stood on edge and took notice of him. "I don't understand. Everyone gets hurt on the job now and then."

"You're an invaluable part of this company. We'll talk later, but for now I want you to stay out of the field."

Ena bit hard at her inner cheek to keep from doing or saying something that would get her outright fired. Her team would be going out again for their next shift in six hours, and she couldn't stand the thought of being left behind. And not only because she had an insatiable urge to be in the thick of things. She couldn't keep them safe if she was chained to a desk.

Gloria waited through a couple of heartbeats, and then turned and walked out of the room without another word. Ena's chest was tight, and she teetered on the brink of tears. Tears, for God's sake. She didn't cry. Ever.

"Ena." Charlie's voice held compassion. She wanted to rip his eyes out.

"Don't 'Ena' me. *You* did this."

He took a half step back. Smart male. "Me?"

"Yes, you." She glared up at him. "Everyone gets hurt now and then."

"I've been in here with you practically since we got back."

"Then how did she know?"

"I don't know. But it wasn't from me."

Ena closed the gap between them and shot him her best nasty-bitch look. "It better not have been."

Charlie took her chin in his hand and tilted her head back even further. Something changed in his face, subtle but undeniable. "Or what? I didn't file a report on your injury, but only because I haven't had time."

She tried to take a step back, but he wrapped his free hand around her waist and pulled her tight against him instead.

"You wouldn't have filed one for any other member of the team."

"When any other member of the team gets hurt, it doesn't make my heart break." He bent and placed a kiss on the tip of her nose. She opened her mouth to protest, and he took that moment to cover it with his.

Anger and confusion and insane desire all warred for dominance inside her. Charlie backed her against the big teacher's desk piled with his work, and cradled her between his strong thighs. Fuck this. She wanted him. She needed some sort of release or she was going to hurt someone.

She knew who'd told Gloria that she'd been injured. Wren, or Moira, or Blair. One of them had an itchy dialing finger and probably hadn't even waited until they knew she was okay before ringing Gloria up.

And Gloria probably hadn't even wondered how her sister had known she was hurt before her captain could even make a report.

She pushed all of them out of her mind and kissed Charlie back, her hands sliding down his chest and working at his shirt buttons. He let go of her waist and her face and

grabbed her wrists, forced them against the desk and held them there.

A small change in position, but a massive change in dynamics. She couldn't move, her body trapped by his, and instead of making her claustrophobic, or even pissed off, she felt a hard clenching in her belly, her nipples tightened, and her panties caught the brunt of a rush of wet desire.

He looked down at her, his eyebrows lifted at whatever he saw in her face. He released her wrists, but when she started to move her hands he slammed his hands over them again. "Leave them there."

His voice was a low growl that sent an arc of electricity through her. He moved his hands again, and this time she left hers on the desk. Thick, rough fingers slid under the hem of her t-shirt and spread wide over her belly, pushing the soft fabric up so the undersides of her lace-covered breasts were exposed.

Her breath caught as this thumbs brushed against her tender flesh. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you're an adrenaline junkie."

"Adrenaline junkie?" He pulled her top up further. Her nipples were hard and the light touch of this thumbs over their rough covering had her sucking in a hard breath.

"We might both end up benched if Gloria decides to come back."

Charlie's thumbs stopped and it was all Ena could do to keep her disappointment silent. He looked over his shoulder at the unlocked door, and then let her top fall back to her waist. He grabbed one of her wrists and pulled her with him toward the exit.

"Where are we going?"

He kissed her again, one hand on the back of her head and the other holding her hand behind her back. Her mouth opened to the pressure of his tongue against her lips and liquid heat nearly brought her to her knees. He pushed his hand inside her jeans again, and under her panties this time. Hard and hot against her soaked pussy. One thick finger slid inside her and she couldn't stop a moan. When he finally pulled back, he looked down at her with those intense green eyes. "Somewhere I can make love to you properly."

Her eyebrows shot up into her hairline, and even though she was about as far from a prude as it was possible to get, she felt an insane urge to tell him that she wasn't that kind of girl. Why did he have to say 'make love' instead of something cruder, like 'fuck' or 'use?' If he had, she could have kneed him in the balls and been done with it. The idea he wanted to make love to her was almost more than she could bear. "Is that right?"

"Goddamn it, Ena. I need you. Are you going to make me beg? I don't mind taking you here, and Gloria or whoever else comes by can go to hell. I want you in a bed."

She saw in his face that he wasn't lying. Not only was the fire that always smoldered just under her surface intensifying her own sharp, almost painful desire for him—she was picking up the vibes he gave off in waves and her body added those to her heat as well.

Two choices. Let him take her away and use her until both of them were satisfied, or leave immediately and pray to every goddess in the book that she could keep herself under control. Because if she didn't, she'd be giving some poor unsuspecting man a ride he might not survive. And soon. "Fuck."

He cupped one full, aching breast, squeezing the swollen peak until she moaned shamelessly. "I know you want this, Ena. I need to hear you say it."

"Charlie." She heard the warning in her voice, and wasn't sure what she was warning him against. She did want this. She needed it. Being afraid never sat well with her, and

she raised her chin against the fear that threatened to override all the rest of her crazy emotions. “I want it.”



### Chapter Three

The tiny Nevada town only had two motels, and Charlie's truck would be visible to anyone driving by. Parked in front of room 125.

Not that spending his down time getting laid was a major scandal. The need to release pent-up adrenaline through sex was hardly a new concept amongst men in his line of work. Assignments in Northern Nevada were favorites to some of the men, because the local brothels always offered firemen specials.

The need to protect Ena, however, ran deep. He ushered her quickly into the room with his hand on the curve at the small of her back that felt designed for just that purpose. Let whoever had the time on their hands to identify trucks in motel parking lots think he was fucking a local slut. But he wouldn't have tongues wagging about Ena.

She stood in the middle of the dingy little room as he locked the door and looked up at him with her stormy eyes. Every time he saw her out of gear, it appalled him that she was allowed to be in the field doing work most men couldn't. At the moment, in her low slung jeans with her t-shirt landing just above her navel, her nipples poking out begging to be sucked, she was beyond beautiful. Beyond feminine. Even though he'd never had her, everything in him demanded that she belonged to him.

"Come here, Ena."

He saw her tense, and wondered if she'd bolt. Her small, constant resistance made him hard as iron whenever he was near her. Because under it he sensed her need to submit, deep where he suspected even she didn't see it. She tried so hard to cover it with her hard glare and her difficult behavior. But a step toward him, and her teeth biting into her bottom lip gave her away.

He waited with more outward patience than he felt inside. She squirmed. Christ, he needed her to come to him, to obey this one request. She took another step, and his cock stiffened. Just one more step.

She took it, her face tilted back to look at him so that red gold waves tumbled nearly to her waist. *Good girl*. His mouth crushed hers. She moaned against his lips and his balls tightened painfully.

He wanted to shove her jeans down her round hips and fuck her where they stood. She was small enough, he could lift her, slide her pussy down his shaft. She'd be tight, and wet, and holy shit did he need to be inside of her.

But she looked so damned vulnerable. And he knew—*knew*—she didn't do vulnerability well. She had an almost pathological need to be strong. She was a precious gift, and if he unwrapped her carefully and found her core, maybe he'd find a way to keep her for himself. That part of her she never showed, never gave away. She would give it to him.

He didn't let himself consider that he'd never wanted to have a woman belong to him before. He'd never needed anyone the way he needed Ena Shannon.

"Charlie?" She looked up at him and gave even more than he'd asked for. She raised her arms over her head.

A shot of desire arched through his belly as he lifted her soft cotton t-shirt, leaving her clad in a white lace bra that barely contained firm breasts that were more lush than

he'd expected. And jeans so low cut the soft curve of her lower belly pointed him toward his prize.

He cupped the back of her head and pulled her closer, holding her mouth immobile so he could sweep his tongue inside. Her small, deft fingers worked at his shirt buttons.

"I've wanted you for a long time, Ena." He pulled his head back, but still held hers at an angle that pleased him. He'd seen her work, knew her strength, and felt humbled when she lowered her eyes in a tiny, almost imperceptible show of submission.

*Was it a show of submission?*

Her long dark lashes swept against her cheeks, her fingers spread under his shirt, seeking his skin. He'd thought he needed her to give him that sign, that small giving in, but when her fingertips brushed across his small flat nipples and brought a moan up from somewhere deep inside, he realized it didn't matter.

Whatever she had to give would be more than enough.

"So beautiful." He brushed loose strands of hair from her face, brought her gaze up to his eyes. "Will you let me see you?"

She looked up, her brows furrowed. "I'm right here."

"All of you, Ena." By leaving off the word please, he tried to keep the pleading out of his request, but was unsuccessful. Her mouth turned up into a slow, sexy smile and she thumbed open the button that sat well below her belly button.

\*

Ena was losing her mind. Clearly. She wasn't used to wanting the men she fucked. To needing to please. But goddess, she needed to please Charlie Reese. Needed to show him she might be small, and sometimes difficult, but she could be what he needed.

*Why? Why did she need that so badly?*

She slipped out of her shoes, and then eased down her zipper and wiggled out of her blue jeans, kicking them away to puddle on the floor. After her shower, for no particular reason except a sudden need to feel pretty, she'd put on the only set of non-utilitarian undergarments she'd brought with her on this trip... A white lace demi bra and matching boy shorts cut high on her hips to show off her ass cheeks.

Charlie's eyes gave away his approval, and Ena felt another surge of power. She couldn't imagine leading this man the way she did the men she picked up when she needed release. But she could control him. He wanted her badly enough to give her some control.

A tiny flare of disappointment startled her. Where the hell did that come from?  
"Your turn."

Charlie raised his eyebrows, and Ena suddenly had the feeling he was indulging her. Could he read her so easily? He pulled his open shirt over his broad shoulders and then tugged a clean white t-shirt over his head. Ena actually swayed. She spent her life surrounded by firefighters, men in top physical condition. But Charlie was something else. Broad, bronzed, chiseled like a fire god.

She ran her fingers over the bristle of crisp curls on his lower stomach and leaned forward to flick her tongue over one nipple until it hardened. She liked making him respond, it sent a rush of wet heat between her legs.

"What kind of girl are you used to, Charlie?" She looked up at him, her fingers working on his jeans, freeing him of their confinement.

He laughed. The vibration of it sent electricity through her. "Not girls like you, Ena."

She frowned as she tried to work out his statement. Not girls like her? “You like pretty girls then. Girlie girls.”

He pulled back sharply, but held her close to him with one big hand on her bare back. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, right. Especially when I’m covered in soot.”

“Yes, especially then. And when you’re cleaned up and you’ve put on slutty underwear that have no place in the field.” He ran his thumb along the waistband of her panties, just above her pubic bone. “You brought them for me, didn’t you?”

She thought about lying. And then found she couldn’t. “Yes.”

“I like them.” He tossed a couple of condoms from his pocket onto the bed, and then stepped out of his jeans so that he wore only a pair of blue boxers. His cock was obviously large, and very hard. Hard for her. “I would like it very much if no other man saw them.”

Her turn to laugh. “You’re the jealous type?”

“Yes.” He brushed his mouth over hers, spoke against her lips. “I am, actually.”

She pushed against his chest. He didn’t let her loose, but he did straighten up. “As if you’re a virgin.”

“Not the first, Ena.” His cock brushed against her belly and stole her breath. “But the last. The last is the most important.”

“That’s asking a lot isn’t it?” Ena felt a twinge of panic. This was supposed to be a screw—a release, and maybe something to get him out of her system. *The last?*

“Just for these panties. I won’t like to think of another man seeing them on you.”

A rush of something confusing, relief mixed with something deeper, flowed over her. Disappointment? It couldn’t be that. “I’ll give them to you. For those long lonely nights in tent city.”

He choked on a bark of laughter and the tension broke. He pulled her into a tight embrace. “I’m taking you up on that.”

“Perv.”

“Maybe.” He reached between them and ran his fingers along the edges of her bra cups, eased the lace aside so that she was exposed, framed by the delicate white fabric. “Christ, you have beautiful breasts.”

She looked down, watched his big hands possessing her, felt the arc of heat between her breasts and her pussy, and bit down hard on her bottom lip to keep from crying out. He bent his head and took one nipple between his lips, grazed it with his teeth. And just when she thought he was going to release it, bit down harder until she couldn’t contain her yelp.

“That’s better. I need to hear you, Ena.” He rolled her other nipple between his fingers, and alternated between sharp bites and soft laps of his tongue. He heard her alright. She would be surprised if they didn’t hear her moans back in tent city.

Every sensation he brought out in her was heightened by her magic. The sparks of pain were livewires of sensation. The soft caresses nearly brought tears to her eyes. She picked up on his energy as well, and felt it mix with the heat always brewing in her blood.

He got them both completely naked, then backed her up against the bed and lowered her to it, his heavily-muscled body aggressive as he crowded her. But he cradled the back of her head with one hand. Protected her in a heartbreaking show of tenderness she had

no idea he possessed.

The element of fire had been with her since birth. In childhood it manifested itself in spectacular temper tantrums and a tendency toward violent emotions she still struggled to contain. Once she'd reached maturity, her hormones had kicked into the mix.

She'd never wanted to commit to a man. Never even once. So when her constant sexual tension reached critical mass, she sought out a certain kind of lover. A man happy to let her use him for what she needed, who wouldn't kick up much of a fuss when she had nothing more to offer.

She was hardly a blushing virgin. But, for the first time, as Charlie covered her body with his, as his weight pressed her against the cheap mattress, she was with a man before her need reached that breaking point. The difference was startling.

She wanted him. Not just any cock filling her, stretching her, easing the fire temporarily. Him. Charlie. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her legs around his hips, and pulled him into a harder kiss.

He lifted himself from her, and she actually whimpered. Whimpered. The sound infuriated her. "What are you doing?"

He threw her earlier question back at her. "What kind of men are you usually with, Ena?"

She squirmed under him, but he held her tight in the cradle of his strong body. She'd opened herself to him and now he didn't let her take it back. "Men who give me what I need."

He used one hand to smooth her hair from her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"Who let me..." She was supremely irritated by her inability to just tell him what she meant. What she needed. And so she made herself do it to prove she could. "Obedient men."

His amusement rumbled through him, and because so much of her was in direct contact with him, through her as well. Damn him. "I am not an obedient man, Ena."

She managed to get her hands between them and pushed against the immovable wall of his chest. What she'd meant as a demand to be set free turned into an exploration of his incredible pectoral muscles. Fuck. "Yes. I caught that."

He moved his hips and for an agonizing moment the thick crown of his cock was poised against her entrance. She hissed out an agonized breath. He lifted a curious eyebrow and moved again. The wide, blunt head butted against her clit until she thought she might scream in frustration. The bastard lowered his mouth to one hard nipple and clamped his teeth against the swollen, tender flesh, applying pressure until she was breathless with need.

"Christ. Ena." He reached one hand between them, sending sparks over her skin, until he cupped her sex. "You're so damn wet."

\*

Charlie bit her again, his hand still on her pussy, and then released her nipple and moaned against her neck as a rush of heat drenched his hand. Obedient men? This woman was a submissive waiting to happen.

If the small, sharp pain of his teeth on her nipple made her slick with desire, what would clamps do to her? Or a spanking? As often as she pissed him off, he was certain he'd know someday soon.

For now, he just needed to be inside her. And clearly she needed him there. She

clawed at his back, and dug into his thighs with her heels as she lifted her hips as much as he'd allow.

How ironic that he felt so determined to have Ena. To demand more from her than he'd ever asked of any other woman, when she was used to fucking *obedient men*.

He tore at a foil packet with his teeth, and managed to get a condom on before he positioned his aching, throbbing cock against her opening again. When her fingers tightened in his hair and she tried to lift her hips, he held still. "Let me take you, Ena."

"Then do it!" She hissed the words. Her musk filled his nose and drove him wild.

He moved again, sucking a harsh breath through his teeth as the head of his cock pushed into her tight sheath. She clawed at his back, drawing blood he thought, and he stopped again. "Ena."

She made a small noise, and lifted her hands from his shoulders to grab the headboard behind her. Whoever had decided to put beds with iron bars running along their tops in this motel was a genius.

God help him, his cock twitched deeper into her of its own accord. Silk ties, next time. Her wrists bound to the bed if that was what it took to help her relax and give herself to him.

He slid deeper into her. Her head tilted back and exposed her long, slender neck. He kissed it as he entered her more fully, sucking at her sweet, soft skin. She smelled so damn good. And her small inner muscles gripped at him, resisting as he pulled back slightly.

She was more than hot. She was fire, nearly burning him as he drove into her deep and hard. He'd been with submissive women nearly all his adult life, but something about Ena's every small show of deference nearly undid him.

The gift of her obedience was more precious because it didn't come easily to her. She let him set their pace, and even that little bit of giving, and her incredibly wet response to it, was a prize.

Even as he took her, he knew he was in big trouble. Had he thought this would be casual? He'd fallen hard for Ena, for the first time in his life wanting a woman for his own. His. Every movement claimed her. He would not be able to let her go. Ever.

Her breath caught, and he looked down at her, not changing the insistent, demanding thrusts into her. "Don't come yet, Ena. Not yet."

\*

Goddess, the man was a sadist. She clenched harder at the narrow metal headboard bars and gritted her teeth, pushing her next words out between them. "I have to."

"Not yet, baby." His thick shaft dragged across her clit and she wanted to insist that he fuck her harder, that he break the wave of her climax immediately. Sooner. Demand that he give her what she needed.

Instead she clung to the headboard like a lifeline and planted her feet hard against the mattress. What was happening to her? He said 'not yet' and all she could do was grit her teeth and hold on tight to her self-control.

She needed to please him. To show him she could be what he needed. It terrified her. She didn't need anyone. Not even her sisters, no matter what they thought. Even now she felt them in her mind, pressing against the wall she'd thrown up. Keeping them out of her head and holding back the rush of her impending orgasm was almost more than she could handle.

Almost. Somehow Charlie's weight, just his presence, gave her strength. Because *she* could control herself, but she felt *him* shaking on top of her, saw his jaw clench as he thrust his cock deep. Goddess, so deep. He was losing control.

"Good girl." He whispered the words against her neck, his weight supported on one arm, his free hand twisted in her hair. The words buried themselves inside her, and for the first time in her life, Ena loosened her death grip on the fire swirling nearly out of control inside her.

Instead of igniting the both of them, and taking the entire damn motel down as well, her heat arched between them, knitting a web that tied him to her. She moaned, the word 'no' whispering from her over and over. She wasn't ready for this. Not ready. Not close.

"Now. Come, baby. Come for me, Ena."

Her body obeyed. Immediately, hard and raw. Her climax crashed against her, the web grew tighter, and for just one bright moment the terrible fire she'd never been without for any other minute of twenty-five years passed to him.

His eyes opened wide, and she finally released the headboard and wrapped her arms around him as he pressed deep into her and convulsed as he came.

For an irrational heartbeat she hated the thin layer of latex that kept him from filling her with his seed.

He rolled off her and tugged her tight against his body. Hot to the touch, so hot. Had she hurt him? She took his fevered face in her hands, searching. He breathed hard, taking air into his lungs as her fire returned to her.

"What the hell was that?" His voice was thick, and a deep shiver ran through his body into hers.

"Magic." She curled against him, his strong arms around her. Nothing even remotely like this had ever happened to her. She should get the hell out of there so she could process it, but even the idea of leaving him was appalling.

\*

Charlie couldn't have let go of Ena if his life depended on it. Magic. He'd felt himself burning from the inside out, like a focused bolt of electricity as he came. It came from her. Even now, his body hair stood on end. His heart beat so hard he pressed her head against his chest in an effort to still it.

His. *She was his*. No one else would ever come close to being enough. Even completely spent, the longing to be inside her again was building. He barely gave her room to breathe, probably held her too tight, but she didn't complain and he couldn't seem to figure out how to let her go.

He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until his telephone woke him. Ena was curled against him, her breath soft against his chest, her silky hair flowing over both of them. He reached to the floor for his jeans, and the phone in the pocket, slowly. More anxious not to wake her than to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Where the hell are you?" Ross Wright's voice was stern, all business, and Charlie disentangled himself from Ena. She murmured and rolled over, sitting halfway up, instantly alert.

"What's up?"

"Another fire. Goddamn it. Have you seen Ena?"

He looked at her, and couldn't help smiling. Her hair was mussed, her lips kiss-

swollen, her eyes sleepy. "I'll find her."

There was a moment's hesitation on Ross's end, and Charlie waited to see if he'd have some smart-ass comment. "Hurry."

Charlie closed his phone and leaned over, covering Ena's mouth with his. She responded so naturally, her lips parting, a small noise coming from her throat. He wanted to taste her pebbled nipples. Instead he straightened. "There's a fire. We need to go."

She stood up, instantly all business. "Where?"

He yanked on his jeans, his eyes never leaving her as she slid her slender legs into her jeans and then fastened her bra behind her back. "No panties?"

She smiled, her tongue darting out over her full bottom lip, and bent to pick up the scrap of lace. She tossed it to him. "They're yours, remember?"

The jeans hugged her, a perfect snug fit. Nothing came between Ena and her Levi's, and the idea of that tight seam sliding against her bare, still-wet pussy was almost too much to take. "Fuck."

"Later." She pulled on her t-shirt and then stood on her toes and kissed him.

\* \* \* \*

Ena burned with frustration. Her gear sat in a pile next to her. Useless. Gloria would not budge. Not an inch. "I need to be out there."

"I'm sorry, darling. I can't let you. You'll work here, and stay in radio contact with the team." Gloria seemed distracted, her usual put-together demeanor showing some odd cracks that Charlie had distracted Ena too much to notice earlier. Like her normally perfectly coiffed hair looking like she hadn't pulled a brush through it in a couple of days. And the lack of her ever-present soft coral lipstick.

"I'm at least going to ride down there with them. I'll stay out of the line of fire, I swear. But I need to—"

Gloria put up a small, manicured hand to stop her. "If you get hurt, John will never forgive me."

*Ena?* She hadn't realized she'd reached out unconsciously to her sisters until she heard Wren in her head.

*Something's wrong with Gloria.*

She immediately felt all three of her sisters in her head, a little elemental witch posse poised to encase Ena in a bubble of rain and wind and earth if need be. She hated that everyone always wanted to protect her. Especially her sisters, who insisted on treating her like an infant. She was the youngest, but that didn't make her a child. And damn it, she had more control over her magic than any of them gave her credit for.

She had a brief, intense flash back to the web her magic had built between her and Charlie, and the incredible feeling of him taking the fire from her even for just that one moment. He was her anchor. The idea was awe-inspiring.

*Oh, snap!* Wren's voice held an incredibly irritating amusement. *Who is Charlie?*

*None of your business!* She slammed the door on that train of thought, at least to the point her sisters couldn't intrude. Her twin sister Sabine, dead at childbirth, should have been her anchor. Ena had resolved herself to never having one.

*He's your mate?* Blair's question was softly spoken, and somewhat in wide-eyed awe. If a voice could be wide-eyed.

*Focus girls. Gloria, remember?*

“Ena, I’m not kidding. I can’t have you running around out there getting hurt.”

“I’ve been running around out there for five years. I’ve never been hurt beyond minor bumps and bruises. Even less than the men. I’m always careful.”

Gloria ran her long fingernails through her less-than-perfectly styled blonde hair and Ena was momentarily stunned into silence by the uncharacteristic gesture.

“John wouldn’t ever forgive me if something happened to you.”

*John?* Wren’s voice had lost its joking edge when Gloria repeated her irrational claim.

Gloria and John Temple had taken Ena under their wings when she’d insisted on becoming a firefighter, despite considerable family pressure against the move. John had died of lung cancer three years ago.

“Gloria, are you feeling okay?”

Gloria shook her head. “I’m fine. Ride with your team if you feel like you have to. But stay off the line, Ena. That’s an order.”

Gloria stalked out of the room and Ena watched her with a slack jaw. *What the hell?* Between Gloria’s weirdness and Charlie’s heat, her mind was reeling.

*I want you out of there, Ena.* Wren’s tone inside Ena’s head was surprisingly stern. *Come home.*

As the keeper of the magic of air, Wren had an unusual ability to pick up on emotions. Even once removed, she’d been able to feel Gloria’s distress more clearly than Ena did standing right in front of her. It startled Ena that Wren was worried enough about Ena being near Gloria to summon her back to San Francisco.

*Are you being overprotective?*

*We aren’t overprotective, Ena. What kind of sisters would we be if we didn’t care—*

She cut out the rest of that speech. She’d heard it before. *I’m out.*

*Who is Charlie, Ena?*

*None of your business.* She heard Blair and Moira rumbling for answers as well and shut them down as quickly as she could. *Yours either. I’ll talk to you about him later. Not yet.*

*You gave him your fire?*

That was Blair. The sister closest in age to her, and most in tune to her. Fuck. *Later, Blair. I promise.*

When she worked out how she hadn’t given Charlie her fire. He’d taken it.

Ena slammed her wall back up, scooped up her gear, and ran out of the room to catch up to Charlie before he took off with the team.

He paced outside. Waiting for her. “So?”

It occurred to her that it didn’t matter. She’d have gone with them no matter what Gloria had to say about it. Sending Charlie into a fire without her was absolutely unthinkable. “Let’s go.”

The fire was twenty miles away, down a bumpy, desolate country road. Ena’s throat hurt from the smoke of yesterday’s fire. She hadn’t slept enough and she was cranky. Charlie drove, and she bounced along beside him, resolutely on her side of the vehicle.

“Come to me, Ena.”

The same words. The words that drew her like a damned magnet. “No.”

He reached for her, and she felt an irritated burst of gratitude. “Please?”

She sighed and unbuckled her seatbelt, slid closer to him. Close enough so he could



wrap his arm around her waist and bring her the rest of the way. The web of magic that had been knitted between them glowed, and as she rested her chin against his arm, grew even stronger.

Damn.

"We need to talk about this, Ena." He turned his head so he spoke the words into her hair.

"I know."

Smoke was already visible ahead of them, a thick black column rising out of the shrubby high desert. With a heavy heart, Ena tasted accelerant. Kerosene. The fourth arson in the area in the past week.

"This afternoon was..."

"This is arson." Ena cut him off. She *knew* what this afternoon was. She'd been there.

"How do you know?"

And here we came to why she never allowed herself to get involved with her lovers.

Charlie deserved to know what she was. Trying to tell herself she'd be able to walk away from him was worse than futile. Nature liked order, and her magic had recognized its mate and tied them neatly. Like two halves of a whole.

And there was the small issue of him being her anchor. Her fire transferring to him. That had been—she nearly gasped as an aftershock of that intensity ran through her.

But how was she going to explain? *Charlie, I'm a witch.* "I just do."

He looked down at her, his eyes darkening for a moment. Suspicion. And she couldn't even blame him. But she'd been with him all afternoon. Sleeping against the hard protection of his body. He'd put his leg over hers in a disarmingly possessive gesture just before she drifted off.

"I didn't start the fires, Charlie."

"I know that." He tightened his hold on her, his thumb brushing the curve of her breast. "There has to be some reason you'd say its arson."

They were coming to a staging area, the other trucks parking. Ena moved back to her side of the truck before Charlie pulled in next to them.

*Ena, don't even think about it.* Wren. Followed by Moira hot on her heels. *Is he your mate? Are you sure? Oh, goddess...you did it with him!*

*For fuck's sake. Leave me alone. This is my job. You don't see me telling you how to do yours!*

*We can't lose you, Ena.* Blair.

*Go away! You're going to get me hurt by breaking my concentration.*

Blair laughed in her head, a sweet, light musical sound. *I don't think it's us breaking your concentration. He's pretty damned hot.*

*We should have all been firefighters.* Moira giggled in Ena's head. Nails on a chalkboard.

*I'm so glad you approve. Good bye.*

She slammed her walls back up. They'd be back if she really was in danger, or hurt. Her instinct to call to her sisters in those times was too strong. She'd been wholly unsuccessful in training herself not to do it. Her only consolation was that none of them had learned to control their need to reach out in need either.

All of them had mastered their crafts during adolescence. She was the youngest. But

her element was also the most volatile. In all of the many generations of Shannon witches behind them, the fire and spirit witches were twins. Anchoring each other. Sabine had died and taken Ena's anchor with her.

Wren, Blair, and Moira were never overwhelmed by their magic the way she was. None of them had the constant need for stimulation. None of them had goddamn fire burning in them that threatened to combust if she didn't find relief.

Ena pulled on her gear, tucking her thick hair under her helmet. Gloria would have her hide, but if Charlie was going in there—if any of her men were going in there—she had to protect them.

"Let's go." She strode toward Ross, who stood at his truck with a topographical map spread in front of him.

Charlie followed, and Ena did her best to put on a professional façade. The fire was raging to the northeast. According to the map, a small enclave of buildings—a ranch of some kind—was disturbingly close. The arsonist was escalating. Each fire had been set closer and closer to human occupation.

Ena knew that when they weren't in the field, some of the men talked about her. They riled at the deference given to her when it came to planning their missions. But here, where it counted, she had enough backers to keep the troublemakers at bay.

She lifted her head, tried to get whatever information she could about the fire from the air around her. Kerosene. The scent choked her. The fire was seven or eight miles away, to the northeast. They needed to build their moat on the other side of the blaze, between it and the ranch.

"We'll have to hoof it around this way, about seven miles, and then start digging here." She put her finger on the map, moved it several inches to the south. "And stop here."

"Seven fucking miles. Are you sure?" That was a tall, blond fireman with a constant scowl on his face. Ena had worked with him for three years, and still he questioned her every damn time.

"Very. We can drive in a little closer. Maybe make it five, just for you Hooch. Let's roll."

They piled back into their trucks, and Ena didn't even bother with her seatbelt this time. Charlie let the other trucks pull out first, and then waited for Ena to slide next to him before taking off. Insane. This gave Dating Hell an all-new perspective.

\* \* \* \*

The physical exertion required to hike five miles up a mountain with a fifty-pound pack on your back and a blazing wildfire at your front was barely enough to keep Charlie's thoughts on his work.

Ena stayed away from him, walking in the front of the pack. She always did. Always had something to prove. He supposed it wasn't her fault she possessed the sort of blatant femininity that brought out old-fashioned manners in men. Even now, he had to keep a stranglehold on his desire to offer to carry her pack. To insist she get her tail back to the trucks where she'd be safe.

Since he valued his balls fairly dearly, he kept his mouth shut.

Christ, but she did have an uncanny way with fire. How could she know from seven miles away where the fire was, that it was arson, and precisely the best way to fight it? It

made no sense.

Four hours after they started digging, the sun had set. Charlie and Ena were back in his truck, filthy, exhausted, but with the fire contained. A small airplane carrying a load of fire retardant flew over their heads. They'd saved the ranch. As always, the trench Ena had designated had been exactly what was needed.

"How do you do it?" He looked down at her. She'd rested her cheek against his arm, and he loved the connection. It felt right.

"Do what?"

"Know where to put a trench. Know what started a fire."

She lifted her head, and he immediately wished he'd kept his fool mouth closed. He liked her curled close to him. "I guess it's just my talent."

"There's talent, and then there's something else, Baby." She was something else.

She sighed and moved all the way back to her side of the truck. Damn. "I'm too tired to talk about it now. You can examine the inner workings of my mind later, okay?"

She was strong, but no amount of endurance could make up for the fact she weighed half of what her male counterparts did. He felt her drooping, even from across the bench seat. He didn't call her back to him, because it would be a battle of wills and he didn't have the heart or energy to make her struggle with herself.

Christ, if he was this tired, she must be on the edge of collapse.

"I'm taking us back to the motel." He didn't make it a question, because there was exactly zero chance he wasn't sleeping with her curled next to him tonight. They were off rotation for the next twenty-four. A mandatory break. He meant to spend it figuring out exactly what had happened between them.

And seeing if he could duplicate the phenomenon. Several times.

"You think that's a good idea? People will notice."

"People can kiss my ass. I need you, Ena." Fatigue was etched across her pretty face. "You need me, too."

\*

She did. Damn it to hell. She did need him. She leaned against the truck door and sighed. If she wasn't so damned worn out, maybe she could figure out how this had happened.

It was completely against the rules for her to have an affair with a co-worker. Especially her captain. Gloria would have her hide. Of course, she would anyway once she learned Ena had been in the field all day.

But that web. Charlie had worked near her all day. And apparently even him breathing the same air she did was enough to strengthen the bond her magic wove between them. She supposed she'd known she'd be mated eventually. But why was she first? None of her sisters were married and they were all older.

*Blair?* She reached out before she realized she was going to. Her heart immediately lightened when she heard her sister's voice.

*I'm here, honey.*

*I think I fell in love.* Ena hated the wistful tone of her thoughts. Absolutely loathed that she was sharing this decidedly un-Ena-like feeling with anyone, even her sister. Was she falling in love? Or was she just so damned tired, she'd mistaken lust for something deeper.

*Well, damn.* If Blair had laughed at her, Ena would have slammed closed their

connection and never forgiven her. Instead, she sounded a little perplexed. *Are you sure?*

*No. Not about anything. But I've never been with a man like him. He took my magic, Blair. Just for a second, but it was the first moment of real peace I've ever had.*

*Be careful, Ena.*

Ena broke the connection with her sister. *Be careful, Ena.* Christ, she hated those words. And it wasn't as if Blair would understand anyway. Her element didn't burn her alive from the inside.

## Chapter Four

Hot water sluiced over Charlie's body and the knots in his shoulder muscles began to release. Soot and dirt ran off him and down the drain. Nothing felt as good as getting clean after a full, hard day in the field.

Except perhaps having Ena Shannon open the shower curtain and slide into the water stream with him. They'd jumped through some convoluted hoops in an effort to avoid having her car parked next to his truck outside room 125. He'd stopped for his duffle, then she'd dropped him off at the motel and gone back in his truck for hers.

And now here she was. Naked. Glorious. Her face covered in soot, her body tense with fatigue and overexertion. He moved out of the way and let her get under the shower head. She was small enough, she didn't have to duck under it like he did. The water rained down on her from above and she arched her back, wetting her long hair, and sighed happily.

"That feels good." She kept her eyes closed and ran her hands over her face, sending rivulets of smoky water down her body. He was surprised to see that her shower routine was utilitarian. She scrubbed her hair and her body, rinsed. Nothing special. No fancy shampoos or curiously girlie routines.

And all the while, she didn't look at him. He leaned back against the tile wall and watched her. She moved as though he were a fixture in the shower. A life-sized man statue that was in her way, but of no consequence.

Finally, as she rinsed the last of the conditioner from her hair, she looked directly at him. He raised his eyebrows. "Hello."

"Hi." A faint blush rose up her cheeks. Damn. She was so fucking beautiful.

For some reason, it appealed to him immensely that she felt shy around him. He had no illusions she was a virgin before him, but her slight awkwardness meant she'd felt what he had earlier.

His body was thoroughly spent. Except that he had a raging hard on. He dragged Ena to him, kissed her perfect, pouting mouth. He breathed in her soft moan and grunted as his cock went even harder.

She melted into him, her slick, wet body pliant against him. Her hands, damned wicked little hands, slid down his belly and cupped his aching cock. She stroked him, her back arched so she could look up at him. Her gray eyes flashed with something like pleasure as she ran her fingers along his length.

Christ. Everything she thought showed on her face when her barriers were down. It made her happy that she made him hard. He drew a finger down her pinkened cheek. "I get hard whenever I'm near you, Ena."

She lifted her brow in surprise. "Is that right?"

She increased the pressure on his cock, her fingers tightened around the sensitive shaft until his knees went weak. He exhaled, took her wrists in his hands and turned her, pressing her into the wet tile wall. Covered her body with his. Caging her.

His cock slid between the perfect round globes of her ass and she shuddered against him. That was better. Much better. He leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "I'm too tired to take much time. But I'm going to make you come, Ena. I need to feel you come

with my cock inside you.”

\*

Ena’s whole body clenched with sudden, hard desire. His words, whispered against the shell of her ear, set her always constant inner heat on edge. “Charlie.”

The word came out a whimper, and she couldn’t even find it in her to be angry about that. She needed him. Now. Right this minute.

He pressed her against the cool, wet tiles and used his knee to open her. When she reached behind her to grab his hips, to try to force him where she needed him, he murmured something that sounded like censure and took both wrists in one big hand at the small of her back. His free hand went around her waist and held her just where he wanted her.

As soon as he had her immobile, her magic started to weave that web again. She actually felt the pull of it, connecting them.

Oh, God! This wasn’t happening.

But it was. And she had absolutely no desire to stop it. Even her fear made her wet. She was in an even more vulnerable, submissive position than before, and instead of making her want to kill him, it made her weak with need.

She felt a little weak all around, as a matter of fact. Exhausted. Beyond the ability to think, to do anything but feel. Feel Charlie. Only Charlie.

He entered her from behind. The thick, blunt head of his cock arrowed deep into her with one thrust and she cried out with the intensity of being filled so full, so fast. His large frame covered her, protected her, and with the next thrust she started to come apart.

The fire inside of her whipped around, taking hold of every emotion Charlie brought up in her and intensified it until tears streamed down her face. And then just when she was sure she couldn’t take another minute, just as her orgasm crested and she screamed into the wall in front of her—she felt peace. He anchored her, physically and magically.

Charlie grunted, but didn’t slow. His cock swelled inside her, his hands tightened on her wrists, and the whole front of her body was pressed against the wet tiles. She actually felt him come. Inside her. Panic edged through euphoria, but it was too late. It was likely that later she’d collapse in regret, but at the moment she *needed* his seed in her. Deep in her.

This wasn’t her. It wasn’t her. Her knees were weak enough that he had to catch her to keep her from sinking into the tub. His green eyes revealed as much confusion and intense emotion as she felt. He’d taken her magic again; he was probably brimming over with emotion.

“Ena.” He whispered her name. It sounded like a prayer.

She did the only thing she could do at this point. Held on to him. He wrapped his arms around her and kept her close to him until the water cooled and they were forced into action.

\*

He’d come inside her.

He’d never, not once in nearly twenty years of sexual activity, even been inside a woman without a condom. He was fastidious about protection, the legacy of parents who weren’t afraid to drum it home from an early age.

*You reap what you sow.* He’d know since pubescence that if he sowed his seed in a woman, and she caught pregnant, his life would be mapped out for him. And he’d never

been with a woman he was willing to make that kind of a commitment to.

Ena was swaying with exhaustion, but when they woke, they'd have to talk about this. Because right at this moment, his most overwhelming thought was that he *wanted* to reap what he'd sown. Needed to do something, anything, to tie Ena to him.

Both times he'd made love to her he'd ended up a fireball of emotion at the end. And she'd fallen into a boneless heap as though she'd never felt satisfaction before. He helped her into the bed and when he straightened to walk around, she gave a whimpering little noise and held on tight to his hand. Scooted over so he could lie next to her. Curl around her. Using his body as a shield, which was useless since there was no danger to her in this room.

Ena was asleep as soon as he had her wrapped in his arms. He lay awake for a while, just experiencing her breaths. Fuck. *Experiencing her breaths*? He tightened his hold on her.

As his eyes drifted closed, he promised himself he would make her talk to him tomorrow. Find out if she felt what he did.

\* \* \* \*

Ena woke sometime in the night. The pitch dark of the room was her first conscious sensation. And then the realization that her fire was back in full force. But somehow it felt more contained. Less wild.

Anchored.

And then Charlie's presence filled her senses. His clean, masculine scent. His bulky body crowded against her as if even in his sleep he was afraid she'd get away if he gave her an extra inch. As if protecting her from some unseen threat.

They were both naked, the blanket somewhere at the foot of the bed. Even in the high desert, August in Nevada was nearly unbearably hot. And having a furnace like Charlie nearly on top of her was heat enough. She turned, careful not to wake him, and sighed happily as he tucked her against him. Her hips against his groin, his legs curled behind hers, his chin on the top of her head.

She'd never slept with a man before. In fact, for all her supposed experience, there was so much she'd never done. Never had intimacy. Never cared much about who she was fucking. Certainly never felt such an overpowering need for as much bodily contact as possible. She'd been a wham-bam-thanks-man kind of girl.

Had she been proud of that? She'd thought so. Thought that actively refusing to fall in love, or even into an entanglement meant she was strong. Didn't need anyone. And now here she was. Entangled up to her eyebrows. And without even the ability to lie to herself about whether she wanted it or not.

Charlie snored lightly against her hair. She felt the rumble through his chest against her back. Intellectually, she'd known that when she found her mate—her man—her magic would recognize him. And upon the consummation of their relationship, an unbreakable web of magic would be woven between them.

Apparently, in Ena's case, he'd share the burden of her volatile element. And in the process, it would seem, give her the strength necessary to control it. For the first time ever, she didn't feel like she was trying to lasso a tornado inside of her.

Sabine had been the first Shannon spirit witch to die as an infant. Ena had no way of knowing her mate would be her anchor.

She needed Charlie. Her magic had irrevocably connected them. And now she had to figure out a way to tell him. This wasn't a secret that would last through a long-term relationship. And being a witch's mate was a long-term proposition in the extreme. Even if he tried to leave her, the web her magic wove would make him miserable.

Charlie murmured against her hair. She caught her name and smiled. Magic never made a bad match. They were perfectly suited for each other in every way. She hoped he knew it as well as she did.

She loved his skin against her, his breath brushing through her hair. His hand moved lower, from her waist to her belly and down until he cupped her sex. She moaned softly and threw one of her legs over his to open herself to his curious fingers.

"You're so wet, Ena." He bent his head and kissed her ear. Ran his tongue along the upper edge of it and sent a shiver of desire through her.

"You make me wet." Somehow, in the dark, it was easier to just feel and not try to analyze things. Turn her brain off and just let her body experience.

"You make me hard." He jutted his hips forward, and she felt the evidence of that statement against her bottom. "Turn to face me, baby."

She did, rolling even though it meant giving up his fingers exploring the wet folds of her pussy. He shifted as she turned so he was on his back; his hands went around her waist and he used the momentum of her movement to bring her over him. Straddling him.

She smiled down at him. This was what she was used to. A position of power. Of dominance. She lowered herself over him. His cock was large enough to stretch her, to make her feel very full as she used her weight to press him deep into her.

He spanned her waist with his hands, and even though he'd given her the upper hand, guided their pace. Slow. Deep. When she tried to move faster, he growled in warning and tightened his hold on her.

The moment she relaxed and let him take the lead, her magic started to flow between them and the effect was mind blowing. He gasped and she knew he felt it too.

She lost herself in the sensation of riding him, tilting her hips so his shaft dragged against her swollen clit. Right up until it occurred to her that he was inside her unprotected. Again. She leaned forward, grabbed the headboard bars above his head, and lifted until he left her body. She couldn't suppress a moan of frustration.

He held her still, looking up at her. "What are you doing?"

"We need a condom." She said it softly, not wanting to be a complete buzz kill.

His eyes went wide and he sat up, taking her with him so she was in his lap, straddling him. "Jesus. How could I forget again? Twice in one night? I'm sorry, baby."

The second condom he'd tossed on the nightstand that afternoon was still there, and he grabbed it. He started to open it, but she took it from him and slid backward off his lap so she knelt in front of him.

She knew why they kept forgetting and shuddered at the idea of having to tell him. It would not sit well with a man like Charlie to have anything take away even a small part of his will. Her magic wanted a baby, and now that it had recognized its mate, it meant to have one. They could, of course, use birth control. But they'd have to be more thoughtful about it than usual.

She opened the foil packet and rolled the thin sheath down Charlie's cock. He really had a beautiful penis. Thick, long, the head smooth and wide. He felt good inside her. Better than any man she'd ever had. They made a good fit.



He kissed her as she straddled him again and ran his hands down her inner thighs to her calves, bringing them around behind him. She lowered herself onto his cock and felt him stretching her as he leaned her back slightly and took one of her aching, swollen nipples into his mouth.

The increasing pressure of his lips, the pull of his mouth, drove Ena into a flurry of sexual tension. The sun was coming up, and with every nip of his teeth on her tender flesh, every deep plunge of his cock inside her, she saw him more clearly. She put her hands on either side of his face, ran her thumbs along his cheeks.

She didn't realize tears were falling down her cheeks until Charlie released her nipple and wiped them away. He didn't speak, thank every goddess, but pulled her tighter against him and turned, rolling so he was on top of her.

She needed this. Needed to feel the weight of his body. The pressure was exquisitely erotic, holding her nearly immobile as he took her. The position gave a new angle to his thrusts that made her gasp as waves of pleasure rolled over her.

\*

Charlie would never get enough of feeling Ena respond to him. Christ, she was so fucking sexy. He had a healthy sex drive, and he'd been with a lot of women. More than he ever wanted to admit to Ena. None of them had ever given themselves over to passion the way she did.

Her head thrown back, a lusty moan filling his senses, her legs opened wide for him.

For him.

Only him.

*His.*

His. Fuck.

He needed her. Every deep, hard thrust inside her brought out a kind of wild, animal instinct he couldn't have fought even if he wanted to.

And he didn't want to. He wanted to own her. Claim her. Mark her. Even as he had that thought, he realized he was biting her. His teeth sinking into her shoulder. And she tilted her head, whimpered. Offered herself. He fucked into her harder, pushing deep, dragging the heavy length of his cock against her swollen little clit, until she was shaking under him, clawing at his back.

"Come. Baby, come for me now." Her eyes flew open, and her lower body started to shake. He felt her sleek, strong inner muscles clenching, gripping him. Milking him. "Ah, God."

They came together. A mind-blowing experience, one he'd never had before. He poured into her, not only his semen, his soul. And somehow he took her into himself as well. His hips pistoned into her, pinning her to the bed, pushing hard, never slowing until he finally collapsed in an exhausted heap. He caught his weight on his elbow and moved just enough to the side to keep from smothering her.

She clung to him. Her arms around his neck, her leg around his waist. Her face buried against his neck. He was still inside her, and she pushed her hips up as if she couldn't stand the thought of losing him. He brushed his hands over her hair, down her back, touching her.

Every thought, every sensation, every feeling was magnified until it seemed he would never be able to hold it all inside. He needed her. He *loved* her. Wanted her so much the intensity of his desire for her put any feeling he'd ever had for any other

woman to shame.

“What’s happening?” He whispered the words against the top of her head. “What the hell is happening to me?”

She sighed under him and tightened her hold around his waist. “You don’t want to know.”

His question had been rhetorical. He pulled back sharply, just enough to see her face. His cock was still blissfully buried in her. Her leg like a vise grip holding him there.

She reached one hand up and brushed his hair off his forehead. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“What exactly is it you think I don’t want to know?”

She tried to tug him back against her, to bury her face in his neck. As much as he wanted her as close to him as she could get, he needed to hear what she was holding back more. Her smoke-colored eyes searched for something in his face. And then she sighed and released her hold on his hips.

\*

If this had to be done, Ena figured it was best done now, with Charlie still holding some of her magic and the web between them a shining, brilliant force. She felt boneless, her body sated even though her mind was a chaotic mess.

Except it wasn’t as much of a mess as it was on any other day of her life so far.

She took a deep breath and went with the band-aid approach. Ripped it off quick. “I’m a witch.”

He blinked and sat up. He was inches from her, but the removal of his heavy, warm body made Ena feel like crying. “Excuse me?”

“An elemental witch. My magic is fire. It’s how I do what I do in the field. It’s how I do my job.” She curled her legs under her and leaned against the headboard. When Charlie tried to look away from her, she put her hand on his cheek and directed his gaze back to her face. “I have three sisters. Wren is an air witch, Moira a water witch, and Blair an earth witch.”

Charlie shook his head against her hand and sat fully up. “Witches?”

“Yes.” Oh goddess, there was more. He was going to hate this with a passion. “And it would seem you are my mate.”

“Your *mate*?” He was in shock, Ena thought. Just repeating what she said. Hopefully he was soaking up her words, coming to terms as she spoke them.

“I know it’s a lot to take in.” Ena brushed her fingers over his jaw. Even freaked out, he was a beautiful man. All hard angles and dark masculinity. Despite everything, she couldn’t muster up much anxiety. Not having overwhelming, out-of-control emotions burning in her was a miracle. She had mastery over them, and it was because of Charlie.

Her Charlie. She had to find a way to make him understand.

“It’s not that big of a deal, Charlie. I swear its not.” Ena reached for him, and sighed a breath of relief when he pulled her against him. “Not even as big a deal as it was in other generations. There should be five of us.”

“Five?” Still with the repeating.

“My twin sister, Sabine, died when we were born. Our mother did as well. Without the spirit witch, we aren’t as powerful as we would be. And there will be no next generation.”

The spirit witch gives birth to the five daughters. Her mother had been a spirit witch.

Beautiful Corrine. Ena had spent her childhood looking at pictures of her mother. Especially of her mother pregnant with twins, which gave her a sense of connection to Sabine.

Although Sabine had died shortly after birth, Ena had always felt a connection to her twin. Even talked to her, like an imaginary friend, when it felt like her fire would overcome her during her difficult childhood.

She'd actually made herself believe she heard a sweet, calming voice in her head when she needed it most.

And now that she had her flesh-and-blood anchor, in Charlie, she saw the futility of years of insisting she was fine without one. Going back to carrying the magic and power of fire alone was unthinkable. She needed Charlie like she needed to breathe.

He sat up, slid a heartbreaking six inches from her. "You're a witch."

"Don't be scared. It's really not as weird as it sounds." Only it was. She saw it in his face. He was going to reject her. "All it means is that I feel fire. I can read it. You already knew that."

"I don't believe in witches. But, you've done something to me, Ena. Haven't you?" He swung his legs off the bed and tears fell down her cheeks.

\*

The air was too thick to breathe. Charlie tried to order his thoughts, but it was useless. Even moving away from Ena hurt. A witch? Why wasn't he laughing? It was ludicrous. Witches were like the boogie man or the tooth fairy.

Weren't they? Ena physically shouldn't be able to do what she did in the field. The only reason she could was because she never got in the way of the fire. She knew long before it happened when it was going to shift. And when things got really bad, the wind changed, or it started raining. Or both. Every time.

"Your sisters change the wind and make it rain, don't they?" He couldn't believe those words came out of his mouth.

"Yes." Ena stayed on her side of the bed. He couldn't look at her and not want to hold her, so he looked at his hands instead. "Charlie, we're meant to be together. I know that scares you. But I can't help it. I didn't do it on purpose."

"Meant to be together?" Why was he such an idiot? All he could do was repeat what she said. Each statement more outrageous than the next. "What exactly did you mean when you said I was your mate?"

She took a deep breath that did nothing to ease the anxiety building in Charlie. Anxiety that, like every other emotion he'd felt since making love to Ena, was magnified tenfold.

She bit at her bottom lip. Damn, when had he looked at her again? Sweet Ena. *Mine*. "Um...when we, you know, have sex, you anchor me. Maybe you'll anchor me all the time, I can't tell yet."

"Anchor you?" There he went again. Charlie the mockingbird.

"You share my fire. It makes your emotions all haywire. Believe me, I know. What you're feeling is only half what I feel all the time." She reached for him, touched his shoulder, and he felt a jolt of desire just from that tiny connection. "I never thought I'd have an anchor. Sabine would have been mine, if she'd lived."

She felt this way all the time? She'd felt this swirling, aching intensity even as a child? "I need to get out of here. I'm sorry, Ena. I just need to think."

“Charlie.”

He stood, dressed quickly and left without looking at her again. If he had, he would have broken into a thousand pieces.

\*

Ena lay back on the bed and allowed herself a good cry. And as she let go of her misery, her mind did what it always did when misery was involved.

*Don't cry.* Wren's voice was soft. Ena felt it like a caress and for the moment forgot to be pissed that she'd called out to her sister.

*He left. Wren, he left me.*

She felt a burst of anger, not only from Wren, but from Blair and Moira as well. She struggled to get her emotions back under control, which wasn't easy because she'd taken back most of her magic by now. Although, even in the midst of inner turmoil, she couldn't help noticing that it was easier to contain. Just twenty-four hours ago, she would have torn this room apart in her effort to expel her emotions.

*If he's your mate, he'll be back.* That was Blair. Always a voice of reason, although Ena didn't miss the tone in her voice that said she'd emasculate the man should he not get his act together quickly enough.

He was her mate. Charlie was hers. If she could deny it, she would have. If she could walk away, she would. But she couldn't.

*I'm losing my mind. I have to get out of here.*

*Go visit Gloria.* Moira made the suggestion, and Ena heard murmurs of approval from the rest of the peanut gallery. *She'll feed you chocolate.*

*You shouldn't be alone.* Ena froze. She hadn't heard that voice in a long time. Not since she was a teenager.

Not since she'd stopped needing Sabine to be her imaginary friend.

She slammed her mental wall up, closing out her sisters and her own personal ghost. What the fuck was that?

She showered quickly, her body and mind having a hard time giving up the hope that the bathroom door would open at any second and Charlie would be there. Her Charlie. Goddess, she needed him. Where was he?

She had no car, so when she was dressed, she grabbed her bag and started out on foot. Gloria was staying at the town's only other hotel. She'd have to walk about two miles, but decided the exercise would do her good.

## Chapter Five

“Gloria?” Ena knocked at the hotel room door. “Gloria, its Ena.”

“Go away.”

The listless, dull tone of Gloria’s voice and the harshness of her words took Ena by such surprise that she actually obeyed and took a couple of steps back from the door. And then she shook herself and walked forward again. Knocked softly.

“Please, Ena. Just leave.”

She knocked a little harder. “I can’t until you tell me what’s wrong.”

There was silence on the other side of the heavy wooden door, and then Ena heard Gloria unlocking it. The woman who had been like a mother to Ena for the last five years looked like she’d just lost everything that mattered to her in the world. Her face was ashen, her hair unkempt, and dark circles beneath her eyes made her look twenty years older than she had just the afternoon before.

Ena pushed her way into the room, even though Gloria clearly meant to just peek out and try to persuade her to leave. The woman wore a beautiful silk dressing gown. Its soft blush pink should have complimented Gloria’s fair complexion but only served to point out how out of sorts she looked.

Ena put her arms around Gloria, held on until the hug was returned. When she stood away from Gloria again, the woman looked even more miserable than she had before Ena embraced her. “You’re scaring me.”

The room was an absolute disaster. The bedding was in a nest on the floor, and seemed to be topped by a trash heap. She realized what she was seeing at the same moment that her brain finally processed what her senses had already taken in. *Kerosene*. The scent had swamped her senses for so many days that it took a minute to realize she smelled it now.

The room was soaked in kerosene. And the trash on top of the bedding was pictures, letters.

Holy shit.

No matter how hard she tried, Ena couldn’t assimilate all the data she was taking in. Most of it totally irrational and incongruent to her known information of the world.

Gloria had backed away from her, and Ena watched open-mouthed as she picked up a metal can.

And then all hell broke loose. Gloria shot a stream of the accelerant all over her beautiful silk gown, and then turned the can toward Ena.

*Ena! Get the fuck out of there!*

*But Gloria...* Ena had called for her sisters, but now she had no idea what they could do to help. *I can’t just leave her here.*

The cold shock of kerosene against her skin, soaking into her clothes, stunned Ena. Gloria’s face held such compassion. So much love. “Gloria? You don’t want to do this. Let’s just get out of here.”

“I tried so hard.”

Ena felt her sisters’ fear and frustration, and did what she could to block out them out. She was too afraid to put up her mental wall and cut herself off from them altogether.

Gloria reached into her pocket and pulled out a small metallic object.

The gold lighter her husband had received when he retired from the San Francisco Fire Department, before starting Ember, Inc. Ena's stomach fell to her knees, but her mind cleared.

*One of you call Charlie.* She rattled his cell phone number off in her head, and then turned her focus back to Gloria.

"Why?" She took a step closer. If she could grab the lighter, she'd be able to overpower Gloria easily. Ena was small, but she was strong, and Gloria was an old woman.

"You weren't supposed to come here." Gloria held the lighter up and Ena tensed. "I'm sorry, honey. But now we can both go be with John."

*John?* Wren's voice was more than alarmed. *Charlie is on his way. He's almost there.*

John had been gone for three years. And while Gloria had loved her husband, and mourned him hard enough to worry Ena, this was not right.

"He loved you so much, Ena. You were the daughter we never had. He'll be so happy to see you."

Oh, bad. *Bad.* "John's been gone for a long time, Gloria. I know he would want you to be happy. Right here."

"Ember, Inc. was everything to him. Everything. I tried so hard. You know how hard I tried, don't you Ena?"

"Of course." Ena took a step forward. Her eyes never left the lighter. Indoors, there was little any of her sisters could do to help her.

The kerosene burned Ena's skin, making it hard to focus. Fear, anger, worry, all strong emotions made double by her fire. *Oh God, Charlie. Where are you?*

"We're bankrupt, honey. John would be mortified. I can't do it anymore. The government just isn't contracting out like they used to. I did my best to keep us in work—"

Ena's heart froze in her chest. At the epicenter of each of the arson-started fires, they'd found a campfire ring filled with the ashes of burned letters and photographs.

"You started those fires? How could you?"

"I couldn't let John die."

Ena shook her head. Gloria wasn't making sense. But then, how much sense could she expect from a woman who was about to light them both on fire? "Give me the lighter, Gloria."

"I did everything I could to save him. Without Ember, he'll be gone." She flicked open the lighter's lid. "We'll go to him, Ena. He'll make everything all right again."

Ena tensed to make a grab for the lighter. She could have turned and left the room. But if she did that—she shuddered thinking of what Gloria had already set in motion. Instead she stayed, focused on the elements in the room and did her best to stay far enough away that she could still get out if she couldn't stop Gloria. "This hotel is full of people. You'll burn them all with us. You don't want that, do you? Why don't we go warn them, clear the hotel?"

"There aren't many people left in their rooms at this time of the morning. There are smoke alarms. They'll get out in time." She sounded so sure of herself. "I'm glad you came, Ena. I was so sorry to leave you. We'll all be together soon."

*Get out!*

*I can't leave her.*

*The hell you can't, little sister. Get out now!* Suddenly Ena wished Wren could change the wind pattern, or Moira could send rain. Or even a little earthquake from Blair that might knock Gloria on her ass long enough for Ena to get the lighter.

But even an earthquake was out of the question, because the room was filled with accelerant and had a propane line running into it.

Gloria ran her thumb over the edge of the lighter's roller. A small shudder went through her, and Ena thought she looked almost euphoric over what she was about to do. Ena could run. Gloria wouldn't stop her.

Ena couldn't leave her.

Her thumb came back down on the roller, and Ena saw it in slow motion. She screamed out loud and in her head, and lunged for Gloria, for the lighter. If she threw Gloria hard enough to the right, she'd at least be clear of the pyre she'd built. Maybe the other people sleeping in the motel wouldn't—

Gloria's thumb strummed the striker and Ena's friend, her mentor, burst into flames. Ena screamed. Nearly as loudly as Gloria did.

*No. No. No.* She searched the room, desperate. Help Gloria. She had to stop this. Stop this.

Stop, drop, and roll.

All the bedding in the room was covered in kerosene. Ena couldn't use her own body to douse the flames, because she'd been drenched in accelerant as well.

*Not happening. No!*

Gloria reached for her. Like a nightmare. A burning nightmare.

Ena choked on the smells. She couldn't think or see. She had to leave now. Leave Gloria to the fate she'd chosen, and get the innocent out of the hotel.

With startling, unbearable clarity, she knew exactly how this fire would play out. Knew that if she didn't move fast, not only would the hotel burn to the ground, it would take most of the abutting neighborhood with it. Houses. Homes. People would die.

She backed away. The vision of Gloria screaming, flailing, burning, etched on her corneas. Gloria reaching for her. Crying out her name.

"Ena!"

Ena spun as the door shook on its hinges. Charlie. "Get the other people out of the hotel. The houses behind need to be evacuated."

"Ena, open this fucking door!" His voice was raw, desperate. The room shook when he threw his big body against the door again.

Ena stared at Gloria in horror. The woman collapsed in an oddly elegant drape across the bedding and ephemera. The screaming had stopped, except in Ena's head. Vaguely, she realized her sisters were clamoring for her in her mind. Begging her to talk to them, to respond. She couldn't.

There had to be a way. Some way to undo this. Undo this. Please, goddess. Please. Gloria wasn't burning on a pyre of her own making. She wasn't. No. No. No.

From somewhere deep, her fire magic kicked her in the head. This fire wasn't behaving properly. By all rights, Ena shouldn't be standing. She was in close quarters with what should have been a raging fire.

Instead, the fire smoldered, turned the bedding to soot instead of ash. Ena looked to

the big windows and her heart lodged in her throat. They were covered in black sludge. She turned to the door and her knees went weak. Puffs of yellowish smoke came from the outside. As if the fire breathed the air from other side.

Backdraft. The fire was oxygen-poor in the closed hotel room. "Get out, Charlie. Evacuate. Now."

She waited for him to argue, ready to explain. He was an experienced firefighter, and she didn't have to. "Shit. Fuck, Ena."

"Get out. Get everyone out."

"I'm not leaving you!"

Her mind, her magic, worked overtime. Evaluating. She'd never seen a fire she couldn't analyze. She unbuttoned her jeans and stepped out of them, then pulled her sodden top over her head. The kerosene had soaked through to her underclothes, so she took those off as well. "Get them out. Then we can vent the heat through the roof."

"Ena."

"Damn it, Charlie."

"I love you. I'll get you out of there."

*Wren? Wren, help me!* She sounded rational when she spoke to Charlie, but couldn't keep the panic out of her head.

*Tell me what to do. Ena. What can I do?*

This was not a hopeless situation. She refused to believe it was. She was goddamn fire witch. Fire lived in her. She could commune with it, for fuck's sake. She straightened her spine. *The heat needs to escape.*

Ena scanned the room. Her heart sunk and panic reared up again, hard. This was an old hotel. Ventilation nearly non-existent. Wren could push heated air out, but there was nowhere for it to go. Gloria was dead. Mercifully so, Ena realized, even in the midst of her grief and horror.

*Just try to keep the air circulating, the smoke rising.*

The smell of her friend's body...oh goddess, help her...*cooking*...was overpowering. Traumatizing. *Gloria.*

Ena was going to die with her. If Charlie tried to save her, he'd be killed by the blast when the sudden supply of oxygen exploded the built-up gasses. She'd kill herself if she broke a window.

Ena put her head in her hands and tugged on handfuls of her hair, trying to think. Think. Begging the fire to talk to her, to tell her how to control it.

It was no use. Her skin was starting to blister from the heat, and her lungs burned with every meager gulp of smoky air she managed to drag in. The fire was starved, the only reason Ena wasn't already dead.

*Get out of there, Ena. What are you doing?* Wren's voice was stern. Angry. Frustrated. Scared. Ena could sympathize.

*I can't.*

*Like hell!* That was Blair. Far more hysterical than Wren.

*I love you, Blair.*

A weird sort of preternatural calm came over Ena. She couldn't fix this. Fire, the element that had ruled her entire life, was going to kill her. Everything in the room was covered in thick soot, and the room was quickly filling with brown smoke. Backdraft smoke. It would kill her first. Her magic wouldn't allow her to be burned alive.



She studiously avoided looking at the fire, at Gloria. She was in shock. That realization startled her. Her brain was protecting her from the monstrosity of her situation.

Her sisters were sobbing in her head. Moira demanding that someone do something. And Ena's magic was still seeking. Anything. Anyway.

The window cracked and startled Ena out of her thoughts. The noise seemed deafening. *Oh, goddess. Goddess, please.* She managed to slam up her wall. Because the only thing worse than living through this was the idea her sisters would have a front-row seat.

She threw one arm up in a futile attempt to protect her face and crouched low, turning her back to the window just before it exploded and the whole room became a towering inferno.

Flames licked out from all sides. Angry, powerful. Hungry. Reaching for her.

It took a full minute for Ena to realize she'd survived the blast. She uncovered her eyes and was nearly blinded by the flames. Surrounding her. She'd never been so close to fire and despite her nearly paralyzing fear, she was fascinated. Enthralled. Tongues of pure energy licked out all around her.

But they didn't engulf her. In fact she wasn't even sweating. She reached out a hand, and then snagged it back when she felt some sort of a barrier.

*Did I do this?* She kept her wall up, keeping her sisters out of her head. She didn't want them to feel what would happen to her if whatever this bubble was burst.

*Get out, Ena.*

Her body froze, and then tried to remember how to function. A heartbeat. A breath. Another. That voice. Again? Her sweet, imaginary friend who always talked to her on their own wavelength so that Wren, Moira, and Blair never heard.

*Sabine?*

Her severely overwrought mind had reached for any modicum of respite. And apparently sent her dead twin to talk her out of this impossible situation.

*Damn it, Ena. I can't hold the shield much longer. Run!*

She gasped. And ran. She shouldn't have been able to get to the door. Hell, she should have been a cooked goose. She clapped her hand over her mouth, holding back a hysterical bark of laughter at the horrible thought. Massive therapy was going to be necessary if she survived this.

She moved through the fire. The shield held up and she was able to grasp a brass doorknob that should have melted the skin off her hand, and open the door.

She had to go down a flight of stairs. Thick black smoke curled around her, but did not penetrate the shield. *Sabine.*

*Please, Ena. Please hurry.*

The shield was still around her, but she felt it waver. Delicate streams of heat and smoke seeped in. She finally barreled her body against the emergency exit and thrust herself naked into the sunlight.

Where she'd been completely alone inside, the outside of the hotel teemed with people. An army of firefighters worked to control the blaze. Hotel guests and the people who occupied the houses behind the structure huddled together in a quivering, adrenaline-high mass.

She collapsed just as the shield fell apart and she landed hard on her hands and knees

on the hot asphalt parking lot.

The ground under her shook, and a hard wind blew the smoke from the fire away from her. When she looked up, the sky was ominously dark with thick, heavy rain clouds. A crack of thunder kick-started her heart into beating again.

*I'm safe.* A collective sigh of relief sounded in her head as the rain started to fall. A torrent, maybe hard enough to save the homes behind the hotel.

Ena reached out on the private wavelength that she hadn't used since childhood. To the voice she'd thought was her imaginary friend. *Sabine?*

*Find your man, Ena.*

*Is it you? How can you—*

The line closed. Hard.

And then Charlie was there and nothing else mattered. Charlie had his arms around her, wrapped a blanket around her. He rained kisses over her filthy face and neck. Every part of her hurt. Her skin was angry red and blistered. Her throat and lungs were raw from smoke inhalation. But Charlie whispered that he loved her and nothing else mattered.

"Don't ever do that to me again." He finally held her away from him, but kept his hands on her shoulders. "What the fuck was that?"

"Gloria is dead." A deep shudder went through Ena. She would never get over watching her friend die. The smells, the screams. "She started all those fires."

"Christ. You're in shock." Charlie turned, pulling her against him again. "Can I get a medic over here?"

\* \* \* \*

"Ena?"

She looked up and attempted a smile for Charlie. It didn't go over real well. Her face hurt.

"Your sisters are here. Do you want to see them now?"

Something she hadn't realized was clenched, released in Ena's chest. Her sisters were here. "In a minute."

Charlie came closer to her, took her hand. "You scared the shit out of me, little girl."

"You said you loved me."

Charlie froze, and Ena tensed, steeling herself to hear him deny it. Instead he lowered his face and kissed her mouth, his lips barely brushing against it. "With everything in me, little witch."

"Are you ready to be a witch's mate? I'm not always easy."

"Is that supposed to be news?"

She laughed, and then moaned. "I love you, Charlie. I need to see my sisters."

Almost before she had the words out, the door opened and her sisters were there. With Charlie so close to her she was anchored and for the first time in her life she could be near her sisters without being knocked on her ass by a million conflicting emotions.

Charlie started to leave, but Ena caught his hand and held him by her. Her sisters fawned over her for a minute, fussing with her bedding, each of them finding some excuse to touch her.

"I'm okay. Really."

"How did you get out of there, Ena?" Wren stood near her. Hovering. "That was a

big fat suckfest.”

“We felt it.” Blair sat on the edge of Ena’s mattress near her feet. “You scared me.”

“You scared all of us.” Moira stood behind Blair.

“I’m sorry.”

Charlie brought Ena’s fingers to his lips. “How did you get out, Ena?”

“You aren’t going to believe me.” She settled back into her pillows. Nearly all of her had been burned to some degree. Mostly first degree, thanks to... “Sabine.”

“Sabine?” All three of her sisters repeated the name in unison.

Ena looked up at Charlie. “She actually wrapped me in bubble wrap to keep me safe. Some sort of protective barrier just as the fire exploded.”

“But that’s not possible.” Charlie took her hand and patted it like he thought it might be best to coddle the crazy girl. “You told me Sabine is dead.”

Ena shook her head and tried a smile on again. “It doesn’t matter. I’m so glad you guys are here. That you get to meet Charlie.”

Moira narrowed her blue eyes, and then turned to Charlie. “Our Ena is a handful, Charlie. I hope you’re prepared.”

“We’re having a wedding!” Blair bounced off the end of the bed and wrapped her arms around Charlie. “Welcome to the family.”

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Shaunta Grimes lives in the Magical Mountains of Northern Nevada with her family. When she's not writing, she's reading. You can also find her in the garden or watching the snow fall depending on the season. Her head is always filled with stories that her fingers itch to bring to life.

**Meet LSB Authors At The House Of Sin  
Lsbooks.NET**

**We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books**

LSbooks.com  
for other exciting erotic romances.

**2007: Terran Realm**

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

**Featured Series:**

**The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors**

Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

**The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan**

Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

**Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron**

Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

**The Max Series by JB Skully**

Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!