



**Combustion**

Denise Agnew

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## **Blurb**

A little heat... Former smoke jumper Autumn MacAllister returns to Montana after tragedy almost takes her life. She doesn't expect the chubby insecure boy she once knew to have turned into a virile man with a mind-blowing smile.

A little flame... Firefighter Jack Dillon never forgot his childhood crush on Autumn, or the devastating blaze that melded their lives together. Now she's back and creating havoc in his heart, and he can't ignore the banked tension between them that threatens to ignite.

Combustion! Now they must combine forces when an arsonist threatens to burn their city, and an old enemy threatens to create a flashover that may consume all they hold dear.

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## **Dedication**

To the firefighters, rescue personnel, and police who gave their lives to save others on September 11, 2001. To those who survived and continued to search for survivors. These brave men and women are true heroes in every sense of the word.

To the firefighters who battled flames during the horrific wildfire season of 2002. Your bravery will never be forgotten.

And most of all, to Daddy, who did it his way.

(May 9, 1918—February 7, 2002)

## Prologue

**Clifton, Montana**  
**September 11, 2001**

CNN blared on the small television high above the bar, and an incredulous silence hovered over those who watched. With diamond-hard precision, horrible images became engraved into the minds of patrons observing the terror playing on the screen. Peril existed for everyone in that second, that minute, that time of destruction.

The Watcher observed the chaos and drew in the scent of the smoky bar—beer, and the unmistakable stench of horror. Uncertainty became a live thing, writhing in the room and circling the people like a python strangling a last breath. Time hovered and stilled.

“Oh, my God,” a woman sitting next to The Watcher said. “They’ve attacked the World Trade Center.”

He felt the woman’s disbelief and almost laughed at the vacant, dumbstruck quality of her expression.

The witless creatures nearby couldn’t believe the dreadfulness unfolding before them. Everyone gaped and spoke in whispers. The bartender stopped swabbing down the bar and gazed at the boob tube in stunned fascination.

At first, the Watcher had cringed along with the rest of them, sickened by the pictures on the television, more than appalled, enraged and vengeful at the sight.

Then he absorbed the magnitude of the events, tasted the outright helplessness seeping from each person in the room. Glorifying in the sensations, he shuddered as enjoyment piled upon fascination. Yes, the ordinary Joe Blow on the street would be glued to the television for hours. And the Watcher would feed on the violence with deep enjoyment.

He looked at the television again and saw firefighters rushing to the site of terrorism. Loathing and hatred ripped through the Watcher’s soul. Clifton firefighter Jack Dillon would probably volunteer to go to New York.

He couldn’t match the evil unfolding on such a staggering scale, but tonight, the small city of Clifton, Montana would have a taste of the fire and mayhem that had destroyed the World Trade Center. He felt the urge and the sizzling desire to create the power required for destruction. The irresistible yearning to burn, tamped down for months, surged as a ravenous hunger.

Jack Dillon didn’t know it, but the conflagration tonight wouldn’t be the first fire the Watcher had given Jack.

It wouldn’t be the last.

## Chapter One

**Clifton, Montana**  
**March 2002**

It all started with a bang.  
Literally.

Autumn MacAllister never expected to run into Jack Dillon the way she did that Monday. Especially after only two weeks back in Clifton, Montana.

The snow started as she traveled from her rented room to her job as a photographer and reporter for the Clifton Times five miles away. Light, wet flakes turned to heavy globs of moisture. Wretched conditions caused her to slow her vehicle to a turtle's crawl.

As she pulled her old blue Taurus up to the stop sign at the corner, she looked both ways more than once to make certain the intersection was clear. The street was deserted, a quiet residential area not far from a park. Satisfied, she turned right onto Jackson. She'd driven maybe half a block when she saw a big SUV barreling down the road at least twenty miles over the speed limit. Seconds later the SUV started to slide. The driver wrestled with the wheel and the huge vehicle swerved from side to side.

Ice. Black ice.

Autumn slowed her car, ready to take evasive action.

Before she could even inhale, the SUV started to spin...and skid right toward her.

Autumn cursed as she turned the wheel to the right and headed for the sidewalk. No cars along the curb. Nobody walking by.

*Too late, Autumn. Too slow.*

The SUV's huge silver grill faced her like a monster in a futuristic movie. She saw an old, wizened face at the wheel of the behemoth vehicle, mouth wide open in surprise or shock.

The SUV glanced off her front right fender and forced the sedan to spin to the right. She cried out as her seatbelt snapped taut and held her in place. Metal bent and crunched. Glass shattered. Her sedan continued to skate, heading straight for the light pole at the side of the street. Instinctively, she threw her arms over her face and head. The driver's side rear door rammed against the pole and vibrations radiated through her body with stunning force. Rending metal and breaking glass screeched in a cacophony against her ears. A sharp sting pierced her cheek, then another prickle of pain touched her left hand and her neck. For a fleeting second, she waited for the light pole to come crashing down and perhaps crush the car, or for power lines to spark electricity around the vehicle.

Her breath rasped in her throat, and she heard the engine idling. For several stunned seconds she couldn't think. Arctic air blew through the window and enveloped her body like an icy shroud.

She kept her arms over her head and her body drawn tight. The engine clunked and ticked, still running. As snow blew into the broken driver's side window, she lowered her arms and reached for the ignition to shut off the car. With shaky fingers, she unhooked her seatbelt. Small pieces of glass littered her lap, and she noticed a streak of blood on her left hand. She craned around to look at the other car. It stood kitty-corner to the

sedan. The front end sat near the left rear side door. The small figure in the SUV slumped over the steering wheel.

Shivers shook Autumn's body as she tried to think.

If the driver's side door had hit the pole, she might have been seriously hurt. Instead, the back rear door on the driver's side was deeply dented by the pole.

As she looked at the devastation around her, an inane and ridiculous thought came to mind.

*I've done it now. I'll be late to work.*

Before she could move, she heard someone shout and a flurry of activity began around the accident. Two cars stopped on the other side of the wide lane.

Her whole body ached with a dull throb. She'd require a good soak in the tub tonight. First, she needed to escape this tangled metal. Since she'd arrived in Clifton two weeks ago, life seemed to become more complicated by the minute. Now she could add another bizarre incident to her growing resume of oddities.

*I'm always in the middle of the action.* She took a deep breath and tried to calm her racing heart. *Come on. You've been in far more dangerous situations than this.*

A balding, chubby middle-aged man suddenly appeared at her window. His nose was red from the cold, and his eyes filled with concern. "You all right?"

"Yes." She pushed against the driver's side door, but it wouldn't budge. "What about the person in the SUV?"

"She's unconscious and someone else is helping her." The man tried yanking on the door but it wouldn't open. "I'll try the other doors."

She realized that although the driver's side front window and back window were destroyed, her windshield formed an odd spider web that hadn't fallen apart. Since this old car didn't have airbags, she was lucky the windshield hadn't caved in and showered her with more glass.

The man struggled to open the other doors and failed. "What a mess. You didn't buckle the telephone pole, though, and that's pretty amazing." Apprehension drew his mouth into a frown as he gazed upward. "At least not yet."

In the distance, a siren wailed. She gave him a weak smile. "Is that help I hear coming?"

"The station is close. I wouldn't move if I were you. You might have injuries."

*Oh, yes, I know.* She knew the drill too well, and shoved back a memory that threatened to rear up and seize her throat like a mad dog. She drew in a deep, settling breath.

More quickly than she would have imagined, a brilliant red fire engine and ambulance arrived on scene, screaming sirens diminishing as the emergency vehicles came to a halt.

Firefighters unloaded from the engine. Garbed in black helmets, canvas-like bunker pants, suspenders, waterproof jackets and steel-toed rubber boots, their attire reminded her of the career she'd given up three years ago.

"Over here!" The middle-aged man waved to the firefighters. "This car won't open and she's trapped. The SUV driver looks in bad shape."

Some of the firefighters headed for the SUV, while two approached came to Autumn's car. They bent down, assessing the damage from behind tinted safety glasses.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

The deep, masculine voice belonged to the younger of the two men. For a stunned second all she could register was his handsome face, eyebrows drawn together in fierce concentration. Whoa. She hadn't seen a firefighter this good-looking in a long time—if ever.

Concern creased his forehead, and his stunning jade eyes narrowed. “Ma’am? Are you hurt?”

*Wake up, Autumn. You’re gaping at him like a lovesick pup. He’s going to think you have a head injury.* She smiled weakly. “No, I’m perfectly fine.”

Something surreal and familiar touched her thoughts. Worry registered in his eyes as he evaluated her. She could tell he didn’t believe her. He tried to wrench open the door.

“I’m stuck.” She realized two seconds later how lame that sounded.

A heart-stopping smile broke over his face, transforming him into nothing short of gut-wrenchingly, absolutely gorgeous.

She blinked and wondered if she’d started hallucinating. “Is the other driver all right?”

“She’ll be fine, ma’am. Don’t worry about her right now,” the older firefighter said before he turned away and shouted instructions to other crewmembers.

Suddenly tears burned her eyes. She took a gulping breath and shoved unwanted emotion back where it belonged. One of the tears escaped. She wiped away the offending evidence of her vulnerability.

“Hey.” The younger man threw her another wide grin as he slipped off his leather gloves and replaced them with latex. “You’ll be all right. You’re not crying because you’re hurting anywhere?”

She sniffed but refused to acknowledge that she wanted to cry and cry hard. “No. I’m okay.”

“We’ll check and be sure.” He reached in the car and started the standard examination, gathering her vital signs and asking her probing questions. As he touched her, his hands sent warm messages that went way beyond comfort. Though his touch was professional, what she felt made her wonder if she hadn’t really hit her head. A sweet ache started low in her stomach as his fingers examined her neck. Tingles raced over her skin.

It felt surreal having someone take care of her this way, and even more unnerving that she wanted his touch intimately. What would it be like to feel his hands tracing over more intimate, forbidden areas?

“Any pain in your arms or legs?” he asked.

Jerked out of her steamy thoughts, she answered in the negative.

He touched a cut on her head with gauze and the sting surprised a small gasp from her. His eyes narrowed. “Sorry. Does it hurt a lot? Did you hit your head?”

“No. It must have been the glass.”

“We’ll need to put on a c-collar. A little bit longer and then we’ll have you out.” His gentle voice, deep and soothing, calmed her at the same time it stirred more carnal, primitive thoughts. “We need to make sure you don’t have any serious problems.”

As he brushed his big hands over her skull, searing sensual awareness gathered inside her once more. She pondered her reaction, and chalked it up to adrenaline.

Impatience wore on her, even though she knew he followed procedure. She wanted out of the car. “I’m fine. I could climb out the window and be out of here by now and



save you from using equipment to get me out.”

He shook his head. As he smiled the tiniest bit, she noted a small dimple in his chin—a barely-there dent. “We’re not letting you climb out of here and risk it. Adrenaline can mask injury.”

“I always was the worst patient,” she muttered.

She’d proven that when she lay in a hospital bed three years ago with damaged pride, sorrow, and a smashed right knee. Automatically, she reached for her knee.

“What’s wrong?” His tone came out brusque, concern evident in his eyes.

“Nothing. I was thinking about an old injury.”

“Tell me if there’s a problem.”

His firm voice said it all, and she found herself responding to his strength. She liked the way he worked, efficient and quick. He slipped a c-collar into place around her neck.

Moments later another firefighter walked toward her with Jaws of Life machinery. Relief slowed her heartbeat to a reasonable speed when she saw the extrication specialist. He’d have her out of here fast.

She heard the young man saying something to other firefighters gathering near the car. Rescue personnel soon placed the woman from the SUV on a stretcher.

Autumn looked up as her firefighter gave her a disgustingly attractive smile that spoke of charm and maybe a little cockiness around the edges.

*My firefighter? Where did that come from? So he’s got an attractive smile. Okay, more than good-looking. Delicious and down right edible.*

*Nah, I don’t do firefighters.* And she didn’t. Though she’d been in firefighting herself, she couldn’t imagine herself married to one. The weird shift hours, the danger ... she didn’t think she’d want to put herself through that. Not with her history.

Seconds later, the ambulance carrying the old woman sped away. Autumn wondered if she could have done anything to prevent the accident. She tried to recall the sequence of events but everything seemed blurred. She couldn’t remember details and that scared her. She knew, all too well, that stress could render a person’s thinking processes off kilter and cause problems with memory.

The good-looking firefighter turned back to her with a blanket. “I’m going to cover you up so that when we open this door you don’t get hit with any debris, okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He eased the blanket over her, his concerned eyes crinkling as he smiled. Reassured, she settled under the muffling cloth.

A firefighter used the Jaws of Life, and she put her fingers in her ears to shut out the tremendous racket as machinery rattled and metal protested. Moments later the door creaked open. The young firefighter pulled the blanket away and squatted down beside her. His measuring gaze searched for any injury he’d missed.

Other rescue personnel brought over the backboard and stretcher. As her firefighter helped them ease her from the car, a thousand points of awareness rushed to her. People talking, traffic in the far distance, and the sound of another ambulance arriving. Trussed up in c-collar, head stabilizers and backboard, she felt like a chicken ready to roast.

Another man said something to the young firefighter taking care of her, and she heard the man call him Jack.

As they wheeled her to the ambulance, memories bombarded her like an avalanche. Surprise rippled down to her toes.

*It couldn't be. It must be.*

The young firefighter took off his helmet and his short, curly, dark blond hair came into view. Next, he removed his safety glasses and revealed more of his green eyes. He'd opened his jacket sometime during the rescue, and she saw his nametag on his uniform shirt and wondered why she hadn't noticed it before. She sure wouldn't have recognized him otherwise.

She reached up and clasped his forearm and he started. Worry showed through his mask of professionalism.

"Jack Dillon?" she asked.

As they slid her into the ambulance, his voice sounded far away. "That's me."

"The Jack Dillon?" She couldn't keep the amazement out of her voice as she recalled the young, overweight boy he'd once been.

A twinkle entered his eyes as he climbed into the ambulance with her. "The one and only."

"You don't know who I am, do you?" As the ambulance rolled away from the scene, she decided she would clue him in. "I'm Autumn MacAllister."

How many seconds went by before he spoke, she couldn't say. Time rolled back, parting the years. So many years and so much distance.

Recognition bloomed in his gaze, and she saw that he, too, remembered one windy afternoon seventeen years ago when they'd first met. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

\*

Jack couldn't believe it. This was *his* Autumn lying on a gurney, cut and bruised from an accident. As he looked down at the slim-boned, but strong-looking woman on the stretcher, his heart did a thud and almost stopped. His breath shortened. The teenage girl who had given so much to him all those years ago had blossomed into a stunning woman.

Uh, yeah. Right. Try fuckable. A-number-one, wall-banger beautiful.

*Jesus Jack. Get a grip.*

Yeah, she was a patient, and yes it wasn't professional to stare at her like this, but he couldn't seem to help it. Ever since he'd seen her in the car, eyes a little wide, looking a bit scared, he wanted to protect her. Taste her. Her lips parted and his gut clenched.

Memories flew through his head. When he'd first seen her silver blonde hair and blue eyes, he'd felt a sense of *deja vu*. He'd shrugged it off and jumped into action, instinct pushing him to do his job. Autumn's voice, so like what he remembered, sent a jolt of longing through him. He let the hungry, appreciative sensations come, male and unmistakable. A carnal scene flashed through his head in an unstoppable instant.

Her long legs wrapped around his hips while his cock sank into her high and deep. Shit. He'd lost his mind in a heartbeat.

He realized that he'd stared at her for some time without speaking. "It's been seventeen years." She smiled and the tenderness in that grin made his heart flip, flop and start a new, frantic beat. "I can't believe you're here."

"I can't either. What a way to meet again," she said.

A wry twist to her lips and heightened color in her cheeks made him wonder if she was embarrassed. He grinned.

As he gently touched her legs, feeling for any sign of injury, he tried to remember his ethics again. Built athletically, she obviously worked out to keep her great muscle tone. Her breasts were round, full, and beautiful under the long red tunic she wore, her waist

and hips slim. Her dark leggings did nothing to disguise the firm curve of her legs. He'd always been a leg man. Nothing he liked better than a woman naked and wearing fuck-me shoes.

A fiery fantasy slammed into him of her stalking into his bedroom wearing a barely there black bra, a postage stamp sized thong, and sharp spike heels. Oh, yeah.

The ambulance hit a speed bump, and as they jostled, he grasped her forearm. "You all right?"

"You've certainly asked me that a lot." Soft, red lips parted into a smile.

Autumn's voice sounded whispery and smooth, and he recalled how her simmering tone once coached him through essays as his English tutor. Heat settled low in his belly and his cock hardened a little. He almost gritted his teeth. Now was not the time to get a raging hard on.

Words slipped from him before he could stop them. "Of course I ask it a lot. I'm worried about you."

He realized how intimate his statement sounded. *Great, Dillon. She'll think you're a nutcase. Do your job and don't upset the patient.*

"It's my job," he said. "Concern for the patient." He inhaled and tried to lower the speed of his out-of-control heart. He cleared his throat. "Mom said you were coming into town and renting a room from her."

"That's right. Your Mom is the greatest." She rushed onward with her trademark ability to bounce from one subject to the next without missing a beat. "She told me—actually several people told me when I got into Clifton—that you'd become a firefighter."

"Does that surprise you?"

She took a moment to answer, and disappointment made him frown. What did the psychologists call it when old tapes played through your psyche and reminded you of your faults? His old tapes turned him into dumpy Jack Dillon who would never amount to anything.

Autumn's features softened, and he could swear she looked at him with genuine affection. "Not at all. By the time I left Clifton, you had all the confidence in the world."

By the time she left Clifton, his determination to become a firefighter was solidified. But not because of confidence.

Unwanted memories intruded.

The sight of Autumn's house erupting in flames. Tongues of fire reaching into the night sky as the hungry blaze devoured the house with incredible speed.

No. He didn't have time to recall the horrible night that changed both their lives forever.

"Yeah, all the confidence in the world." Jack grinned ruefully and sat up straighter. "I was tempted to puff up with pride when I joined the fire department here two years ago, but I managed to keep a straight head."

"I can see how you'd be tempted." Before he could reply, she continued. "I heard you went to college, earned a chemistry and fire science degree, then went to Detroit. Why Detroit?"

"I had a girlfriend from college who lived there."

"Oh. You lived with her?"

Nothing like being personal. She'd always been direct. "Right."

"Hmm."

Damn. Did the woman know what that sound did to a man when it came out all breathy? Autumn's wide mouth drew his attention, and then he realized that like all those years ago, she'd caught him staring. Heat rose in his face.

"I remember, too, Jack."

Did she mean she thought about the wild crush he'd had on her, or the fire? Whichever one, he didn't want to think about it. Better to leave the past in the past where it couldn't hurt either of them.

He realized his other hand still held her arm. He drew back as they arrived at the hospital.

As they rolled Autumn's gurney into the emergency room, that deep, gut reaction pounded inside him. He wanted to know more about her life and what happened over the years she'd been away. Sure, he heard rumors about her from time to time. Try as he might to avoid listening to those rumors, he'd absorbed everything he could learn about her anyway. Guilt replaced excitement.

*Back to work, Jack.* "See you later. Take care."

He waved and smiled as Autumn was wheeled away. She lifted a hand in farewell but said nothing, and her gaze locked on his for a long time until she rounded a corner.

Forcing his feet to move, he headed back to the ambulance and grinned. He wondered what she'd do if he asked her out. Ever since his mother had told him Autumn had come back to Clifton, he'd considered contacting her again despite their shared, painful past.

Now that he'd seen her, mile-long legs and deliciously curved body, he wanted to see if the old Autumn he'd known had changed mentally as well.

Damn. The woman he'd fantasized about for years had stepped right out of his dreams into reality. Excitement swirled in his psyche and pooled in his groin. *Time to do something about it, Dillon.*

## Chapter Two

Icy gusts blew through the car window as the Watcher waited on the corner of Main Street and Wilmington Drive.

He wondered if Autumn MacAllister realized the trouble she'd brought when she returned to Clifton. Did she understand the tumult her reappearance would cause in this town? Old hurts, old games, old memories would roll over this place like an avalanche. Only the most cunning would survive.

Stupid bitch.

He'd followed her through town, keeping back far enough so she wouldn't see. Excitement pumped into the Watcher; spying on her felt almost as good as studying a fire. With closed eyes, he waited for her to get out of her car, and imagined flames licking and surging around her, growing higher and hotter until they exploded.

Arousal spiked and flowed in his body and a hot pleasure grew. *Ah, yes.*

He heard a car door slam and his eyes popped open.

As he observed Autumn pausing in front of old man Hamilton's corner store, the Watcher decided she hadn't changed much. Sure, her hair didn't fall down her back in great, luscious waves anymore. Instead, she wore one of those short messy cuts he despised. She looked superficially like Meg Ryan, with dainty features that made her appear younger than her true age. Yet her body was tall and lanky. Once upon a time, her walk was pure elegance; now it spoke of a don't-screw-with-me confidence. The Watcher supposed her attitude went with her old career.

Of all the dumb-ass jobs for a woman. Women always tried to make out as if they could do a man's work. Stupid women who didn't know their place made him see fifty shades of red. He took deep breaths to calm his pounding heart and stop the sweat beading his forehead.

Again his obsession demanded. Oh, to start a fire now and to feed off the blaze and alleviate the hunger.

*Shouldn't get hacked off now. Too much time invested in this. The bitch pay...and soon.*

He scratched his chin and pondered if Autumn ever thought about those days seventeen years ago. Of course, she must. How could she forget what they'd shared? The Watcher smiled and savored the memories of Autumn's screams and sweet, sweet vengeance.

\* \* \* \*

As Autumn stepped out of the red sedan she'd borrowed from Bitsie Dillon, she stopped and savored the crisp, high altitude air. She drew deeply, appreciating the thin air and its special clean scent. Her gaze landed on the high peaks, and once again she marveled at the snow clinging to blue summits. Sandwiched between the Helena and Deerlodge National Forests, Clifton battled crazy winters that went from light to severe in a heartbeat. Close to the towns of Deer Lodge, Butte and Helena, Clifton brought in cross-country skiers in winter and hikers in the summer. March could be a cruel month in

the mountains. Up there a person could freeze to death or die challenging a fire.

Her breath clogged, unwanted memories entering her thoughts. She closed her eyes and the images came hard and fast.

Powerful winds forcing her and her jump partner too close to the fire. Her partner's line streaming as it refused to open. The jerk as her chute opened, and her partner clinging to her desperately as she tried to save his life. The fear pumping into her as they dropped straight into Purgatory itself.

She gasped and forced her eyes open. *Relax. Forget it. It's all in the past.*

No. Forgetting wouldn't happen. Maybe acceptance.

Some days she thought she'd put aside what happened. Other days she didn't know.

She rubbed the back of her neck, weary. As her tension eased, Autumn took note of the quietness and appreciated the quaint Victorian office buildings and homes that lined Main Street. A few tourists straggled from one antique store to another, carrying their cappuccinos and lattes as they walked. She missed this serenity ... or the illusion of peace. The outer limits of the town sported new fast food chains, a tiny mall, and other modern conveniences. Here she could slip back in to old-time Clifton.

Turning away from the mountains, she walked until she saw Hamilton's quaint corner store. When she'd arrived in Clifton she'd noted with relief that the tiny shop had remained in business.

She recalled her date all those years ago with George Beckett and how they'd entered this store to buy ice cream. God, she'd been so young. A fresh seventeen-year-old with a new tutoring job and exciting ideas for the future; little did she know the complicated road she would travel. She did know she never wanted to see George again as long as she lived. Her throat tightened at the thought of him. She burned with a shame at the thought of what she'd allowed him to do, and the self-respect she'd lost. Shaking her head, Autumn decided she didn't have time to dwell on things she couldn't change. The past must remain the past.

Now that she'd returned to Clifton, she felt unsure. Almost as if she'd never lived here at all. Like a new babe exploring its environment, she would need to swim with caution and negotiate the waters.

She entered the store and noticed not much had changed over the years. Time appeared to have taken a day off.

"Help you find something?" Sylvester Hamilton, or Old Man Hamilton, as everyone called him, didn't appear to have aged. He should be about seventy-five now.

Autumn smiled as he came from around the counter and peered at her with curiosity. Okay, so maybe he did look more stooped, but his pale blue eyes appeared as sharp and clear as topaz.

She put out her hand to shake his. "Mr. Hamilton, you may not remember me. I'm Autumn MacAllister."

His mouth dropped open for a second, then his eyes brightened and amusement filtered through his expression. He retrieved his hand from her grip and scratched his graying, balding head. "By God, if it isn't you. You've grown up a mite. If this doesn't brighten a man's day. You won't mind me putting it to rights with my wife, would you?"

"What?"

"She said you weren't coming into town until next week. She heard it from Manny Phillips over at the garage when we got the alternator fixed on our truck—" He waved

one hand in dismissal. “Well, that doesn’t matter a whit, but you know what I mean. Can’t be spreading around misinformation, you know. Far too much of that going around these days.”

Amusement replaced irritation. “Absolutely. Way too much. Feel free to correct Stella. How is she, by the way?”

Mr. Hamilton proceeded to enlighten her on the new ailments his hypochondriac spouse invented over the last seventeen years, and then the topic turned. “I was sure sorry to hear you’d left Clifton, girly. Everyone missed you something awful.”

“Thanks, Mr. Hamilton.”

She explained she wanted gauze and bandages to take care of the minor cuts on her body incurred during the car accident. After telling her where to find the items, he went back to his counter.

After she finished gathering what she needed in a small shopping basket, he rang her up and took her cash. “I’m a bit surprised you came back to town.”

“Why?”

He stuffed the money in his ancient register. “I don’t mind saying I wouldn’t have come back. You’re one brave soul.”

Heat warmed her face as she remembered the day she’d left. And the day before that. And the day before that. *Why won’t people let me forget?*

Words slipped from her before she could think. “I’m stupid, more likely.”

The door slammed opened, banging against the opposite wall with such force Autumn jumped. At first, she thought the wind caused the problem, but then she heard a cruel chuckle. Something niggled inside her brain, a reminder of a time and place she couldn’t bring to the forefront of her thoughts.

Mr. Hamilton’s eyes hardened as he stared at the doorway, and she turned with deliberation.

A skinny man with harsh, wind-burned features walked toward the counter, his country boy style evident in his threadbare red flannel shirt and his steel-toed work boots. His straight, greasy, medium brown hair needed a cut. Autumn caught the glint of his icicle-cold blue gaze as he took full assessment of her from her hair to her athletic shoes.

Right behind him sauntered a huge man wearing a grimy denim shirt, paint-spotted jeans, and a mean tilt to his lips. Collar-length dark brown hair curled over his head in windblown disarray. His eyes looked like brown pools of misery wrapped in hate. A chill rippled over her body and made the hair on her body prickle.

As she looked from face to face, she tried to place them. The thin one appeared to be in his late twenties, but she couldn’t be sure with his large red nose and the wrinkles around his eyes. A leather-tanned face and a yellowish smile gave her the creeps. His feral grin and messy, longish brown hair lent him a sinister air. She smelled sweat and the cologne designed to hide it.

The big boy possessed a massive body as thick as a redwood that dwarfed her and his partner. Yeah, his body weight, muscle mass and bad breath would overpower anybody.

Skinny man stopped near her and grinned. He chewed on a toothpick and it muffled his words a little. “Well, look what we got here. What’s your name, honey?”

Disgust rolled through her. She reached for her bag of groceries. “Excuse me.”

The bigger man blocked her way. “Wait a minute. Are you new in town? You look

familiar.”

Annoyance tightened her muscles. She took a deep breath and “became” the person she’d been before. Then, like now, one false move could mean disaster. Stiffening her shoulders, she remembered what one of her former bosses once told her. Speak like a man. No maybes. No ifs, ands, or buts. Be painfully blunt.

“There are close to forty thousand people in this town. You’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

Lame statement, but it’d have to do. She started around him, but the skinny guy caught her right shoulder. Panic threatened, but she realized idiots like these fed on fear and would use it to their advantage. Better to play it cool and win through stubborn will. Her mother once told Autumn that she was so stubborn she wouldn’t relinquish an inch even when evidence showed it was no longer in her best interests to continue. Mom hadn’t meant it as a compliment. Perhaps now it would come to good use.

Mr. Hamilton cleared his throat and started around the counter, his expression fierce. “Hey, you leave her be.”

She imagined in his younger days Mr. Hamilton might have challenged these creeps with no problem. Now she worried about him getting hurt. “It’s okay, Mr. Hamilton.” She glared at the other men. “Release me.”

Bag-of-bones didn’t listen. “We’re not through with you yet.”

Fury rose inside her, but she kept her words slow and even. “Maybe you’d like the cops to hear about this.”

“I’ll testify against these skunks,” Mr. Hamilton said firmly.

The bigger man grunted. “Quiet, old man. This is between us and the little lady.”

“What’s your name, little girl?” asked the skinny asshole.

Autumn imagined roasting the sick bastards on a fire pit, but kept her tone calm.

“Autumn MacAllister.”

“If it ain’t Miss MacAllister.” The larger of the two swine grinned like a beast contemplating a meal. He took another step forward. “I thought that’s who you were.”

Oh-oh. Now she recognized them. She couldn’t believe it. Todd Geraldo and Micky Roman were ugly boys seventeen years ago. Now they resembled used up, scruffy creeps with bad attitudes.

Her stomach jumped, then all her muscles drew as tight as a crossbow. Instinct told her they were waiting for her to make one false move and then they’d be on her like stink on shit.

“You can’t possibly think you can get away with this,” she said. “Small city like this ... the cops will find you.”

Scrawny boy didn’t release her or step away. “We ain’t done anything, Missy. Not a damned thing. We’re just trying to be friendly.”

“I don’t have time for this.” She shrugged and the skinny one released her. “And I don’t want any trouble.”

Meaty boy shifted on his feet and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He looked at his thin friend. “Let’s get outta here. We’ve got work to do.”

Without another word, the scumbags lumbered out of the store. Once again, they let the door slam, and the bell clanged loud enough to give her a headache.

Her hands trembled slightly. She put the bag back on the counter. “Those two dolts are still hanging around?” She smiled at Mr. Hamilton, trying to hide nerves. “I thought



Micky used to be the heavyset one.”

“Yep.” Mr. Hamilton leaned on the counter as if all the fight had left him. “That’s right. It’s like they switched bodies. You know how boys are. They change when they become men.”

She almost made an unfeminine snort, but stopped herself. “Obviously some things haven’t changed much about them. I figured they’d be dead or in jail by now.”

Anger simmered in Mr. Hamilton’s eyes. “You all right? You want to call the cops?”

She smiled. “And tell them what? That two creeps verbally intimidated me? It’s not worth it and there isn’t anything the police can do.”

Mr. Hamilton sighed. “Well, you handled them pretty well. Lots of women would have been scared out of their minds.”

She kept her grin firmly in place. “I’ve had plenty of experience with scary situations.” A weird silence grew in the room, until Autumn thought she could hear her heart. “Are they criminals?”

Mr. Hamilton grunted. “No one’s ever caught them for anything illegal. Not sure if that means they’re clean or not.”

After she left the store, she hurried to the car, and as she drove away, she thought about her return to this town. She’d come here to recover, to lie in the comfortable embrace of familiarity and regroup. She recalled the day she left Clifton, almost eighteen and hurting in every fiber of her being. Jack’s tearstained face always returned to her. That image seemed burned into her brain like a brand. She wondered that day, and every day after, if she could have done anything to ease the little boy’s pain. If she’d stayed in Clifton could she have done any more for him?

Unexpected tears rose in her eyes and she tried desperately to hold back the reaction. Had Jack erased those unspeakable days and nights, or did he reflect each day on the unhappiness and horror they’d shared? Did he block it out with work, with rescuing people from the flames? Did it exorcise the unending knowledge that one night had changed their lives forever?

\* \* \* \*

**Seventeen years ago**

**Day of the Fire**

**8:00 am, Saturday**

Insistent knocking woke Autumn from a dead sleep. She blinked in the morning light, total confusion masking her brain until she realized the voice belonged to her mother.

Autumn tried to speak, but her voice croaked. “Okay, Mom. I’m up.”

“You’re going to be late.”

Autumn felt terrible. Last night flashed into her brain with cruel sharpness. She turned on her side and winced. Pain radiated up and down her body, and she questioned if maybe instead of running home she should have walked to the hospital. No, she couldn’t have walked that far last night. Home was closer, and the safety of being in her own room a temporary blanket over harsh reality.

Tears rose to her eyes. It was better to forget last night and George. After she’d broken loose from his powerful grip, she wondered if he would chase her down with his

Firebird and—

*No. I won't think about it.*

"Autumn?" Her mother knocked again.

"Yeah, I'm up. I'm getting in the shower."

At least her Mom didn't open the door before she knocked. So many parents did. She'd heard more than one embarrassing tale from her friends about what parents saw when they opened teenager's bedroom doors. Not that she had much to hide. Since her mom seemed to have contempt for posters, Autumn didn't even try to pepper her bedroom walls with her favorite movie and music stars. Mom would make her take them down, so why bother? She hid her diary under layers of clothes in the closet, so unless Mom went hunting, she wouldn't find it.

Afraid she'd fall asleep again, Autumn slid out of bed and looked at her clock. Eight o'clock already? She thought she set the alarm, but when she checked it, she saw she'd set it to ring at nine instead of eight. Her hair flopped in her eyes as she rushed into her small bathroom. Once in the shower she shampooed her hair like a mad woman. When she went to college, she planned on chopping it off. Maybe she'd get a crop job that she didn't have to slave over.

As she scrubbed her body, she saw bruises here and there. One on her shoulder, on the top of her thigh. Little indications of George's strength and intent littered her skin with stark and undeniable evidence. Water cascaded over her hair, rinsing away shampoo.

"No," she whispered.

She would forget. She'd broken up with George last night and wouldn't have to see him again. As she left the shower and toweled dry, she couldn't seem to get warm. She wished she'd listened to Mom and Dad's warnings about him.

*Stupid, Autumn. You're so stupid.*

She'd never have guessed in a million years that George's reaction to her pointed questions about seeing him kiss Cherry Guillett would bring on a surge of violence.

Autumn managed to get ready in record time. Today she was auditioning for the last school play of the year and then she would go to the park and community center Spring Fling. She hoped Cherry had lied when she said she wouldn't audition for the same part. Somehow, though, she was sure Cherry would.

God, what had turned Cherry against her? Why did Cherry feel she had to have everything?

Autumn gazed into the mirror and her heart felt heavy, tears filling her eyes despite all attempts to squelch them. She gulped and covered her face with her hands.

Things would never be the same again.

### Chapter Three

“Hey, Cherry. Bring me a beer, will ya?”

*As if I don't have anything more to do but cater to his ass. I'm gonna kill him.*

Carlotta “Cherry” Guillett heard George Beckett's voice over the blare of the small television in the miniscule apartment living room. She stopped washing the dishes in the sink and considered reaching for the butcher knife and doing him right now. Visions of blood filled her mind like a grade-B splatter flick.

Chopping off his dick would normally be her first choice, but she wanted to stab him in the heart far more today. She looked at the gleaming handle of the cheap metal weapon and wondered if she'd have the guts to do it. She could claim the constant chatter of the tube made her commit murder. People plead innocent with more ridiculous excuses.

“Hot damn!” His exclamation rang from the living room as a cheer went up from the basketball crowd on television and the know-it-all announcer reported that so-and-so team scored again.

Big shittin' deal. Hair fell into her face as she looked down at the plastic gloves on her hands. She stripped off the gloves and threw them on the speckled lime green counter. One glove slipped off and landed on the linoleum floor. She didn't pick it up. Who in their right mind put white linoleum in a kitchen?

“Cherry, sweetheart! My beer!”

His voice sounded cheerful, but the demand burned her gut. She almost didn't comply, staring at the refrigerator like a crash test dummy. Sweetheart, my ass.

And yet, that one word may have saved him. One word that made everything all right. As long as he gave her the three A's she would cut him slack. Affection, attention, appreciation.

“All right! I'm coming!”

She yanked open the ancient refrigerator and found the light beer. He insisted on cheap light beer. She started toward the living room with his drink, smiling and knowing that someday she'd have a man who drank martinis or owned a fine wine collection.

One guy in particular came to mind as an example. Jack Dillon. *Now there's a real man. God, what I wouldn't do for a fuck with him.*

She almost tripped over the scrawny lab and shepherd mix on the floor by the couch. “Cooley, what are you doing? Get out of the way.”

George's glacier blue eyes glared at her as she handed him the sweating beer bottle. “Leave him alone. He ain't doing anything.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “He takes up space and money. You ought to take him out back and shoot him.”

He took a swig and looked back at the blasting television. “No more'n you take up room.”

Furnace-hot anger burned in the back of her throat. “I thought I told you what I'd do the next time you said something like that to me.”

He put the beer on the scratched plastic coffee table and stood. “I didn't mean anything by it, sweetie. Honest.” He reached for her shoulders slowly. Drawing her against him, he pressed his groin into her stomach. “Didn't mean anything at all.”

A silly, self-assured grin peeled his lips back. George Beckett might have the IQ of a flea, but he knew how to screw, she'd give him that. She gazed up at his tall form. "Watch your freaking basketball game and don't get any ideas. I'm not in the mood."

"You're always in the mood."

*Stupid bastard.* He would remind her of what he could give her. The man was hung like a horse and she liked it as often as she could get it.

"Bastard!" She wrenched out of his arms, stomped to the kitchen and retrieved the butcher knife. She took a heaving breath and turned back to the living room. "I told you what I'd do, George."

When he saw the knife, he paled and held up his hands. "Whoa, now. You know what happened the last time you got that idea out on the lawn."

She remembered the neighbors calling the police and the resultant mess of explanations. "They won't see me coming at you this time. We're in the apartment."

All pretense of charm left his face, and apprehension replaced his smile. "I'll sit right here and drink my beer and won't say a nasty thing all evening."

She lowered the knife. "You do that." She turned away and returned to the kitchen. "I'm going out."

"What for?"

She slid the knife back in the wooden block. "None of your business."

Cherry thought she heard him snicker. "You going to the firehouse to see that pansy-assed fireman again?"

"Maybe." She stared at the peeling yellow paint near the pantry. "And he isn't a pansy. At least he has a job, George. Everyone, including me, has a job in this town." Silence.

"I got a job," he finally said. "Over the lumber yard helping Todd and Micky. They're going to be doing some construction on the new home sites."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"No, really. They're working construction."

She rolled her gaze to the ceiling and sighed. Then she wished she hadn't looked; cobwebs hung from the corners of the dingy ceiling. "You didn't tell me about any job."

"Just found out Friday."

Right.

She visualized reaching for a frying pan. Feeling the weight of cast iron in her hand, she would heft the skillet and walk into the living room again. She'd take aim. Then she'd watch his skull crack open and the crap he had for brains would spill onto the turd-brown faux leather couch.

Instead, she went for her coat in the closet and retrieved her purse. "I'll be late."

George stared at the television and said nothing. Disgusted, she left.

On the way to the mall to spend money she didn't have, she thought about stopping by the fire station to see if Jack was there. She fantasized about what life would be like when Jack realized how he felt about her. When he knew he wanted her for his wife.

A smile parted her lips as she decided to put the final plan into action.

All these years of waiting would soon be over.

\*

George waited until he heard Cherry's car squeal away from the curb, then tossed the empty beer bottle in the overflowing trashcan and grabbed another cold one from the

fridge. He settled onto the couch and thought about how he could appease Cherry.

He never knew what she would do from one minute to the next. Trouble with women was they didn't know what the hell they wanted half the time. Then when they did figure out what they wanted, they wanted it now. She wanted to fuck the fireman, and she didn't even hide the fact.

Jack Dillon. What a piss poor excuse for a man.

George watched the players scamper across the screen, but he didn't see them. Instead, he thought about what it would take to bring down a big guy like Dillon. Sure, the fireman worked out, but then so did he. He could snap the fireman's neck without breaking a sweat.

Another swallow of beer whetted his appetite for a good fight. One of these days he would show Cherry he deserved her lust on a full-time basis. As he drained the beer he plotted his next move. Micky and Todd would be happy to help him.

Dillon would soon lie in the dust, maggots eating his flesh.

Then maybe Cherry would stop treating him like gum on the bottom of her shoe.

Eat shit and die, Dillon.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn's wool and acrylic sweater, which had sounded so comforting on a winter's day, made her skin itch around the neckline. She needed a severe dose of caffeine, and her stomach rumbled because she'd missed lunch. She shifted in her chair and tried to concentrate on the feature write up in front of her. Instead, she glanced out the window and saw new snow flurries flying to earth. Would she have to fight ice tonight on the way home from work?

Deciding she couldn't do anything about the weather, she turned back to her computer and the work the Clifton Times paid her to accomplish.

The small paper consisted of six reporters, including her, and they all crowded into a back area beyond the reception desk and waiting room. Today the steady drone of the computer hard drive and the clack of keys were a backdrop to the fierce wind howling outside the building. At least Booger and Squeeze had left the building that morning on assignment. Artemis "Booger" Carmichael and Thaddeus "Squeeze" Rollins could make enough of a din to drive her to within an inch of insanity.

She paused and rubbed her eyes. "Must get coffee."

"Are you mumbling again, MacAllister?" Ginger Parks asked from her small desk nearby. "Never mind. I'll make a new pot." The young, beautiful auburn-haired reporter smacked her gum and grinned as she walked to the ancient coffeemaker. "You've been muttering under your breath all morning."

Autumn quirked one eyebrow and kept typing. "Being in a car wreck and dealing with the consequences will do that to a person. It threw me off stride."

Ginger laughed, the musical sound pleasant and sincere. "Hey, we're just glad you're okay."

"Thanks. I want to forget about it."

"I think something else is bothering you," Ginger said.

Autumn hit the wrong key and had to backspace. "What?"

"I heard that Jack Dillon was there to rescue you at the accident, and that he called the hospital later that day to see how you were."

Autumn's head snapped up and she pinned Ginger with a stare. "It was professional concern." Autumn returned to typing. "Nothing more, nothing less." She shrugged. "Well, maybe something less."

Ginger flipped her long hair back over her shoulder. "Come on. Jack's a total sweetie. Completely oblivious to my charms, but otherwise a grade-A, number one hottie."

Autumn laughed at Ginger's description. Jack had evolved into a prime example of handsome, self-assured masculinity. So much so, that thinking about him made her blood heat. Heat? Try boil. She couldn't stop thinking about spending time with him. And, if she was very honest with herself, fucking him.

Ginger opened the coffee can and scooped grounds into the filter. "I heard that you used to be friends."

Autumn's fingers refused to touch another key. She shifted in her chair and leaned back. "Used to be are the operative words, Ginger. Used to."

"That doesn't mean you can't renew the friendship, does it?"

As she watched Ginger saunter away to get water, Autumn contemplated what she'd said.

Ginger returned from the kitchen area in the employee lounge moments later. She poured the water into the coffee maker and flipped the on switch. "You know what else I think?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me," Autumn said with mock cheer.

Ginger returned to her desk and propped her jean-clad legs onto her desk. "I think he likes you."

"Where do you get this stuff? I barely know him."

Ginger winked. "A little bird told me."

"Right. You mean, a big, brawny firefighter by the name of Hank Newland?"

Ginger blushed. "Um ... yes. I mean, they're good friends. They tell each other everything."

Autumn sighed and scratched her nose. "You mean you pulled the information out of Hank in the heat of the moment." She hazarded a glance at Ginger, and the woman's face turned deep red. "Am I right?"

With a nervous giggle Ginger said, "Something like that. How did you know?"

"I am a reporter, remember?" Autumn waved her hand around like a wizard. "I see all."

Ginger clasped her hands over her stomach and sank into her chair a little further. "You've worked here less than two weeks. I haven't said that much about Hank."

Autumn laughed. "About twice a day you've said how hot he is. How difficult can it be for me to get a clue?"

"Get a clue about what?" a deep male voice asked from the front.

Autumn smelled the spicy men's cologne before she saw the owner. The scent would be enticing enough if the wearer didn't apply it a little too liberally.

"Afternoon ladies." Elliott Welch, editor of the newspaper, winked at them. "How's it going?"

Autumn answered first. "It's going. I hope you have an assignment for me. I'm about finished with this one."

"Already?" Elliott's smile, broad and attractive, spread over his square-jawed face.

“A woman after my own heart.”

He smoothed his hand through his thick, straight dark hair. A touch of gray at the temples gave him a sophisticated air and contrasted with his youthful, unlined face. She guessed his age at forty, but she couldn't be sure. While his stylish looks seemed somehow out of sync in Clifton, he caught the eye of many local women. They liked his suit-and-tie mentality.

He sat on the edge of Autumn's desk. “How are you feeling today?”

She threw him a crooked smile. “Fine.”

“Could I talk with you in private then?”

As she followed him into his less-than-spacious office, she gave Ginger a “who knows” look and shrugged. He closed the door and gestured for her to take a seat. She settled into the small metal chair in front of his desk while he sank into his leather executive.

Her first impulse was to joke with him. When her stress level escalated she turned irreverent, a trait she tried to curb. Swallowing hard, she waited for him to speak.

Elliott reached for one of the pens on his messy desk. “I've got two areas I'd like for you to cover from now on. You heard about the house fire on District Street yesterday, right? Well, there was another small fire at a store down on Main this morning. Suspicious circumstances.”

“I thought Artemis was covering the fires.” She couldn't bear to call him Booger, even if the word described the irritating man to the maximum.

Elliott nodded. “He was. But I saw his write up last night and it doesn't have what I'm looking for.”

Oh, boy. She didn't know whether she liked this. “Artemis is going to—how can I put this delicately—hate my guts if you give me his story.”

Elliott sighed and tossed his pen back on the desk. It hit a stack of papers and rolled onto the almost-buried ink blotter. “He's within about an inch of getting his butt fired. I need you.”

His implacable gaze spoke of more than professional interest, touched with a heat that startled her. She'd seen similar looks from him before, but always dismissed them as imagination. Now she couldn't be certain. His attention landed for a moment on her well-fitted sweater, and he didn't bother to disguise an unmistakable glint of interest.

“Why not give it to a more experienced person like Ginger? She's been here five years, right? I'm new in this position. I'm still in a learning curve. Or maybe Squeeze would like the assignment.”

For a moment, he said nothing, his scrutiny turning to the date book in front of him. “Ginger can be brassy sometimes and Squeeze has his own work to do.”

A startled laugh, soft but unmistakable, escaped her lips. “Ginger is brassy?”

“You look...” He seemed to fumble for the right words. “You appear more delicate. People don't expect you to come on strong. Then you hit them with the one-two punch and knock them out before they know what's happening.”

As his deep brown gaze touched her again, she decided his words held another meaning as well. “I may be small boned, but I'm very strong.”

Autumn regretted the words. Defense was always her best offense, but she'd spent months trying to forget her body had failed her when she needed it most. She hated that men couldn't see past her looks.

Before she could speak, he stood and walked to one of the windows behind him. He stared into the fading afternoon sunlight and the parking lot. Snow blew across the window.

"Your background bears that out, Autumn. But that's not your job anymore."

*Thanks for reminding me.*

"Of course not." She wanted to brain him for stating the obvious. "So what's the full story?"

"As you know, there are rumors that the fires could be arson. The fire department and the police are keeping a tight lid on the truth. Someone like you can crack this."

"Ginger has a boyfriend in the fire department. Maybe she could get information that way. She seems to be pretty good at pumping him."

He burst into a deep chuckle and she blushed. *Autumn, could you get any more stupid? Watch your tongue.* "I ... I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"I know what you meant." He sat on the edge of his desk, far too close for her comfort. "You're different, Autumn."

"So people tell me." Anger mixed with embarrassment and mingled into one obnoxious soup. "Anything else? I'd better get back to work."

He smiled. He might be her boss, but she'd learned when he hired her that he valued honesty. "Yes. There is. Are you free Saturday night?"

Surprise held her tongue immobile. When she finally loosened it from the roof of her mouth, she asked, "Why?"

"I thought you might like to go to dinner and then dancing at the Top 'O the Morning Club."

Uneasy with the idea, she asked, "Dinner with the boss?"

Looking rueful and a little boyish around the edges, he smiled yet again. "No one would have to know. Think of it as a business meeting."

"Half the town would know as soon as we walked in the building."

He held up his hands. "Okay, okay. I get the picture." His voice dropped lower and his gaze held sincerity and genuine appreciation. "I like you. I wanted you to know. You keeping your job doesn't hinge on having a date with me. This isn't sexual harassment."

So all those long looks and winks did mean something. "I appreciate your honesty. Now I'm going to be honest. I don't date the boss and this could be taken as sexual harassment."

A knock on the door startled her, then it popped open to admit Artemis. Tall, thin, and with a smile as wide as a clown, the tow-headed young man had all the finesse of a baby giraffe.

"You couldn't use the phone to interrupt?" Elliott asked with a drawl.

Artemis blushed, but excitement poured off him. "Sorry, but I heard on the scanner that there's a big fire down in the warehouse district."

Elliott nodded in her direction. "Autumn."

A surge of uncertainty threatened her. She hadn't attended any kind of fire as a professional or spectator in three years. Fear and excitement made her heartbeat quicken.

She stood and headed for the door, ignoring the disappointed expression on Artemis's face. "I'm on it."

"Find out if it was arson," Elliott said as she grabbed her camera, notepad and small handbag.



Arson.

She knew way too much about that subject. Memories flooded back and threatened to invade all her thoughts.

As she entered the small dirt parking lot and climbed into the Focus, the word arson burned into her gut. She put her keys in the ignition and sat frozen. Thrumming with an uncomfortable beat, her heart pumped even faster. Before she could control it, images rose up to claim her.

\* \* \* \*

### **Seventeen years ago**

Harsh voices woke Autumn, their strident, unyielding tones demanding answers.

"She's going to college next fall. Journalism. That's what she wants," her father's voice said. "I don't want to hear any more argument."

*Okay, Dad. Don't listen to anyone. Just say the way it's going to be.* Irritation made Autumn's stomach sour. Why did he have to be so stubborn?

Mom's voice came in, filled with determination. "She wants to be a firefighter just like you, Dirk."

Dad grunted. "That's not a good job for a woman."

Her mother made an unladylike sound. "She isn't going to be like me. She isn't going to settle down, get married, and create babies. It's not in her."

Not in her.

*Really, Momma?* The words stung in a different way. *Why wasn't it in her to marry and have kids?*

Confusion held Autumn in a fugue. She did want to get married and have a family someday. Maybe. If she could be a firefighter like Dad first, that would be the highlight of her life. Who said she couldn't do both?

Seconds passed as she lay in bed, unmoving. The pitch of her parent's disagreement scaled new heights. Sighing, she turned over and pulled the covers up to her ears. In the last year her once-loving parents seemed to have lost their way. Though she tried to make them understand that their brand of communication led to more disagreements, they looked at her as if she'd misplaced her mind somewhere. More often than not, she got in trouble if she spoke up about their arguments. They said a seventeen-year-old girl didn't understand marriage and communication.

Down deep, their anger with each other wounded her. She experienced their discontent like a knife twisting in her gut. Once they'd been so happy ... or so she thought. Her contentment seemed wrapped in theirs, her heart full if they approved of her pursuits. Somehow, though she loved them to pieces, she wondered how much longer they could stay together if their unhappiness continued.

If she went to college and became a firefighter, her dad would disapprove. If she didn't become a firefighter and followed through journalism, Mom would be unhappy. A rock and a hard place didn't describe Autumn's precarious position. She dangled over a cliff with a huge pair of scissors ready to snip her lifeline in two.

She could take journalism instead of fire science. Being a reporter always appealed to her. So did helping kids with their English.

Kids like Jack.

A satisfied glow entered her heart when she thought of tubby, sensitive Jack. A sweet, strong kid so full of heart, and he'd made progress this year in school. She liked thinking she might have influenced him to make great strides forward. When she left for college this next year, she'd have memories of Jack's ready smile. Even their age difference hadn't seemed like a big deal. They'd been able to talk like equals most of the time.

Her father's hard, deep voice echoed as he ascended the stairs. "You want her to be a firefighter because you admire that bastard, Dillon, not because she'd be following in my footsteps."

Autumn's senses went on full alert. Dillon. He must mean Jack's father. She sat straight up, tempted to turn on the bedside lamp.

"Don't start." Her mother's voice held an unforgiving, icy cast. "We've gone over Mitchell Dillon a dozen times. I am not seeing him on the side. I am appalled you'd ever think such a thing."

*Yeah. Don't start talking about that. Don't say what you really think, Dad.* She knew what he thought, and the idea made her want to scream. Mom would never betray him. Never.

"I've seen the way you look at him, Alma. Those smiles and hot looks sure as hell aren't for me." His voice came like a lion's snarl, disbelief and the desire to hurt in every syllable.

"Go to bed." Mom's voice was cool and detached, with almost an I-couldn't-care-less quality.

Autumn heard her parents retreat to their separate bedrooms. Moments later her father turned on his police scanner, and in his inconsiderate way, didn't turn down the volume. She heard the squawk as a fire report erupted from the scanner. Fear and a curious exhilaration rippled over her skin as she heard the situation.

A warehouse fire.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn jerked out of the past. With a glance at her watch, she realized she'd sat in the parking lot of the Clifton Times longer than she should while the past played in her head. Forcing herself into action, she turned on the car and headed toward the conflagration.

She shoved aside her childhood. No time to reminisce on the good old days that never were. She had to admit it to herself. She was excited about seeing Jack in action at the fire.

*Easy now, Autumn. You're getting ahead of yourself.*

New fear threatened her thoughts. What if he did come to this fire and got hurt? No. No. A man like him plunged right through flames unharmed. He possessed enough common sense for two men.

Her adrenaline surged until she almost felt like she'd been in a new accident. She slowed the car, aware of the snow melting as it hit the pavement. Taking deep breaths, she succumbed to a mixture of fascination and stark fear fire always generated inside.

Smoke rose above the tallest buildings in Clifton and the wind blew in a southeast direction. A red haze drifted with the breeze, and she smelled the smoke despite being enclosed in the car. In the distance she heard sirens, and looked in her rear view mirror in

case any emergency vehicles came up behind her. If she took a side street she would be closer to the action and yet not in the way.

Then she saw it.

Orange flames danced from the top floor of the four-story warehouse. Grabbing her equipment, Autumn left her car and headed for the scene. More smoke assaulted her nostrils. She took a deep breath and regretted it. She choked a little on the stench. She rounded a corner less than a block from the fire and saw the emergency apparatus already at the scene. Seconds later, as she quickened her pace, a strange sucking noise filled the air. Deep in her gut, she guessed what would happen.

Flashover.

A blast ripped through the windows on the top floor. She ducked into an alleyway in case debris rained down on the area. Flames roared from the windows with incredible force, the strange whirling noise they created a testimony to their ferocity.

Then she heard something that almost stopped her heart.

“Dillon and Newland are on the third floor! Flames are chasing downward to their position! Stairway blocked! Get a ladder right now!”

## Chapter Four

*Jack is in that building.*

Autumn glanced up at the flames pouring from the windows. A ladder truck dispensed water on the fire, attempting to douse the consuming monster. Fire-heated water steamed and splashed through the windows. She saw firefighters on the roof, probably attempting to chainsaw a hole for ventilation.

Her throat tightened and her heart started a new rhythm of anticipation and edgy trepidation. She knew Jack must feel the same thing. Fear often kept people in this profession alive, along with skill, determination, strength, and perhaps dumb luck.

Right now, she wanted Jack to have all the dumb luck in the world.

Shouted orders mingled with the exclamations of bystanders. Firefighters obtained the extension ladder, and above the noise, she heard the ladder commands necessary for safety. Soon they had the ladder hoisted and secured. More sirens blared as a second truck roared up to the scene and firefighters leapt from the big vehicle.

She knew arsonists often stayed at a scene to enjoy their fiery creations, so she moved nearer the growing crowd. Thirty or forty people watched, their expressions filled with fascination and horror.

She snapped several photos in quick succession, certain to catch each angle. She might not fight wildfires anymore, but she understood the excitement of conquering the burning beast and wanted to document the struggle, as well as the crowd's fascination—just in case the alleged arsonist had stuck around.

After taking several photos, she saw Todd Geraldo and Micky Roman standing in the crowd, their expressions dark and interested, as if they savored the battle. Shuddering in revulsion, she took their picture. Might as well add their nasty mugs to the selection.

A crash echoed from the building, and then more shouts. As she observed the firefighters doing their job, bitterness chased her. She cursed the accident that had stolen her career as a smoke jumper. Breathing deeply, she wrestled the demon into submission. Witnessing the fire unearthed feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. She wasn't too proud at that moment, disappointed that she couldn't watch a fire without wishing she could help. Well, what did she expect? Maybe she wasn't cured of everything that ailed her, mentally or physically. She needed more time.

After all, she'd worked as a newspaper reporter in Denver, then as a smoke jumper during fire season. She'd juggled the two jobs with the knowledge she couldn't fight fires forever. Journalism was her net and her next interest.

Still, old regret lingered.

She turned away from the crowd and scribbled notes on her pad. As an afterthought, she added what she felt. Elliott said he expected her reports to be more than mere fact ventures. She would do two stories; one would be the truth of the event, the other her feelings on what she saw. She strained to hear what the other firefighters said about Jack and Hank.

Her gut clenched as she thought about the danger firefighters faced. A weakened roof could collapse, pitching them into the flames, or down a few floors to their death. A shiver replaced the adrenaline. She forced herself to take more photographs and notes,

grabbing each detail.

Another series of shouts went up as one window broke outward, an ax crashing through the glass from the inside. Two firefighters appeared at the window and climbed out onto the ladder one by one. Knowing one of them must be Jack, she hurried forward in some relief. She jockeyed for position and reached the front of the crowd. She snapped another photo of the men descending the ladder.

“That was close,” one of the spectators said to another person watching the fire. “Too close.”

She knew what he meant. Her heart seemed jammed up somewhere around her throat. Once the two firefighters reached the ground, Autumn strained to see if she recognized them. They still had their breathing apparatus in place. One man’s helmet had Paramedic written across the front under the firehouse Number One.

When the man with Paramedic emblazoned on his headgear reached the ambulance, he ripped off his helmet and self-contained breathing apparatus in a rush, almost as if he couldn’t wait to get it off.

Jack’s face and disheveled hair came into view. Thank God. Relief mixed with the tight feeling in her chest. He looked up and caught her gaze. Pain clearly etched his features, and her concern elevated. Before she could take a step forward, though, his eyes went warm and surprised. A genuine grin curved his mouth. He winked and a swirling, no-holds-bared sexual heat replaced the topsy-turvy feeling in her stomach. Her heart started an unsteady thumping, and she felt scalded by the way his gaze danced over her. Damn the man. He had such a wicked appeal, she couldn’t seem to catch her breath around him.

She clicked two pictures in rapid succession, and an almost cocky expression rushed over his face. So, the man had a bit of ego. Good. A guy in this line of work needed a healthy dose of self-confidence.

Another firefighter slapped him on the back. A wild impulse to run to him gripped her. She almost rushed forward through the crowd, but managed to hold back.

Moments later, she caught sight of a somewhat familiar face in the crowd. Carlotta Guillett. Better known as Cherry. *I’d know that petulant lower lip anywhere.*

Autumn wasn’t pleased to see her former friend. Cherry’s lips pursed, as if she’d seen something she liked. Autumn trailed Cherry’s gaze and saw where the other woman’s attention fixated. Jack.

Interesting.

A second disconcerting thought popped into Autumn’s mind like a bad dream. Did Jack think Cherry was attractive?

Curiosity kept Autumn’s attention on the petite woman. Cherry used to be a brunette with long curls. Now her bottle-produced orangey red, pixie-short hairstyle framed her piquant face. She was, as most men would say, stacked. With her navy blue trench coat and stiletto-heeled black boots, Cherry looked ready to devour and fuck any man that stepped close. Autumn wondered how Cherry walked in the impractical boots. Then again, Cherry had always been one of those women who would rather be in the height of fashion than comfortable. Even with the screw-me shoes, Cherry would stand a couple of inches shorter than Autumn.

Cherry stared back at her. Before Autumn could pretend she hadn’t seen the woman, Cherry started toward her. The redhead’s smile, broad and playing at sincere, made her

nervous. Every muscle in her body tensed for battle.

“Autumn, is that you?” Cherry reached for Autumn and gave her a hug. “It’s Cherry. It’s so good to see you.”

A little stunned at the affection, she had no choice but to return the gesture. “Hi, Cherry.”

“It’s been so long. I heard you’d be in town.” Cherry glanced up at the building. “I suppose you’re doing a story on this, right?”

Autumn nodded, but before she could respond, Cherry grabbed Autumn’s coat sleeve and tugged her away from the mob. “This is going to seem strange, but I stopped by here on my way home from work. I’ve got George’s old clunker of a car and he has one of those emergency scanner things.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what they’re called. Anyway, I heard about the fire and came straight over.”

Autumn managed a half-sincere smile. “I don’t remember you having a penchant for watching fires.”

Cherry’s laugh held mischief. “Oh, I didn’t. But ever since Jack Dillon came back, well, my interest in fire has gone way up.”

The redhead’s gaze devoured Jack, the intensity of her longing and lust almost embarrassing to witness. When Autumn felt the first stirring of unwanted jealousy, she slammed back the emotion with a vengeance. *Good God, girl, are you nuts?* Autumn decided she didn’t want to pursue a conversation about Jack, especially if it meant watching Cherry drool at the mention of him.

Suspicious, Autumn said, “I’m a little surprised at your greeting. When I left Clifton all those years ago we didn’t exactly part on good terms.”

Doubt flickered through Cherry’s large eyes, then vanished. “Really? I don’t remember. We were just kids, after all.” Again, that sexy laugh she seemed to use with everyone rippled in the air. “Besides, I don’t hold grudges. They’re so non-productive.”

*She doesn’t hold grudges?* Autumn had never done anything to Cherry, so there was no reason for Cherry to hold a grudge in the first place. The Cherry she recalled held a core of selfishness and an ego larger than Montana. Still, people could change.

“So you work at an accounting firm?” Autumn asked.

“How did you know that?”

“Bitsie Dillon told me.”

“Oh.” Cherry’s voice sounded disappointed. “And here I was hoping you’d heard some truly juicy gossip about me.”

“Give me time.”

Cherry’s glance turned razor sharp, within an inch of looking like she’d retort. Just as fast the look disappeared, making Autumn wonder if she’d seen it at all. “This town is bad for that, I’ll admit. You’d think as large as we are we would be rid of that small town mentality.”

“Never can tell.” *What about Jack? Are you dating him?* Autumn clamped her lips shut to keep from asking.

“Well, I should go.” Cherry’s smile gleamed with a friendliness Autumn didn’t believe. “Jack is delicious to watch though, isn’t he? Touching all those gorgeous muscles is simply too divine.” Cherry threw another grin in the mix as she started to walk away.

“Later,” Autumn mumbled as the woman walked down the block.

Touching all those gorgeous muscles. Autumn felt every one of her muscles tense in reaction to Cherry's statement. Did Cherry mean she'd been pawing Jack? Everything in Autumn rebelled, but she took a huge breath. She hadn't come here to assess Jack's musculature or his love life, she'd come here to do a job.

She swung her gaze back to the fire and caught sight of Jack at work, his headgear in place once again. Unable to take her gaze off him, she took photograph after photograph. Admiration and a tiny bit of jealousy welled inside her. She wanted to be on the other side of the police line, fighting the beast.

As the fire died to smoke and embers, she realized most of the photographs she'd taken featured Jack. Jack with a wet head, sweaty face, soot-smudged cheeks and chin.

She forced herself to interview Hank, and the big, meaty man with the balding head and huge handlebar mustache didn't appear to mind answering her questions one iota. Determined not to allow her gaze to swing toward Jack one more time, she headed back toward her car and the newspaper.

"Autumn! Wait up!"

Startled, she turned and saw Jack walking at a brisk pace toward her. He'd removed his Nomex jacket, a part of his firefighting gear that kept flames from burning through to his skin. Though he looked grimy and disheveled, her heartbeat increased in pure female appreciation. Muscles rippled in his arms, his wide shoulders and somewhat rolling gait showing his unmistakable virility. He might be sweaty, but she'd love to pull him into the nearest alley and discover how delicious he tasted. His lips. His chest. His cock. An image of doing just that flipped into her head with lightning speed.

*Geez, Autumn. Slow down.*

Another part of her rebelled. Why slow down? So she'd discovered Jack wasn't a geeky kid anymore. He couldn't read her mind and no one else could. A little down-and-dirty fantasy never hurt anyone.

Then again...

A little down-and-dirty reality with Jack might just be what she needed to liven up things in her life. She could have fun, but didn't need to get more involved than that.

"Hi." She forced energy into her voice, though watching the blaze seemed to have drained her in a mysterious way. "Couldn't let Hank be the only one interviewed, eh?"

Again, he winked, and she wondered if other women found his thick-lashed eyes mesmerizing. "Hey, watch it."

After they laughed, she asked, "Did your mom get in touch with you? She called me earlier to let me know she has a late committee meeting at the community center. So our dinner together will have to be rescheduled."

A gentle grin touched his lips. "Too bad. I was looking forward to catching up on the good old days."

"Well," she said with a sigh, "you know what they say about the good old days. They usually weren't that good. Besides, your consolation prize is being in the newspaper tomorrow. Hank might have gotten the interview, but your picture will be front page stuff, I'll bet."

"Really?" He didn't sound convinced. "That'll be different. I've never been in a newspaper before for anything except—"

He seemed to remember at the same time she did. The fire seventeen years ago had brought the Dillon and MacAllister families to the forefront of the news for weeks. Old

pain pierced like a deep splinter.

Her ache must have shown on her face, because he squeezed her shoulder, then released her. "Sorry. Didn't mean to bring it up."

She managed a smile. "I don't hide from the past, Jack." She shrugged. "Not much anyway."

Doubt covered his face. Could she be that transparent? Did he realize that an occasional nightmare reminded her of that horrible night years ago?

Jack gave a deep, raspy cough, and before she could think about what she was doing, she took hold of his bicep. "Are you all right? I saw you coughing earlier."

"Piece of debris fell on me when part of the roof of the warehouse collapsed. Knocked me over and took the wind out of me."

"God, Jack."

"I'm fine." He looked back at the continuing clean up. "Look, I've got to go." Jack's gaze did a quick, but undeniably admiring sweep over her. Hot, sexual longing filled her as she recognized the interest in his gaze. "Can we have dinner tonight? The two of us?"

Surprise made her mouth pop open, but it took her a few seconds to answer. "I don't see why not. I'll be at the newspaper late tonight anyway, and I'll be starving."

"Would seven o'clock work for you?"

As his gaze took another quick foray over her, all she could think was that Jack had just given her a devouring once over. Twice. "That sounds great."

He waved and trotted back to his rig. "Gotta go. See you later!"

As he left, she wondered what she would learn about Jack tonight. She didn't trust the crazy feelings zipping around inside her. Part of her said she played with fire in more than one way. She couldn't afford to become attached to Jack, and if her pulse rate was any indication, her body was well on the way to wanting him.

Maybe tonight she'd release inhibitions and allow whatever happened to happen. After all, she'd returned here to remake herself, and what could be a better way than to indulge in a little hot and heavy sexual play with no strings attached.

She smiled. *Watch out, Jack.*

\* \* \* \*

The Watcher waited for Autumn to leave, then for the firefighters to continue cleanup. The Watcher clenched his fists at his sides as he saw Autumn speak with Jack Dillon.

Hatred exploded in the Watcher's gut.

No denying that Dillon had a serious hard-on for Autumn; the way his eyes ate her up when he thought no one was watching was one hundred percent screaming need.

Pleasure seeped away now that the fire lay extinguished, no longer the frightening, exciting animal. The Watcher couldn't blame the firefighters for destroying the flames. Yeah, firefighters must love destruction in their own way. They felt that pull in their groins and a spike of lust. Most of them would deny the sexual urge, though some went home and screwed their wives for the release.

Temporarily sated, the Watcher decided to leave. Soon the craving would come again, and the Watcher wouldn't wrestle against it. Fighting back urges for years hadn't taken away the desire, it only delayed the inevitable.

Sighing, he drifted from the area, the memories of flames keeping the yearning alive.



\* \* \* \*

Over the bustle and noise of Fire Station Number One, Jack busied himself in the kitchen making a huge pot of chili. Rolling his shoulders, he let out a little grunt of discomfort.

His muscles hurt. Of course, being hit in the ribs by a big-ass piece of wood didn't help. Cleanup at the warehouse had taken a long time, and he'd promised the guys he would make chili even though his shift finished long ago. Maybe, just maybe, he could get out of here soon, have a hot shower and race to the paper in time to see Autumn.

Autumn. Whether she knew it or not, she represented full-on, nothing-held-back sex. Every time he thought of her, his cock reacted, and he thought of her often. He'd awakened more than once after dreaming about her naked body against hers, but here at the firehouse he couldn't do a damned thing about a world class hard-on other than to grit his teeth and shove thoughts of her out of his head. A woman had never preoccupied his mind this much, especially not on the job.

There was only one way to eliminate the effect she had on him. Okay, maybe two ways.

He could go home and jerk off and forget how her rounded, full breasts pushed against her shirt, how her mile-long legs would feel wrapped around his hips as he pounded his cock into her repeatedly.

Or he could have sex with her. Enough to satiate this craving.

Jesus. His gut clenched and then his cock twitched as heat filled his loins. When he'd seen her at the fire he'd wanted to find an alley somewhere and kiss her senseless. Raw need had clamped a hold on him and demanded action. His obsession had promoted him to ask her to dinner.

Problem was, she may not want to go to bed with him. He'd seen interest in her eyes, make no mistake. Her gaze had cruised over him more than once, and he even thought he'd caught her staring at his cock once.

Mother of God save him.

A large hand clamped on his shoulder and made him jump. His buddy, Hank, squeezed his shoulder and let go.

"How's the ribs?" Hank asked.

"Everything's cool."

"That bad, eh?"

"Naw. I'm just a little sore."

"Did you crack something?"

"Nope. A few bruises and muscle strain. That's it."

Hank reached for a spoon and dipped it in the chili for a taste. "Man, this smells great."

"Better watch out," Jack said. "This is high test."

The spoon didn't even reach Hank's mouth. "Damn."

Jack laughed, then groaned when his side protested. "Man, see if I ever get on the receiving end of a two-by-four again."

Hank glared at the spoon in his hand, as if he might scare the spices right out of the chili. "I know what your real problem is."

Jack put the lid on the bubbling creation and leaned against the counter. "And I suppose you're gonna tell me?"

“Have I ever *not* given you my opinion?”

“No.”

“You should take some time off, bud. You haven’t had a vacation in forever.”

Jack decided he wouldn’t make a big deal out of Hank’s assertions. The man held onto ideas like a dog with a bone. “Yeah. I need a vacation. What’s that have to do with having the crap kicked out of me by a fire?”

Hank looked triumphant. “Nothing. I just wanted to hear you admit it.”

Jack grunted. “That’s what I thought.”

Hank quit staring at the spoon in his hand and took the plunge. As he tasted it, he made significant sounds of approval. When he swallowed the chili, he instantly went for water in the refrigerator, while Jack laughed.

Hank’s downed half a bottle of water. “Jumpin’ Jesus! Fuck me!”

Jack gestured to the pot on the back of the stove. “The low octane stuff is in the other pot.”

Hank smiled. “You son of a bitch.”

“Hey, I warned you.” Jack groaned. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“I outta kill you.”

“But then you wouldn’t get my chili recipe.”

“I thought you cut me out of your will a long time ago?”

Chief Frank Hallam came around the corner. He had a wiry strength in his tall, spare body. His graying hair, thick as a bush, had a tendency to stick up.

“That smells good,” the Chief said.

Hank stirred the non-lethal variety. “Good and hot. If you want to keep the hair on your head I suggest this version.”

Chief Hallam shook his head. “What are you worried about? You haven’t got much more hair to lose.” Before his subordinate could retaliate with a wisecrack, Hallam said, “I heard a rumor that Dillon here is going to be spread all over the paper tomorrow morning. I guess he thinks it’ll get him a promotion to Lieutenant before he even has to take the tests.”

Jack stopped spreading butter on French bread. “What?”

Hank turned away from the chili pot. “That doesn’t surprise me a bit. I saw him turn all manly for the camera when we were out there.”

Jack snorted. “Like you wouldn’t have done the same thing.”

Hank wagged his bushy eyebrows, reminding Jack of Mr. Clean. “You’re damned right. I’ve always wanted to pose for one of those firefighter calendars. For charity, you know.”

Jack groaned and rolled his gaze to the ceiling. “Right.”

“Hey, it’s a good thing.” Chief Hallam moved closer to the stove and sniffed. “It keeps up a good image of the fire department, you know.”

“Calendars?” Jack asked in disbelief.

Chief Hallam’s cheeks turned pink. “The newspaper publicity.”

Hank sat in a hard plastic chair next to the dining table. “He can’t fool me, Chief. I saw the way he looked at that reporter. What’s her name?”

“You know who she is,” Jack drawled.

Hank clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair. “Miss smoke jumper. The one you’re having dinner with tonight.”

“Former smoke jumper,” Jack said.

“What happened? She couldn’t cut it?” Hank asked.

Jack glared at Hank, surprised by the defensiveness that reared inside him. Reining back a retort, he spoke evenly. “She was in an accident on the job. Busted up her knee and cut her career short.”

“Where did you hear that?” Hank looked suspicious. “Did Bitsie tell you?”

“I’ve heard things over the years.”

Hank crossed his arms and smiled. “So you’ve been keeping track of her?”

Not sure whether to be irritated or amused, Jack shook his head. “Hank, shut up. You’re gossiping like an old woman.”

With his trademark booming laugh, Hank did as told. The Chief smiled and left the room.

## Chapter Five

Autumn closed the document on her computer and glanced at her watch. Six-thirty. Soon she'd be with Jack, and she couldn't deny the idea excited her. She rubbed her eyes and leaned back in the chair for a moment with her eyes closed. She shouldn't be too wound up about having dinner with an old friend. After all, Jack might think she was attractive, but that didn't mean he wanted to engage in a full-blown sexual tango with her. Then again, the way he'd looked at her spoke of sex.

Did she want just sex? Something to remove this burning need for him?

Yes. She didn't plan on staying in Clifton. Better to scratch the itch and then forget it.

After shutting down the computer, she entered the employee lounge and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. She took several sips, realizing she'd managed to dehydrate while clacking away at the computer. She'd been so absorbed in finishing the article on the fire to make the deadline, she hadn't moved from the desk.

"Hi, Autumn."

Autumn almost left her skin. She gasped and whirled around. The water bottle went flying and landed on the floor, spraying water everywhere. She crouched down and snatched the bottle before it could lose more water. She glanced up at the six feet plus of solid muscle filling the doorway. But it wasn't the man she expected to see.

His dark brown hair spiked upward like porcupine bristles. His smooth, almost baby-face handsomeness gave him the appearance of a much younger man. A small scar above his right eyebrow kept him from looking deceptively mild, and the hard gleam in his eyes told the truth. His worn blue sweater emphasized powerful shoulders and arms. His jeans were too tight, emphasizing his cock. At eighteen he'd been a formidable looking boy, but now he appeared stronger, taller, wider, and meaner.

She thought she'd locked the outside door, but maybe not. Nauseous, she swallowed hard.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't recognize me, darlin'?"

The man's voice held the gravelly quality associated with too many cigarettes, or maybe too much booze.

"George." Her heart slammed in her chest like a jackhammer. "What are you doing here?"

His concentrated gaze, filled with an unsavory intent, made the hair on the back of her neck prickle. "I heard you came back to Clifton and had to see for myself."

Sweat popped out on her forehead and she realized she was breathing too fast. *No. Regain control, Autumn. You can't let him see what he does to you.* "I'm about to leave. I've got somewhere to be, so if you'll—"

He stepped forward and she thought her heart would stop. He smiled like a komodo dragon moving in for a snack. "We need to talk. Get to know each other again. There are things you gotta know."

Anger seeped through the fright. "You think I'd want to see you again after what you did to me?"

He smiled, and she often wondered why the heavens had wasted good looks on this

scum. “We were dating.”

“And that makes it all right? You took advantage of me in the worst possible way, George.”

As soon as the words escaped her mouth, she couldn’t believe how she’d understated what happened. She couldn’t push the ugly truth past her lips.

“It’s what you wanted.” His soft tone, laced with shards of menace, made her heart pick up speed again.

Cold shivers raced down her back. “God, if I had a dime for every time I heard a man say that about—”

His laughter cut her short. “Is that all you wanna say to me?”

He took another step forward, and every fiber in her body stiffened in reaction. She could fight him, but she would lose. He had almost a foot in height on her and tremendous strength.

“Heard you did some smoke jumpin’ in Colorado. Is that right?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He crossed his arms and sniffed. “Interesting. But now you see it wasn’t the right thing to do, eh?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“A little woman like you can’t do that kind of job.”

Resentment burst inside her. “George, I can drag a hundred and seventy pounds. I’ve lugged equipment on my back that weighs upwards of fifty pounds or more over miles of rugged terrain. That hardly qualifies me as a little woman. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m tired of talking.”

Dislike flickered in his eyes before he hid it with trademark charm. Didn’t he know his greasy personality leaked through that poor excuse for charisma? He let his arms drop to his sides, and his feet spread apart.

“A woman is a woman. You should have stayed in Clifton and married me.”

“Married you? I don’t believe I’m hearing this. You have to be insane. After what you did...” She couldn’t finish, the tightness in her throat threatening to choke her. She headed for the doorway, intent on brushing by him. “If you’ll leave now, I won’t have to call security.”

“Kinda surprises me that they’d let a little girl like you be in here all alone.” His smile defined the word feral. George’s hand lashed out and he grabbed her left arm.

“Wait a minute.”

She jerked back on his tight grip. He didn’t let go. “I swear to God, if you don’t release me, I will cut off your dick and feed it to you.”

His robust laugh filled the room as he tossed back his head, but he didn’t release her. “You’d like a taste of my dick, wouldn’t you?”

Revulsion made her shiver, and she hated herself for not holding back the impulse to cringe. She tugged on his grip, but his fingers pressed into her skin. She barely held back a groan of pain. Seconds later she heard a door open in the outer office.

“Autumn?”

Jack’s voice came from outside the staff area, and relief almost made her giddy. “I’m in here, Jack.”

She wrenched backward and George released her. She dashed out the door and almost bumped into Jack coming around the corner. His hands locked on her upper arms

as he caught her. A gasp escaped her as he gripped the part of her arm George had bruised.

Jack's features tightened with concern. "What's going on?"

George swept by them, his grin full of triumph. He'd enjoyed scaring the hell out of her, no doubt. "Hey, Dillon."

Jack's mouth narrowed into a dangerous line as he watched the other man. "What are you doing here, Beckett?"

"Just visiting an old friend." With a laugh that echoed in the room, he pointed at her. "I'll see you later. You can bet on it."

George slammed the door and the glass rattled.

Jack looked down at her, anger clear in his eyes. "What the hell was he doing in here?"

"I don't know. I was back in the lounge when the creep showed up and scared me to death." She took one deep breath, then another, trying to regain a sense of equilibrium.

His fingers caressed her shoulders. "What did he do?"

"Nothing. He's a creep, that's all."

Jack's eyes blazed, his jaw line hardening to granite. "Son of a bitch."

She chuckled weakly to ease the tension. "You can say that again."

His fingers slid down her arms, then back up again, and this time she couldn't avoid a small gasp of pain. "You're trembling."

He drew her into his arms, and she nestled against his hard warmth with a sigh. She'd imagined what it would feel like to be in Jack's arms, and she discovered reality felt ten times better. Hard and big, his body cradled hers tenderly. She absorbed the heat, strength, and caring in his touch. As his hands traced over her back, and she put her head on his shoulder, she started to relax. Appreciation for his body touching hers mixed with happiness he was here.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked.

"I think he bruised my arm."

"Son of a bitch!"

She pulled back a little to look into his face and smiled. "I think we've established that."

"Let me see."

To her surprise, a blush slipped into her cheeks. Stifling her embarrassment, she attempted another smile. "I'd have to take off my blouse for you to see it. I'll look at it later."

His brushed his fingers over her back. "You're shaking like crazy. The sick bastard assaulted you. We should call the cops."

She shook her head. "It wasn't that bad."

"The hell it wasn't."

"Please. Let's get out of here."

The dark quality in his eyes, though, said the conversation wasn't finished.

\* \* \* \*

Jack didn't like the tight look around Autumn's eyes as she sank into the booth opposite him. She acted jumpy, evidence that Beckett rattled her sense of security. He knew under her deceptively delicate features resided a well-honed mental and physical

strength. The thought of Beckett manhandling her, though, sent Jack's blood pressure into orbit.

As they'd driven to the restaurant, Jack felt a nagging suspicion about what happened at the newspaper. He struggled to hold back the urge to hunt down Beckett and rip his lungs from his chest.

To even out his chaotic thoughts, he decided to start their dinner conversation with a safe topic. "My mom said you've had to get rides to work. I have an older SUV you can borrow until you find another car. I have a truck, too, so it isn't a big deal."

"That would be fantastic. Are you sure it's all right?"

"You bet. What are friends for?"

A glimmer of humor returned to her face. "Thanks, Jack. I hope I can repay you one day."

"You can repay me tonight." He allowed his voice to turn huskier and deeper and laced with sensual nuances she couldn't miss.

Her gaze snapped to his and he noted the heavy-duty attraction simmering in her gaze. One of her eyebrows lifted, and a teasing glint entered her eyes. "Oh?"

"Yeah." He shifted a little as his cock grew hard and hot against his jeans. "I want to kiss you."

Her eyes widened, and a slight flush filled her cheeks. "You're very direct."

"I've learned to be over the years."

"This is sudden."

He shook his head. "No, it isn't. I've been fantasizing about it since I was a teenager."

Her grin was tip-tilted and unrepentant. "That long?"

"God, yes."

She laughed, and the gentle, throaty sound hardened his cock even more. *Fuck me.* Damn, if she didn't look beautiful as hell. He liked her responsiveness and the way she didn't back down. They went silent for a moment, and he took her in with a single-minded enjoyment he couldn't seem to control.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

He leaned on the table, keeping his voice low. "Sorry. I was staring."

"Yes, you were."

He sighed and winked. "It's because you're so damned beautiful."

Her smile wasn't self-deprecating, and she looked him directly in the eye when she said, "Thank you."

They settled into silence as they perused menus, but primal feelings built inside him. Jack cared what happened to her with a fierceness that shook him. Since the day she'd walked back into his life, he'd known she had always remained inside him, a part of him. He'd spent way too much time just daydreaming about her. She was here. He was here. Now he intended to make good on the fantasies.

After bringing them colas, the waiter took their orders. As they sipped their drinks, Jack decided he had to know what business Beckett had with her.

"So what did George want?"

Wariness filled her eyes. "I don't know why he was there, or even how he knew I was still at work."

"Maybe he's been watching you."

She pulled her jacket back around her shoulders. "I—he took me by surprise."

Jack felt his temperature rise. "Tell me everything he said."

She glanced up sharply. "I told you everything."

"Look, let's put it this way. Whatever relationship you had with him in the past, the man's a bastard. Stay away from him."

"I don't know what he has in mind, but I also don't appreciate being ordered around. I won't tolerate it."

*Easy, Dillon. You're making this worse.* He scrubbed a hand over his jaw in frustration.

She fiddled with the straw wrapper lying on the table in front of her. He placed his hand over hers and stilled the motion. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to come out as an order. I've seen the result of violence against women. We've been called out to assist on a few cases of domestic abuse when a woman was injured. George is on the edge. He could be the next guy we hear about getting arrested for beating his girlfriend."

"I'm not his girlfriend, Jack."

"I realize that." He drew his fingers over hers in an involuntary caress. "What I'm trying to say is that he's dangerous. Cherry is nuts for being with him."

"Cherry Guilett?"

"Yeah. She lives with him."

Autumn made a soft noise of disgust. "I should have guessed. She was at the warehouse fire the other day and she mentioned she had his car. She's insane."

It didn't surprise Jack that Cherry had shown up at the fire. More than once he'd looked around a fire scene and seen her there.

When the waiter brought their food, Jack watched Autumn pour vinaigrette dressing on her salad with a nonchalance that made him wonder if she hadn't perfected the skill of stuffing her feelings down. She would have to jam back some emotions in her old line of work. Crying would give the impression of weakness, even if the tears had nothing to do with emotion.

He ate his BLT, and she dug into her salad with a distracted air. When the silence stretched too long, he spoke. "Something bad happened between you and Beckett all those years ago, didn't it?"

She kept her gaze on her food. "Can we not talk about this right now? I don't ... it's all in the past."

"A lot of things happened in our past. Did you talk to someone about it?"

"I didn't talk with anyone about what happened between me and George."

He swallowed hard. "What about the fire?"

"I discussed it with my Aunt Edith and Uncle Bedford after I left Clifton and moved in with them after the fire. I talked mostly to my aunt. My uncle wanted to pretend it didn't happen, I guess."

"You and I didn't discuss the fire."

"No, but you were a boy, and I was too young to know I should talk and release the feelings." She kept her gaze pinned to her food. "I remember after your father's funeral. You were so broken up. I don't recall ever seeing a boy cry as hard as that before."

A fiery lump settled in his throat. Old emotions returned, misery and a feeling of no one understanding top among them. He put down his sandwich. "When you didn't cry and looked like a zombie at my Dad's funeral, I thought you didn't care."



She looked up from her plate. "You know I cared."

"I do now."

Her gaze filled with sudden hurt. "I'm a control freak about certain things. I guess it was a reaction to the chaos, and the only way I felt I could manage."

"Did it help? Keeping all your emotions in check?"

Autumn shoved the lettuce around on her plate. "I'm not sure anymore."

He hated the note of resignation in her voice. Suffering and a wave of anxiety took over her expression. Glittering and sharp, an answering stab of empathy cut into his midsection.

She crunched a piece of carrot. "It was sort of a shock. I blamed myself for about a hundred things I couldn't have prevented. And I felt betrayed. By everything and everybody. I had no energy left to comfort you." Her voice became raspy. "You were my friend, but I abandoned you."

Again he reached for her hand, pressing it gently. "It's all right. Maybe someday you'll trust me enough to tell me what happened between you and Beckett."

"It's not a matter of trust. It's in the past, and I don't live in the past." Her gaze shuttered. "Can we start again and keep this light, Jack? I didn't come to Clifton to rehash the past. I needed time to chill, not dredge up old feelings and hurts." Her gaze, always spot-on and uncompromising, tackled his attention and held it securely. "I'm not staying in Clifton."

*Okay, so that's the way she really wants it.* Part of him felt relief. After all, he didn't want things to become heavy either. He could exercise these physical cravings for her without fear of her clinging or wanting something more. Good.

He nodded. "I understand." He settled back in his seat and finished his BLT. "Sorry I jumped into the deep end about Beckett. I was just worried he'd hurt you."

"Thanks for caring."

\*

"Always."

Jack's scrutiny, assessing and disconcerting, sent fine shivers of desire through Autumn's belly. Thick and concentrated, all her primordial female desires flared. Her nipples went hard and a delicious tingle throbbed between her legs. His thoughtfulness and the hunger in his gaze sent fresh waves of sexual desire pulsing to the forefront. God, she wanted him. But she didn't want to talk about the past anymore, and the best way to throw him off was with sex.

"You said you used to fantasize about me?" she asked.

Jack leaned forward, his attention riveted on her. "Yeah." He grinned, and his gaze sparkled with devilish amusement. "From about the time I was fourteen. I was a slow starter, but when the hormones hit me, watch out."

She returned his smile, even though his revelation threw her off guard. "Teenage boys are always a raging ball of hormones, aren't they?"

He tilted his head slightly to the side, curiosity mixing with humor. "Some worse than others. My daydreams were pretty explicit, and so were my dreams at night. And it didn't stop in college, either." His gaze sparkled with high-potency sexual nuances. His voice husky and warm as velvet.

Her breath shortened, and her heartbeat quickened. "I'm flattered. Tell me more."

He touched the back of her hand with his index finger. She inhaled softly, her breath

stuttering as warmth spread through her entire arm.

His hand encompassed hers, holding it gently to the table as his fingers curled around hers. Wild urges tickled her libido, then blew into full-fledged awareness. Without pausing a beat, her imagination flooded with images of his body naked and powerful, his hand wrapped securely around the full, hard column of flesh nestled between his legs. Warmth spread lower until it came to full blossom between her legs. Suddenly, she had to know the details.

“When you fantasized, what did you ... think about specifically?” She squeezed his fingers subtly.

“You name it, I thought of it.” He looked down at the table a moment, his long dark lashes thick and veiling secrets. When Jack looked back up, his gaze captured and held. “I thought about making love to you everywhere and anywhere.”

Making love. God, the words sounded so erotic on his lips. Most men didn’t call it making love—they referred to it as having sex, fucking. You name it, they usually came up with a less romantic term for sleeping together. Husky and deep, his voice stirred desires inside her she thought long abandoned.

He smiled crookedly. “Most of the time I imagined you lying on my bed, and we were doing it missionary style.” He shrugged. “Sometimes a teenage boy’s imagination doesn’t venture much farther than fucking quick and easy.”

Her lips quirked and then she couldn’t restrain a soft laugh.

Jack didn’t release her hand, his touch so gentle and exquisitely arousing. “I spent a lot of time jerking off in the shower.”

His expression grew serious as he turned her hand over in his, cradling it palm side up. He traced his index finger over her palm, and sharp, sweet pleasure darted over her skin. Her entire body flushed with a growing fever she didn’t want to extinguish.

“By the time I got to college, I’d developed a whole scenario of positions and situations,” he said.

Autumn’s lips parted. She wanted to say something, but her thoughts jumbled, her mind filled with flashes of erotic possibilities.

“Ever since I saw you again, those dreams have come back,” he said. “And the fantasies are richer. More explicit.”

“God.” She didn’t even try to keep the breathy tone from her voice.

Her gaze tangled with his, her heart pounding a frantic new beat to keep up with the undeniable flutter low in her belly. She stood on a precipice with him, one she *wanted* to leap off of. She could quench the newfound desire boiling inside her.

The waitress approach and handed them the check. Jack insisted on picking up the tab this time, and she let him.

“Sure you don’t want to go dutch?” she asked as they slid from the booth.

He slipped his arms around her waist and fit her close to him. “Not this time. Besides, you can pay me back with that kiss.”

“Ah, I see.” And man, did her body understand. Held near Jack’s powerful body, she yearned to share that kiss and see what would happen.

“Do you?” His question teased, and she didn’t answer. Let the mystery build. Let the games begin.

When they reached his truck and slid inside, he said, “You can pick up the SUV tonight if you want.”

“Why not? Sounds like a good idea.”

They drove in silence and within a few minutes they pulled into his condo parking lot next to his other vehicle.

Once out of the car, he slipped the key from the key ring and handed it to her. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” She glanced at the truck. “Man, this is a big one.”

He smiled and moved closer to her. As she stood next to the SUV, he placed one hand on the car near her head and leaned in. “Can you handle it?”

“Believe me, I’ve handled machinery much bigger than this.”

As he hovered near, his gaze sweeping over her in the dim light, she felt vulnerable and strong all at once. She shivered deep inside, but not from fear; she instinctively understood she could trust Jack one hundred percent. Everything about him felt honorable and strong. Indulging in a fling with him while she stayed in Clifton would mean pleasure and fun without entanglements. Deep desire built within her core until she trembled.

“Thanks for everything, Jack.”

She didn’t give him a chance to take a kiss. She could see the need growing in his eyes, and feel the craving building momentum inside her. Without hesitation, she slipped her fingers over his broad shoulders and leaned into him. His head lowered and then ... oh ... yes...

His mouth covered hers gently. She inhaled softly as his mouth molded and shaped. The soft exploration of his kiss surprised her, yet the chasteness inflamed and taunted. Sensation exploded.

As his body pressed her lightly to the side of the truck, carving the impression of hard muscles, his hands came down on the car on either side of the head. Awareness flooded her as his warm, softly ravishing kiss tasted her lips. His unhurried approach was so delicious, the erotic pressure sending a delirium of feelings through her. She responded to his kiss with tentative movements, exploring him as much as he did her. Tight craving coiled in her loins and desire moistened her body in preparation for sex. She inhaled deeply and savored his warm scent.

Again, she explored as she slid upward, cupping his jaw. Five-o’clock shadow bristled under her fingers and sent tingles through her skin. Still he did nothing more than kiss her with coaxing investigation, until her body ached, her desire rising higher by the second. She thought she’d come unglued under the hot brand of his lips. Hunger for his touch drove her to slip her fingers back down his shoulders.

He drew away long enough to bury his face in her neck and murmur with husky restraint, “God, Autumn.”

She quivered in delight at his obvious desire. “Just like your fantasies?”

“Twenty times better.”

Jack pressed soft kisses to her neck and her nipples tightened and tingled. She wriggled a little in his arms, wanting his fingers on her nipples, pulling, tugging, licking.

Power radiated from him, and she felt the tension grow inside Jack, as if he might coil and snap. His cock was a rigid bar of flesh against her belly. Her breath sucked in slightly, her own hips moving in response. His restraint broke, arms lacing around her back and waist to haul her against his chest. Autumn wrapped her arms around his neck, urging him closer.

Once more, he kissed her, and this time his tongue met hers, an ardent dancing and stroking as if he couldn't go deep enough. Her mind melted as well as her body, thoughts disappeared as she became nothing more than unadulterated sensation. They didn't stop at one long kiss, but ventured into two, then three penetrating discoveries. She ate at his mouth, her lips ravenous as the temperature baked all her inhibitions and she staggered on the edge of combustion. An eternity of silky, hot pleasure danced through her body. Rapid-fire needs swirled inside her. Moist heat dampened her panties, and she wanted to align her sensitive tissues with his cock and rub against him to assuage the desire. Her hips wriggled, and his hands slid to just the top of her buttocks.

*Oh, yes. Please.*

But he didn't cup her, instead he stroked, his touch lingering in a way that sent waves of explicit longing tangoing through her body. She'd never dreamed kissing him would make her feel this hot, dying for completion.

When he drew back, she saw flames hotter than any fire within his gorgeous eyes. "Wow."

She smiled. "I'll say."

He slowly drew away from her. "I'd love to invite you inside, but I have to head out for some wildland training in the boonies at three in the morning."

She sighed, disappointed. "I understand."

He drew his fingers over her cheek in a gentle caress that only added to her torment. "When we get into bed together the first time, I want it to last all night."

Heat burst in a flashover, and she ached to feel him buried deep in her body, thrusting out his hunger and appeasing her ruthless passion. Giving him a shaky smile, she said, "When we make love? You're very sure of yourself, Jack Dillon."

The cocky, self-confident look on his face told all. "Can you deny it's what we both want?"

"No. I just never thought you'd ... that we'd..."

"Neither did I."

He cupped her shoulders and dove in for a voluptuous, tongue-thrusting kiss that sent wild shivers through her body. She arched into him, about ready to beg for him to take her inside. She drew back from the kiss, alarmed at how much she wanted him, and the fact she'd beg in the first place. Normally she didn't give into an animal craving without much thought or consideration.

*But that's what you want from Jack. Straightforward. Uncomplicated. No emotional component.*

"Good night then," she said with a smile as she unlocked his SUV and climbed inside.

As she drove away, he watched her from the sidewalk. He hadn't said anything about seeing her soon, and it didn't concern her. They'd end up in bed sooner or later. She knew it without any doubt.

*God, Autumn. You're lusting after Jack?* Thoughts of him as the young boy she'd tutored all those years ago had left her mind the minute he'd rescued her from the car accident. His masculinity, his self-assurance, blew away any thoughts that he was too young. After all, they were adults now.

Besides, he obviously didn't want attachments. Free and easy sex. His kisses replayed in her head. Thoughts of making love to him, of discovering all the secrets of his

body, teased her all the way home.

## Chapter Six

“Wow.” Bitsie Dillon’s small, round face betrayed her pleasure as she surveyed the photographs on the front page of the Clifton Times. She’d spread the paper in front of her on the kitchen table moments ago. “Second day in a row featuring Jack and the fire department. I’ll be. Color photos and everything.”

Autumn chuckled. “I’m supposed to use black and white, but I decided to experiment. Good thing the photos came out great, or Elliott would have had my head for lunch.”

“I knew my son was handsome, but these pictures take the cake.”

Pleased, Autumn settled into a chair at the table and took a sip of herbal tea.

“Thanks. I was inspired.”

Autumn perused the large photograph of Jack in his full regalia. She’d caught him in moment of strength, his ax poised to tear down dangerous woodwork that threatened to fall on any firefighter who might step through an entranceway into the warehouse. Nothing of the vulnerable boy she’d once known showed. Another glance at the photo made an appreciative flutter dance in her midsection. Yeah, no doubt about it. The man was disgustingly heroic.

“I paraded several photographs of firefighters in front of Elliott, but he thought this picture was the best one. It made up for the skimpy article yesterday and today,” Autumn said.

“Do you have an extra copy of the photographs I can buy from the paper?” Bitsie asked as she shoved a hand through her salt-and-pepper hair. “You took several more shots of Jack, right?” Bitsie’s expression filled with mischief, and Autumn read the speculation in her green eyes.

Swallowing hard, Autumn then said, “I got carried away. I’m sure Elliott will let me give you copies.”

“I’d like to see Jack’s face when he gets a load of this paper. He’ll be embarrassed.”

Autumn remembered the cockiness in Jack’s expression last night. “Is he that modest?”

Bitsie glanced at the article again. “Sometimes that boy is the picture of humble pie. Bravery and reticence in one mixture.” Another crafty gleam entered the woman’s eyes. “I’m surprised some young thing hasn’t snatched him up yet.”

Unsure whether to feel uncomfortable with Bitsie’s insinuations, or a little interested in the idea, Autumn probed for answers. “Well, he’s young yet. All of what ... twenty nine?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Just a baby.”

“And you’re ancient, my dear.”

“Thirty-four. Decrepit.”

They laughed.

Unsettled by her own transparency, Autumn changed the angle. “I’m sure he has plenty of girlfriends to keep him occupied. From my experience, firefighters have this hero appeal women find irresistible. The men I worked with in smoke jumping had no

problem finding girls.”

Bitsie’s eyes clouded over, and a flood of memories bounced back to Autumn like a yo-yo. Seventeen years ago, nasty rumors about the relationship between Bitsie’s husband and her mother had filled the town. The rumors had turned out to be true.

Hastening to reassure Bitsie, Autumn reached over and covered the older woman’s hand with her own. “Don’t worry about my feelings. I know what happened between your husband and my mother.”

Bitsie’s peach-hued skin, youthful for her years, flushed with anger or embarrassment. “My husband wasn’t a saint. I knew that when I married him. Glossing over the facts didn’t work then, and it doesn’t now.”

Autumn tried a smile, but it felt brittle.

Bitsie stayed silent for a long moment. “The night my husband and your parents died ... well, my husband admitted he’d had an affair with your mother. He divulged that the baby she was carrying was his.”

Equal parts painful memory and acceptance slid through Autumn like a slow burn. Her parents had told her the night they died that her mother was four months pregnant because of her affair with Mitchell Dillon. And while she hadn’t wanted to believe her mother would have an affair, her parents’ quarrel that fateful night of the fire had confirmed the rumors of adultery.

Autumn took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “My parents had a squabble in front of me at dinner the night they died. When I realized they were saying that Mitchell was the baby’s father ... well...” Autumn shook her head and tears threatened. “So none of what you’re saying is a surprise. Except that you would tell me now.”

Bitsie’s eyes watered a little. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought back bad memories.”

“Please don’t worry. I was considering asking you about it. I just didn’t expect to hear it so soon.” An ache built in Autumn’s chest. “It never changed the way I felt about you and Jack. Both of you are fantastic people.” Swallowing hard to free the boulder that seemed lodged in her throat, she cracked a weak smile. “I always liked how you told the truth. That’s something I learned from you all those years ago. My mom was very good at pretending things weren’t happening when they were. At least in front of me.”

Bitsie smiled this time and the tears shimmering in her eyes dissolved. “I was worried if I even hinted at what happened between my husband and your mother, that I might start something awful between you and me. We never had the chance to talk before you left all those years ago. I was too busy helping Jack deal with his father’s death. So many things were left unsaid.” Bitsie sniffed. “What a mess.”

They sat silently, sipping their tea and reflecting. Autumn realized she had nothing left to say about the scandal that rocked their lives years ago.

Bitsie’s expression lightened. “I guess since we’re being honest here I’ll ask something else. Why did you come back to Clifton?”

Autumn wondered when someone would ask. “After the parachuting accident, I needed a break and time to recover. I’m keeping in touch with therapists and doctors and they told me I can return to smoke jumping soon. My knee is essentially good to go, but—” She didn’t want to say it. Those words that would prove she didn’t have the guts to do the job anymore. “I tried jumping out of a plane a couple of times this last summer.”

“Tried?”

“I couldn’t do it. I realized I needed more time.”

Bitsie’s sympathetic expression made Autumn feel worse. She didn’t want anyone’s pity.

“I’m sorry,” Bitsie said.

“Please, don’t be. I’ll find confidence again one way or the other. I came to Clifton for the change of pace. I like this little newspaper better than the larger one I was working for in the Denver rat race. Even the pay cut was worth it.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here and staying at my house.”

“Thanks again for the room.”

Bitsie shrugged. “It’s the least I could do for the young woman who turned my son’s life around.”

Autumn often wondered if the fire that killed her parents and Jack’s father had been the first catalyst in Jack’s decision to become a firefighter. “You’re giving me far too much credit. He needed to discover his real path in life. Being the brunt of other kids’ cruelty will either make you stronger, or drive you to the edge. In Jack’s case, it seems to have made him stronger. I take it no one kicks sand in his face now?”

Bitsie drained her teacup with a satisfied gulp. “Definitely not, my dear. From the first day you tutored him to the last he learned to stand up for himself. You did what no other person in his life seemed to be able to do. Not even his father.”

She reached for Bitsie’s empty cup. “More tea?” When Bitsie shook her head, Autumn took the cups to the sink, rinsed them and put them in the dishwasher. “Okay, have it your way. I’m a goddess.”

Bitsie laughed. “Enough of this heavy conversation. I’ve got to head off to my meeting. Jack will be here any time now. Unless there’s another fire, he’ll make it to dinner tonight.”

“Your famous pizza? I’ll bet it is as great as Jack’s chili.”

“Nothing is as good as Dillon chili.”

Autumn recalled a picnic where Jack’s father had served her a huge bowl of his famous firehouse chili. Autumn almost burned her tongue on the spices alone. “Has Jack toned down the recipe, or should I put on flame retardant undies the next time I taste it?”

Bitsie grinned. “He’s made modifications. I’ll let him tell you what they are when you see him.”

Seeing Jack tonight would be a risky proposition if she expected to keep her sanity. For the last couple of days all she’d thought about was fucking him blind. A nervous tickle of anticipation made her ready for anything tonight.

“Did Jack say anything to you about the warehouse fire being arson?” Bitsie asked as they moved to the kitchen and started working on the pizza.

“No, but then I didn’t talk to him for long about it. Hank said there was no evidence pointing in that direction. At least not at the time. Who knows what they’ve discovered since then? It might have been kids playing with matches.”

She knew she lied, but she didn’t want to think about what a string of arson fires might mean. She didn’t want to remember that arson destroyed her family ... Jack’s family.

Seconds later the front door opened and Jack’s voice penetrated the air. “Hey, where is everybody?”



*Steady. It's just good ole, dependable Jack. No reason to turn all girly.*

Um, right.

"We're in here," Bitsie called out.

Jack lumbered into the kitchen and his gaze landed on Autumn.

Autumn knew the cliché about the earth standing still, and when Jack's gaze captured hers, heat built like a firestorm. She felt an electric connection flash between them. The pure male interest in his eyes almost liquefied her into her athletic shoes. A blue cable-knit sweater fit well over his broad shoulders, well-worn jeans clung to his muscular thighs, and he wore boots on his big feet. She wanted to laugh. Even as a kid, he had large feet.

*I wonder if the rest of his body measures up.* An image of what his cock might look like came to mind and heat ignited in her face. Maybe tonight she'd find out.

"Hey." A slow, breath-stealing grin curved his mouth. "Autumn."

Stunned by the force of her attraction to him, she opened her mouth but nothing came out.

Bitsie cleared her throat, and Autumn started. Autumn tried to speak and ended up stuttering. "Um ... hi, Jack."

He sauntered over to Bitsie and gave her a huge hug, and Bitsie kissed her son on the cheek and patted him on the back. "Well, now that you're here, I'll leave you two to finish making the pizza. I'm going to be late for my meeting."

After she headed out, Autumn gave Jack her biggest smile. She handed him the knife she held. "Here. You can finish cutting the mushrooms while I put on the sausage."

He complied with a return grin. Autumn also took the opportunity to eyeball his muscles. Never in a million years had she imagined Jack Dillon filling out a sweater that way. Her fingers ached to touch those big shoulders and test the strength of his arms again. She drew in a deep breath.

Realizing that her fantasizing had reached a hazardous new level, she asked, "So, how do you like the first-page spread in the newspaper, Jack?"

He wagged his eyebrows. "Bodacious." He headed for the fridge and snatched a can of cola. "I loved the spread. It's good for my ego." He popped the top of the can and took a deep swig. "Everyone's been teasing me."

Autumn wrinkled her nose. "But how did you like the articles? I knew you'd like the photos." She shrugged. "Well, I thought you'd like them if they didn't embarrass you."

\*

Jack gazed at Autumn and wanted to tell her a lot of things, none of them whatsoever dealing with those photos. At least mortification didn't figure into his feelings. "No embarrassment, really."

"Good."

"You'd better be prepared for the police to want to look at the photos," he said.

"They already did."

Jack savored watching Autumn work at the kitchen counter, her movements efficient. Today her windblown, short haircut looked sexy as hell.

There was nothing provocative about her blue sweater or jeans, but her body made him ache. And not in the ribs, either. Last night his dreams had filled with scenes of Autumn sliding her wet, tight heat down over his cock and riding him until he ejaculated high and hard. He'd awakened in the middle of the night with his heart pounding at

ramjet speed and his cock at full attention. If he didn't fuck her and banish this over-the-top attraction soon, he'd end up embarrassing himself at work. He could easily imagine laying in his bunk, his cock tenting the sheet and blanket. Fuck.

As Autumn leaned over to open the cabinet beneath the sink, he appreciated the sight of her rounded, tight little butt. He wanted to cup those cheeks, squeeze them until she gasped with desire. He almost smiled, then realized if anyone looked at him right now they would have full view of his sex-crazed smile. God, he'd loved kissing her and wanted to do it again.

They kept the conversation purring. He spent considerable time watching Autumn's mouth and wondering what her lips would feel like sucking his nipples, her tongue slurping his cock like an ice cream cone. Fighter planes did aerial maneuvers in his stomach. Having Autumn so near made him hotter than a Molotov cocktail.

Fading light from the kitchen window bounced off her hair, and he thought about pushing his hands through it, gripping it as he—

*Time out, Dillon. She's looking at you strangely. Who could blame her? You probably look like a sex-starved lunatic.*

She turned that full-wattage smile on him. One minute he felt like her old buddy, the next he wanted to yank her into his arms and kiss her until she couldn't stand upright.

Fucking her to within an inch of passing out. That's what he really wanted.

Autumn reached over and snapped on the small kitchen radio on the counter. A sultry, throbbing song filled the air. They finished designing the pizza. After they slipped the pie into the oven, they sat at the small kitchen dining table.

"Your mom is a real sweetheart," she said.

"She loves having you here." When she didn't reply, he made sure to watch her expression, trying to read the truth in her sapphire eyes. "Why did you stay away so long?"

"Nobody missed me, I'm sure."

"Hell, I was hoping you'd miss me, but since I was a pain in the ass most of the time, I can't blame you for getting as far away as you could."

She grinned. "You might have been a pain in the butt, but you were a great kid all around."

"Now that's the kinda thing I like to hear."

"Speaking of people I haven't missed, Cherry was ogling you at the warehouse fire the other day."

He laughed. "She has a crush on me, I guess."

"No kidding." Her tone sounded a little abrasive, and he looked at Autumn closely. She couldn't be jealous.

"You haven't lived in Clifton all this time I was away. Tell me more about what you were doing," she said.

Thankful for the change in topic, he said, "I lived in Detroit for several years. I broke up with my girlfriend and decided I should quit hanging around the firehouse. I needed to leave Detroit and come back where I belonged."

"Were you engaged?"

"No. I thought she loved me, but she loved her job more. She got a transfer and told me it had been fun, but she had bigger bacon to fry. I think she meant it literally. She was a firefighter, too."

Her brow knitted. "Oh, Jack. I'm sorry it didn't work out."

Another shrug moved his shoulders. "Funny thing is, she married less than two months later."

"You're kidding?"

"No. I realize now that it wouldn't have worked out if I'd married her. She obviously didn't want me, and I know that I didn't love her."

Another silence covered the room. Autumn's mouth dropped open slightly, as if she might say something. Her gaze cruised over him, and heat spiraled downward in a head-spinning rush to his groin. He thought he saw admiration in her eyes.

*Oh, yeah. She was checking him out again. Face it. She has you by the short hairs, Dillon.*

Only the steady sound of jazz music moved through the room. Jack decided he liked the way he could be quiet with her. When he'd been a kid in the classroom after school and she'd tutored him in English, he used to enjoy the silences. A strange soul-deep tranquility enfolded him.

*This feels way too domestic. A five-alarm fire went off in his head. Pull back, Dillon. These crazy feelings aren't about anything but sex. Keep it light.*

They ate dinner in comfortable companionship, while he updated her on what had changed in town after seventeen years. They traded some old stories that made them laugh. After they finished putting away the dishes, he offered to make coffee.

While he ground the beans, he glanced over and caught the erotic sight of her tongue sweeping over her bottom lip. He imagined running his tongue over her plump mouth and a wild bolt of arousal took control. Fuck the coffee. He turned away from the machine and stepped closer to her.

An impish glint entered her eyes. "Bitsie told me some tales about you."

"Yeah?"

"Enough to get you in serious trouble. Like the fact you hate tuna fish sandwiches, and that bacon, lettuce and tomato is your favorite. That ought to go over well with the boys at the station." She patted his arm. "You know, with BLTs being a girly-girl sandwich."

Enjoying her sense of humor, he leaned a little closer to her. "Not BLTs. They have bacon, and there isn't anything the least girly about bacon. Now egg salad sandwiches are chick food. I don't eat 'em."

"Yeah, right, buddy. Tell me another one."

He allowed his gaze to drift down to the delicate line of her collarbone, then settle on the defenseless looking flesh of her neck. He saw her pulse throbbing against her skin, and an insane desire to taste her almost made him lean forward.

"I'd like to be friends again. If you'll allow it," he said.

"Allow it?" Her question came out sounding sharp. "Why wouldn't I allow it?"

"You seem a little jumpy around me."

"I do?" A little breathy, her voice dropped to a mere whisper. "Well, I didn't expect to feel this way."

He was drawn in by the sparkle in her gaze and that little husky intonation in her voice. "How do you feel?"

Autumn's lips parted. He fixated on her bottom lip, which was a little fuller than the upper. When he caught a glance of her tongue, his groin tightened.

Man, oh, man, he wanted her. He could almost scent her desire, feel the way her pulse heightened. Shit, he was losing his mind with wanting her.

Her lips parted. "I feel..."

"Yeah?" He leaned a bit closer, his head tilting a bit to the side. His hands came down on the counter on either side of her.

\*

Autumn's innate awareness of him sent a slow and dizzying need through her. He smelled so good—of leather and a musk that created a potent craving. His gaze smoldered, his attention disturbingly intimate. She sensed a bridled power within him, and it taunted her, removed her well-constructed defenses. His dark lashes fanned downward as he glanced at her mouth. She felt off-balance. Good thing she leaned back against the counter or her legs would never hold her. She slipped into an overwhelming need she couldn't resist and didn't want to stop.

All around them the music swelled until she saw, heard, and felt it mingle with every fiber in her being. She'd never experienced a surge of mind-melding attraction this quick or deep. Jack's face seemed more compelling than anything she'd immortalized in the newspaper. His arrested expression surprised and gratified her. God, she wished he'd touch her. Kiss her now.

Her heart thundered in her ears. She'd never experienced a consuming sexual connection like what she felt with Jack. Her body burned every time she saw him, her soul sang with enjoyment. Now, as he caged her to the counter, she felt deliciously trapped, captive to impulses she feared exploring. Yes, they had history together, but now his very presence filled her with secret longing. His height, his strength, the gentleness she sensed he carried. He was all male, but the tenderness he'd already displayed toward her drew her even closer. Yeah, she wanted him because of all these factors.

"I have a proposal for you. Several proposals actually." The deep timbre of his voice vibrated and stirred desire like a tuning fork.

Did she want to know? Autumn placed her palm on his chest and absorbed the heat and energy. He was so alive and arresting. "Sounds interesting. Tell me."

He allowed her caress, then reached up and cupped her face with one hand. He traced one finger lightly over her cheek and a quiver passed through Autumn. "For years I've wanted you, but my fantasies were half-formed. Now that you're here, I want to explore those fantasies one by one."

Sheer surprise and wicked delight fought for supremacy. God, she couldn't believe it, and yet she wanted it with fervency. She traced her fingers over his hard pecs, delighting in rock-hard muscles. He quivered under her touch, and she felt that power grow and demand attention.

Frown lines creased the area between his brows. "Something wrong?"

At the same time she caressed him, she watched her touch play over his wide chest. "Let's say I'm surprised at how fast we're moving."

He tilted her chin up, and she had to look into his eyes. "You want to slow down? Look, I want you, and you know that. But I won't pressure you into anything you're not comfortable with."

"I'm comfortable with it, but I want the cards out on the table. We have a lot of history together. I don't want that to interfere."

He looked worried. "How would it interfere?"

“We don’t know each other any more. A lot of time has passed, and we’ve changed. I’ve changed.” She sighed. “What I’m not saying very well is ... let’s keep this light, okay? I’m not going to be in Clifton for long.”

Jack slipped a hand behind her neck and leaned in. He pressed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Just enough time to learn what you want?”

Desire warmed her from the inside out. His masculinity didn’t overpower, at least not in this moment. His tenderness sparked and bubbled in her blood. “Smoke jumping is my life, Jack, and I’m going back to it.”

His eyes narrowed enough to make her wonder if he believed her. Then the brush of his lips over her forehead once more stifled the thought.

“Good. You should do what you want. Here’s to the freedom to self-determine.” He released her and stepped back an increment. “So what are the boundaries?”

“Like I said, keep it light. No expectations. Nothing deep. Let’s explore your fantasies.” She winked.

“What if the first fantasy is full-on sex? Are you ready for that?”

A delicious thrill ran up her spine at the thought of making love with him. “Yes.”

A wicked smile touched his mouth, and she saw relief flash through his eyes. Good. Jack returned to his stance—he moved in for the kill, hands caging her against the counter.

“You won’t know what I plan to do from moment to moment,” he said. “Does that scare you?”

“Anticipation is the spice.”

“I won’t hurt you.”

“I know.” She did know. If Jack was anything, he was honorable. She could tell that trait hadn’t faded over the years.

“Tell me to stop anytime you want.”

She returned to palming his chest, this time with both hands. God, he felt so hard. So sexy.

He leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Don’t worry about anything. If we make love, I’ll protect you.”

She smiled, inhaling deeply to take in the heady combination of man and musk.

“Birth control? I’m on the pill.”

When he drew back, his gaze held hunger. “I’m healthy, so you don’t need to worry on that account. Still ... I want you to know you can trust me. We’ll use condoms, too.”

“I do trust you.”

Condoms and her on the pill. A double line of defense. For a moment, the clinical but necessary conversation threatened to dampen her enthusiasm for the fantasy.

His lips hovered near hers, and her body came on line when he tucked her closer. With a warm kiss, he coaxed her into surrender. But she didn’t want or need enticing. She desired him. Hot. Hard. Taking her in the most primitive way possible. Making her forget all that came before in a blinding passion guaranteed to explode. As her hands caressed his shoulders, his hands palmed her back, slipping under her chunky knit sweater to press warm, tantalizing caresses. Few men had touched her this way, with a passion so strong she’d fallen under their spell without so much as a whimper. Jack drew her into a storm of physical sensation. And as his kiss grew lushly sensual, a storm of emotions also assailed. Unexpected tears stung her eyes, and she gasped into his mouth. His tongue

plunged deep. He stroked and teased her tongue into a dance, and Autumn's last hesitation flew away on a scorching wind of desire.

## Chapter Seven

Jack's mouth twisted over Autumn's, a hungry sound leaving his throat. Suddenly his hands went to her hips, and he lifted her onto the counter. A little gasp of surprise slipped from her throat, but his kiss deepened and stole words away. His hips parted her thighs. When his erection pressed, she inhaled sharply once more, the quick pleasure radiating from her clit causing her hips to writhe. Hard, ridged cock stirred against her aroused flesh, and her body clenched and released with need.

*Yes. Oh, yes. This was better than any fantasy. Way better.*

His lips slid to her cheek and pressed tender kisses until he reached her ear. "You're so soft."

Jack's husky words sent fiery need toward her center, and she arched her hips into his with a clear message. He hissed in a breath and pressed forward, back, forward, the rhythm undeniable. His lips trailed down her neck, found the pulse point and caressed. She trembled, so excited she felt she might combust on the spot if he didn't do something to douse the fire. When his big hand palmed her breast, she moaned and arched into his touch. Gently he squeezed, plumped her fullness. Though he touched her through her sweater, she might as well have been naked, the sensations felt so acute. His thumb flicked over her nipple, and she gasped. Oh, God, this couldn't continue without an explosive ending—the sensation was too thrilling, too demanding.

Entangled in him, she drew him closer, wanting everything and wavering on the brink of discovering how far she'd go. He drew back, still encircling her within his powerful arms. Boldly his gaze took her in, his pupils dilated, his chest rising and falling.

"Your mother might return," she said.

His smile, secretive and wicked, seemed to say that he understood. He cupped her face. "Let's move this into your bedroom."

"Your mother might still come home."

He sighed, his eyes narrowing. "Maybe I'll move right to one of my number one fantasies then."

"Oh?" She couldn't keep the breathlessness out of her tone.

He lifted her from the counter and took her hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

He tugged her toward the back door, and she grabbed her purse and coat from the rack as she went by.

"Remember Camel Rock?" he asked.

"Of course. The make out spot for teenagers way back in the day."

His grin was unrepentant. "Yep."

When they piled in his truck, he turned toward her. "There's a part of the fantasy that starts right here in the truck."

Heat flared in her face as the excitement rose. "Tell me."

"You're sure?" He wagged his eyebrows. "It's very raw. In your face."

Swirling spirals of arousal dipped and dove inside her. "Tell me."

In the semi-dark created by the porch light, he looked delicious enough to lick. If he didn't tell her soon and put out this fire, she might resort to making love to him right here

and now.

"Once I get the heater going, unzip your jeans and slip them down to your knees," he said.

Her mouth popped open. "You're right. That is ... in your face."

His brows pinched together. "If you don't want to do it, it's okay. No pressure."

"No. I mean, yes. I want to." Her voice shook a bit, and the inquiry in his eyes held caution. "What happens after that?"

His lopsided grin held equal parts sin and satisfaction, as if he'd already accomplished a major seduction. Thoughts and sensations rushed at her as she realized the full implication of what tonight might bring. Anticipation ran hot and thick in her veins. Sensual awareness took hold. Within the confines of the truck cab, she drew in his masculine scent, so seductive in its dark, alluring way. Light filtering through the windshield caught the golden strands in his hair and they glinted like a shield, shiny and thick. Her pulse ramped up as he started the SUV and darted a glance at her. Filled with unadulterated heat, his gaze said he wanted her, no holds barred, no more waiting.

As he pulled out of the driveway, she realized they'd come to the peak. They'd known each other for so long, and now the years that came between them dissolved. The past didn't matter, the future was on hold. All they had was this crazy moment.

"Now." His voice came out of the semi-darkness, as shadows danced in the cab.

She didn't need to ask what he was requesting. Though she wore a seatbelt, she managed to manipulate her clothes. She undid the belt to her low-rise jeans, worked the button and zipper until they opened. She saw him take another glance.

"Eyes on the road, Dillon," she said with teasing in her voice.

"Yes ma'am."

The idea that someone might see her divesting herself of her jeans made her heart throb and beat with heady excitement. *Oh, yes. Yes.*

"Pink," he said, his voice as rich as whiskey and sin.

"I take it you're talking about my panties."

"Oh, yeah."

His reaction to her bikini panties, in mundane cotton, reminded her a man didn't always need a bustier and lace thong to stoke his fire.

"You should see my bra."

"God, I hope so."

His unapologetically male statement made her laugh softly. Wrapped in the heart of a competent firefighter was a man on pure fire.

"Spread your legs," he said as they cruised down the quiet side streets.

She did, and offering her body to him like this sent waves of ultra-sensitive heat straight to her private folds. Seconds later, he reached over and traced his fingers over her lower belly until he touched the cotton panty waistband. She sucked in a breath and watched his hand move. Her body went full tilt, quivers skittering along her skin. With a leisurely stroke, he dipped his hand between her legs and swept his fingers over her cotton clad folds. She gasped as sweet pleasure tingled in her clit. Though he didn't look at her, his lips parted. He became bolder, moving his finger in a quick, light stroke over her clitoris. Another gasp, this one of amazed arousal, parted her lips.

"Oh, God," she managed to say on a gasp. "Jack."

"More?"



“Yes.”

All the way down the street he teased her flesh. His touches never pressed hard, his attention always tantalizing, pleasuring, bringing her to the tip of a screaming release that never quite materialized. She grasped the side of the seat and went along for the ride, tossing her head back and allowing waves of sensual enjoyment to spiral into her clit.

“Jack.”

“Mmm.”

“Please.”

His fingers slipped up and down, plying her damp panties. She didn’t care now if anyone saw them. She quivered on the edge, her hips twitching, her breath growing short, her heart pounding. Orgasm threatened, teased. Didn’t come. Time disappeared as his fingers coaxed and tormented her flesh.

“Jesus, you’re wet.”

His throaty declaration made her laugh softly. “You’re driving me insane, Jack.”

“Good.”

She wanted to growl at his smug statement, but the pleasure swamped her. As she kept her eyes closed and her head thrown back against the headrest, she fell into a world where nothing existed but Jack’s touch and the ecstasy hovering out of reach. Each exquisite brush of his finger over her clit drove her higher, until her hips twisted.

“Jack.” Her breathless plea only caused him to stop.

“We’re almost there.”

She moaned, not daring to open her eyes or she’d lose the moment. “*I’m* almost there.”

His soft chuckle followed her assertive statement. “Keep your eyes closed. We just passed a car full of teens going the other way.”

She moaned again.

“We’re here,” he said.

He took his hand away, and she felt the truck turn to the left as he found a parking space. Darting glances around the area, she saw they were alone in the secluded area. He switched off the lights and engine. The sound of his seatbelt snicking open seemed to herald a last chance. A last call to stop sexual madness. But she didn’t.

She waited, drinking in only a little of the shadowy forms of swaying pines and bold, dark mountains encircling them. When he slid across the bench seat toward her, she unbuckled her seatbelt and went into his arms.

In the darkness she couldn’t make out much. Only the slash of his nose, the curve of his handsome mouth. Then he kissed her, and nothing else mattered but discovering and touching and finding pleasure. Inside the truck the air was warm, and she shrugged out of her leather jacket and tossed it into the backseat. His lips met hers, his hungry kiss turning thermonuclear without a moment’s hesitation. His tongue found hers, and she groaned softly into his mouth.

She gasped when he slipped his hand under her sweater and found the front clasp to her bra. With one quick movement, her bra opened. When his warm hand cupped her breast, her nipples tightened into hard beads. He brushed his fingers over her breasts, and she twisted in torment. Without remorse he plucked, stroked the captive nipples between his fingers until Autumn thought she’d lose her mind.

Jack apparently meant it when he said he’d brought her here to make out. He tasted

her with long, slow kisses, so deep and sensual she floated in a hazy world of drugged sensuality. His mouth moved to her neck, pressing tender kisses over sensitive points. She drifted in pleasure, her fingers slipping over his shoulders, drifting to his face as his tongue dipped into the hollow of her neck. She twisted in his arms. One more kiss, deep, plundering, taking her mouth with torturously lush strokes.

She tore her mouth from his. "Please."

He brushed his lips over her nose. "Please what?"

"Put me out of my misery."

Jack lifted her bra and sweater out of the way and then his hot mouth covered one nipple. She whimpered.

"Oh, God. Yes."

She'd once heard someone say that lovemaking wasn't pretty. But his breathless declaration, so rough and aching with desire, sounded sweet to her ears and fueled her yearning.

He licked, soothing and driving her insane with nips of his teeth, then long, savoring touches. Tonguing one nipple, he tugged the other between his fingers again and again. He switched nipples until she writhed under his touch. She threaded her fingers through his hair while he lingered over her breasts. His fingers drifted down until he could slip under the waistband of her panties. When his touch slid between her thighs, she gasped in pleasure. Gentle touches lingered over the heat between her legs. She shivered, caught up in pleasure.

In the back of her mind she knew they could get caught—someone could see—and yet her longing rose higher at the very idea. Each heated stroke between her legs heightened her libido and drew her higher toward the fire. She quivered on the edge, ready to take the plunge. Jack kissed her while he continued his mind-numbing exploration. He slipped two fingers inside, and she arched and whimpered. She shivered as he started a rhythm. She panted, reaching for the ultimate and finding it. Pure bliss spread outward from her center, and she cried out. His fingers left her long enough to tease her clit, and he lit the pilot light. Climax burst through her center.

"Jack!"

Groaning, shivering under the onslaught, she fell into bliss.

When she opened her eyes, his smile held a wicked light she couldn't resist. "That was wonderful."

He nuzzled her ear. "Mmm. Good." Husky and deep, his voice stirred new desire inside her as she slipped from his arms. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere. Tell me what else was in this making-out-in-the-truck fantasy."

Even in the dim light, she caught the gleam in his eyes. Slowly he drew her hand to the hard evidence pressing against his jeans. His boldness sent a shiver of excitement through her.

"No full-on sex?" she asked.

"Not here. That's another fantasy."

Excitement still pulsed in her loins, and her glance dropped to his lap. Without hesitation, and a sense of anticipation, she reached for the button and zipper on his jeans. Within seconds she slipped his cock from his underwear. When her fingers touched him, his breath hissed inward. Autumn drew his long thickness into her hand, her mouth watering as she explored him intimately. As she closed her eyes, she drew her fingers up

and down his length. Up. Down. Up. She drew the rhythm into her, then leaned forward to taste his tip. She tasted his salt, licking along the ridge, then drew him into her mouth. He groaned, his hips twitching as she took him on a journey, determined he'd find the same full-out ecstasy as she had. Tonguing his silky steel, she kept her hand clasped firmly around him. She found a pace, her mouth and hand working him until he was harder, thicker, his gasps and moans a clear signal that soon he'd climax. She'd never wanted to give this to a man as much as she did Jack, her body responding with heightened awareness and a growing ache. His fingers went into her hair—he didn't hold her in place—his hands restless. Sucking, torturing, she pumped him until he trembled.

\*

Jack felt a jolt of surrealism. Jesus, he never expected his deepest fantasies to come true, and now she was here. He moaned, unable to stop, not wanting to stop his reaction as she licked his cock with a feverish intensity. He cursed as she relentlessly plied his vulnerability, drawing him into his desire so effortlessly; he knew he'd discovered nirvana. Her fingers teased, taunted, and skimmed his cock. His hips moved, uncontrollable, working into her countermovement.

When her lips came down over his flesh again he shuddered. "Son of a bitch, that's good."

He saw her grin flash in the dim light, and then she returned to torturing him. Each lick of her soft, wet tongue forced him closer to the edge. And before he knew it, the edge was there.

He gasped out strangled words.

"Babe, if you don't want—"

Under a harsh groan he released his seed. She accepted him, keeping him within her mouth as he gave her everything he had. Quivering and gasping, Jack stiffened and released another moan of sheer pleasure. His fingers tightened in her hair, and then she let him go. When she looked up at him, she licked her lips.

He pushed his fingers into her hair and brushed it away from her face. "Autumn."

"Mmm?"

"That was the best thing I've ever—shit, I can't think of the words." He let his head fall back to the headrest and closed his eyes. "Fucking wonderful."

"I'm glad." She laughed softly. "What's next in your fantasy playbook, Jack?"

"I want to keep it a surprise for the next time we're together."

She seemed happy with that, but her silence concerned him a little. Damn it. Maybe she hadn't wanted this fantasy as much as he had. He didn't say anything, not wanting to break the fuzzy, out-of-body feeling surrounding him.

"Come here," he said softly, and drew her into his arms.

"What is your next fantasy, Jack?" She snuggled deep into his embrace and sighed.

"Maybe I should surprise you."

"Tell me now."

He chuckled and caressed her back. "You and me naked in my condo. Sex without sex."

"What?"

"Slow, meticulous, sexual play designed to blow your mind."

Her head came up and in the dim light he could still see her surprise. "That's..."

"Yeah?"

“Most guys I know would have already said they wanted to just get it on. Here. Now. In the car.”

He allowed a slow grin to part his lips. “Oh, but I’m not like every other guy you know.”

She brushed her fingers over his jaw. “I know that.”

“If we’re going to play out my fantasies, we’re going to do them right. One at a time and in order. How about a couple of nights from now? I’m on-shift until then.”

As she nuzzled back into his shoulder, she sighed deeply. “Ginger wants to go on a ladies night out to the Top O’ the Morning Club on Friday night. Want to meet us there? We could do a little dancing.”

“Make a little love?” he asked.

“I think there’s a song in there somewhere.”

He laughed. “Top O’ the Morning Club it is.”

\* \* \* \*

Buffeted by a need for sleep, Jack’s mind mixed the sounds of the fire station with his dreams. Time drifted until he was twelve again. Before Autumn. Before the fire.

Mom’s voice rose in anger. “I know those last few times weren’t just clean-up at the firehouse. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

Boy, he sure could use something to snack on right now. Something sweet, or maybe something salty. But Mom didn’t want him eating junk food anymore, and so she kept it out of the house.

He lingered in the hallway, hoping they wouldn’t come upstairs and see him before he could race back to the bedroom. He hated hearing Mom and Dad argue. Waking up in the morning, he had this uneasy feeling like he would fall over a cliff. Once he asked them about their arguments. Mom said she and Dad didn’t argue. They discussed. If that’s what discussing sounded like, he didn’t want to do it ... ever.

“Bitsie, I’ve had about enough of your jealousy and accusations. You’re driving us apart.”

“I’m driving us apart? You never come home, Mitchell. You’re always at work. Are you seeing someone?”

Jack cringed inside. Until now, they’d seemed to be holding something back, mad over this weird thing or that. Something creepy always seemed to be around the corner, like a horror movie monster. He felt it near his back, drawing closer. Fear made tracks over his skin. He hated it. Hated it.

“You think I should ignore what’s happening?” Mom said. “Pretend I don’t care and I don’t see?”

“Nothing is happening but your overactive imagination.”

Mom and Dad’s voices faded into another room, and Jack padded across the hardwood floor and back into his room. Once under the covers, he allowed a single tear to run down his face. Mom and Dad didn’t love each other anymore. People who loved couldn’t fight like this.

He woke with a gasp as the station’s alarm went off, and he launched out of bed like a rocket. Fully awake, he jammed the dream to the far reaches of his mind. No time to hesitate. Instincts from years of firefighting sent him and the other men into action. Engines roared into the night, sirens blaring. By the time they returned less than an hour

later from a false alarm, Jack felt exhaustion eating away at his ability to think.

Hank came into the back room where several rollaway beds stood ready to use. "Hey."

Jack sauntered toward his bed, hoping a few more winks of sleep would remove the fog in his brain. "Hey what?"

Hank plopped onto his own bed and unlaced his boots. "You're off shift in less than fifteen minutes. Why don't you go home?"

Jack flopped back onto his pillow with a groan. "Too tired." He yanked the covers up and sighed. "I've got to sleep."

"You haven't been back to your condo in days. What's up?"

Jack didn't know. "I'll get there in a couple of hours. After a little more sleep."

Okay, so he *did* know what was wrong. Every time he walked back into the condo he started to feel the need for change. What type of change he couldn't say for certain, but he'd thought about buying a small house over in the older part of town. Clifton's Victorian era homes appealed to him, and he'd toured a couple that might fit his budget. A firefighter's pay had to stretch; he sure wouldn't get rich fighting fires. His mind decided he was too tired to care right now.

Jack hoped to drift to sleep again, but this time his thoughts went to Autumn and when she'd been his tutor all those years ago. Beautiful, blonde Autumn with her long legs. Seventeen and dating George Beckett. Groaning, Jack turned on his side and decided thinking about Autumn would keep him awake the entire night.

He remembered how Autumn's long strides always covered the school hallway in record time. His heart would pound as he watched her windblown hair and sincere smile. He recalled one day in particular and wondered why this memory intruded now, when he wanted sleep.

*"Hey, Jack!" Jeremy Short, his buddy, yelled as he came up behind Jack in the school hallway. "Whatcha doin'?"*

*Jack turned and Jeremy looked at him with a smirk. "Waitin' for Autumn."*

*"Waiting for Autumn?" Jeremy mimicked Jack's voice with a sneer. "You got a crush on her, don't you?" He ran a grubby hand through his short hair and it stuck up in places on his head. "Everybody knows it."*

*Jack didn't know why Jeremy acted so dumb lately. Jeremy seemed to think Jack should hate Autumn. "She's cool. Of course I like her. I ain't got no crush on her."*

*"Yeah, right, dweeb."*

*"What's your problem? Since she's been helping me you've been acting like a butt."*

*Jeremy's expression turned pissed off. "I think Micky and Todd are right. You're turning into a girl lover. Sick, man!"*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*Jeremy slugged him in the arm and left, laughing as he went and making kissing noises. Autumn appeared right then, passing Jeremy and looking at the noise-making boy as if he'd grown a third arm.*

*When she walked up to Jack, she gave him that smile that always made his heart go faster. "What's up, Jack? Has Jeremy lost his mind?"*

*"Pretty close."*

*"Come on, let's go talk about English." She started to walk toward the vacant classroom where they spent time three days a week. "We've got work to do if you want to*

*pass your next test.”*

Even then he'd caught himself watching how her butt swayed under that curve-hugging skirt. As a kid his hormones didn't make the transition between the fascination he had for her butt and having a huge crush on her. He knew he thought about her all the time and wanted to be with her a lot.

Thinking about her very adult, very nice ass made his throat go dry. *Man, I thought I'd forgotten about that day forever.*

Jack rolled onto his back and groaned as his ribs gave a twinge. He recalled how much that punch in the arm had hurt, and how Jeremy deserted him for Todd Geraldo and Micky Roman.

Mafia Boys. Autumn had dubbed the two creeps the Mafia Boys when she saw them trying to beat him up one day. She must have seen how much Jeremy's betrayal also hurt, but she never interfered. As if she knew he must learn how to build confidence. He'd passed that English test; his grades in school went up that term and never went down again. Mom and Dad had been happier than pigs wallowing in mud.

Until the fire.

Everything hinged on that fire and the lives it altered forever. Including the life of the one woman Jack couldn't get out of his mind.

God, he wanted to crawl inside her, thrust hard until they both went supernova with the ecstasy of it. He'd allowed his body to operate on rudimentary instinct when they'd played out the fantasy in his truck, the depth of his passion startling the shit out of him.

He never would have believed it for a minute if someone told him that his English tutor would return to town and send his libido into hyperspace. He threw his arm over his closed eyes to keep out light, and thought back to the long conversation with Autumn the other night and the steamy encounter they'd experienced in each other's arms.

Each time he saw her all his back-to-the-cave male instincts came on line with a wicked, hard vengeance. He wanted to pick her up, take her to his lair, and make certain every man knew she was his.

*Face it, Dillon. You're toast. You want to fuck her so much you can't see straight.*

Hank stumbled into the room on the way from the bathroom and fell back on his bed. "What are you doing? Dreaming about Autumn MacAllister?"

"Yeah." Jack's tired brain let the confession slip.

"Oh, boy. Big trouble in River City."

## Chapter Eight

"We need another angle on these arson fires, Autumn." Elliott walked with her and Ginger into the noise and bustle of Top O' the Morning Club.

Much to her chagrin, Elliott had appeared outside the establishment tonight. He'd acted surprised to see them there, but she suspected he'd overheard Ginger asking her to accompany her to the nightclub.

Music throbbed against her ears as Autumn asked, "You don't think people will get bored with the topic?"

"Are you kidding?" Ginger said. "With nine-eleven so fresh, everyone wants to see and hear about firefighters. It gives them something good to think about."

Nine-eleven. That moniker lingered in the air these days like a bad dream. She'd quit her job as a smoke jumper long before the events of that traumatic day. Still, she'd felt the agony as much as anyone.

"A few of the guys over at Station One went to New York last year to help in the recovery efforts. Four volunteers." Elliott's expression brightened. "Hey, that might be a good angle. No one interviewed them after they came back. They were there about a month. See if you can arrange that as a separate article."

"Do you think they'll talk to me?" Autumn asked.

He flashed a big smile. "Use your charms. I'm sure they will."

"What kind of charms are we talking about, Elliott?"

"Be yourself. They'll accommodate."

*Right, Elliott. That wasn't what you meant, and I know it.*

"I think you should visit a fire station," Elliott shouted over the music as they paused in the midst of the crowd. "If you're face-to-face with them they'll have less reason to refuse. Talking on the phone won't cut it."

"I've already set up an interview with Fire Chief Hallam for next week. I'll see if I can arrange additional interviews with any of the other men."

"Excellent," Elliott said.

Lights flashed from strobes near the ceiling, the colors throbbing in time to a systematic beat. The two-story nightclub pulsed like a live thing as people writhed to the music. The Saturday night mob wore a conglomeration of styles. Some dressed in designer labels. Others had donned more outrageous pieces.

Elliott wore dark blue slacks and a moss green silk shirt that screamed Italian designer. Autumn chose the one evening outfit in her entire closet, a little black dress made of clingy fabric with long sleeves and a v-neck. The hem ended about two inches above the knee.

Her high-heeled, black pumps might kill her feet before the end of the evening, but they were the only party shoes she owned. Now that she was actually wearing the dress, she questioned her sanity. Was she nuts? The way Elliott stared at her made her think she should have dressed in sack cloth.

*You dressed this way because of Jack.* Jack's admiring looks never hurt her ego.

"Let's go upstairs." Elliott said to Autumn and Ginger as he directed them up the metal stairs that led to the next level. "It's too crowded down here to think straight."

“Not that it will be better upstairs,” Ginger said.

Once they arrived, Autumn saw that Ginger was right. The floor under her feet seemed to vibrate as the crowd upstairs filled the dance floor and congregated around the bar.

Seated at the bar, they each sipped a cola and watched people gyrate. Autumn hadn’t been in a nightclub in forever. Not that she thought she’d missed anything. Her life in Denver consisted of doing her job, returning home to a somewhat threadbare apartment, and trying to survive the politics of working in a male-dominated career.

Elliott excused himself and walked toward the restrooms.

Ginger leaned toward Autumn and yelled above the noise, “I thought this was supposed to be a girl’s night out. No guys.”

Autumn chuckled. “There are guys everywhere. How did you expect to get away from them? Besides, I was surprised when you asked me to hang out. I figured you and Hank would be together.”

Ginger frowned. “We had a fight.”

“Oh, no. About what?”

Ginger sighed. “We’ve been dating for almost a year, and I thought he might be ready to take our relationship to a more serious level. He told me he’s not ready.” Ginger took a sip of her soda. “We agreed to a few days away from each other to cool off. We’ll see what happens then.”

Disappointment welled inside Autumn. She’d witnessed many relationships between firefighters and their significant others go belly up, and she hated for it to happen between Ginger and Hank. They always looked good together and Autumn knew they cared deeply for each other.

Before she could say anything more, Elliott returned.

Then Autumn spotted Todd Geraldo swaggering in their direction, his dirty blue jeans and ragged T-shirt painful to the eyes and good taste.

“Oh, hell. He’s coming this way.” Elliott made a snorting noise, and she frowned at him. “What’s so funny?”

Before he could answer, Todd arrived. “Hey. What’s up?” Todd held out his big hand. “Wanna dance, Autumn?”

“Um ... no. Sorry, Todd. My feet are killing me.”

“How can they be killin’ you? You just got here,” Todd said.

So Todd the Toad had been watching her. Her skin crawled.

Right that moment she saw Jack weaving through the crowd. Her heart sped up as she contemplated possible rescue. Jack was a walking, talking dream. He wore a white T-shirt, black jeans, and cowboy boots. Jack must be crazy; it was darn right cold outside and he wore a T-shirt. Then she got a closer look at the words across his chest, a slogan she never would have expected to see on him in a million years. Red letters screamed the message loud and clear.

*Firefighters Have Bigger Hoses.*

“Whoa,” she murmured.

With the perfect, butt-molding fit of Jack’s jeans and the way his shoulders filled out his T-shirt, Jack qualified as one heartache inducing man. Her pulse accelerated at the same time a sultry tune started.

Todd sneered. “If it ain’t Dillon the dweeb.”



She almost retorted with fighting words. Instead, she sighed and said, “Todd, you haven’t changed, have you?”

“Why would I wanna do that?”

Jack arrived at the bar in time to stop her next comment. “Elliott.” His gaze passed over Todd with all the attention a man might pay a fly. “Geraldo.”

Before Todd could open his mouth, Jack held his hand out to her. “May I have this dance?”

Without hesitation, she gripped Jack’s hand, and he led her away. Once out of earshot, she said, “Thanks.”

He stopped before they reached the dance floor, slipped his left arm around her waist, and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “For what?”

She shivered in pure excitement as his warm breath touched her skin. “Todd. He was asking me to dance.”

Jack gave a mock shudder. “God.”

The warm, interested look in his eyes made her nervous and flustered. Her stomach did a pirouette. “Love your T-shirt.”

His grin turned wicked and he whispered in her ear again. “Well, you know what they say.” His voice deepened and went husky. “Firefighters find ‘em hot and leave ‘em wet.”

She couldn’t avoid the nuclear level reaction as tendrils of arousal stirred in her stomach. Swallowing hard, she tried to regain her composure.

As she looked into his eyes, she attempted an unrepentant grin of her own. Her heart raced and an overwhelming excitement churned deep inside.

Someone jostled her, and she bumped into Jack. Before Autumn knew it his body mashed against hers from breast to hips and each spot in between. She felt Jack inhale sharply at the same time she did. His gaze snagged hers and held. Compelling masculine approval radiated from him, and the temperature from that one glance lapped around her ankles and moved straight up the rest of her body until she felt it tingle in her breasts. Her nipples tightened into points, and she almost let out a small moan. Her senses filled with his heady scent of soap and sandalwood mixed with musk.

In Jack’s arms, she felt almost tiny. His powerful form wrapped around her in a way that protected and aroused so much, Autumn found her face aflame and the rest of her body not far behind.

She finally found her voice. “I thought we were dancing.”

He leaned down to speak in her ear once more. “Sorry, this music is too loud. If you want to talk, we’ll have to do it like this. Or leave and go somewhere quieter.” His voice deepened again to that melting, husky pitch.

A bolt of pure lightning seemed to ignite inside Autumn at the idea of being alone with him. She already floated about ten feet off the floor. The sensation of his muscular arm around her distracted her so much she could barely think. Time for evasive action.

“Dancing it is,” she said with enough volume he had to hear.

His teasing grin said he might be reading her mind. The fast beat meant they couldn’t talk anyway.

As he started to move, she saw Jack’s enjoyment of the tempo overtake him. As the world faded from focus, the throbbing music pulled her into a realm where only the two of them existed.

*The man is sin on two legs.*

She never would have imagined the pudgy boy with low self-esteem would someday turn into the sexiest man on earth.

Apparently, she didn't qualify as the only shell-shocked female in the room. In a peripheral corner of her sight, she realized other women watched Jack. She caught a glimpse of Cherry Guillett sitting at a table, and Autumn couldn't pretend she didn't see the woman's clear lust for Jack.

He opened his eyes and caught Autumn in his laser sights. The temperature in the room notched up about a hundred degrees. As the pulsating song slowed, she realized he didn't plan to let her leave the floor. His arms slipped around her waist and again she pressed tight against his chest and hips. One of Jack's palms slipped down and his fingers hovered low on her waist, almost touching her rear.

The music, a combination of New Age techno and smooth jazz, swept them into a languorous flow. She realized she'd never been so turned on in her life. If he did one more blatantly sexual thing, her short fuse might blow.

Then he slid his leg between her thighs, and Autumn found her clit rubbing against his rigid thigh muscle.

"Oh." The exclamation of surprise and excitement left her throat before she could prevent it.

The pressure was exquisite, and she involuntarily squirmed. *Oh. Oh, my God, that feels good.*

He brought his mouth close to her ear and asked, "All right?"

She slipped her arms around his neck and said with a silky purr into his ear, "I'm beyond all right."

When he pulled back, his teasing expression told her she'd revealed way too much. She thought she would dissolve right there on the dance floor. Yep, that was it. Melting into a puddle might be the best way to escape. Hot with longing. Scorching with desire. Ready to combust without a care for consequences. Seconds slipped into minutes, she let the music stir her the way it encouraged him, with sensuality.

Broad, strong muscles moved under her fingers as she clasped his shoulders. His hand slid up from her waist, and Jack buried his fingers in her hair a moment so he could pull her head back the slightest bit and look into her eyes. Autumn allowed her feelings to show in her eyes, well aware how perilous it might be. The music slowed to a stop, yet the magic he wrapped her in didn't ease. Instead of releasing her, Jack kept his hand buried in her hair and his other arm around her waist.

He said into her ear, "Sit with me awhile and talk."

"I'm here with Ginger, otherwise I would. Girl's night out, you know."

Her last words brought her lips close to his ear, and her mouth touched the lobe. Jack shivered, and the knowledge that she could make him quiver brought satisfaction.

"Autumn," he rasped, "are you flirting with me?"

"I might be."

He gave her a cocky smile. "We need to talk, and more than about just dancing. Come with me."

"Where?"

Jack latched onto her wrist and gently tugged her with him. "I'll show you."

Anticipation trickled up her spine in one jolt. They walked passed the restrooms and

around the corner to a doorway. "Hope this is open."

"What—"

He grabbed the doorknob and then they were through the door. He flipped on the light and revealed a tidy, large closet filled with a variety of supplies. It smelled faintly of furniture polish.

Alarmed and yet intrigued by what he had in mind, she gave him a teasing look.

"How did you know about this closet?"

"I helped with a fire inspection of this building a couple years back. You wouldn't believe the crannies we find in these places."

"Jack, what are we doing here?" she asked, breathless, excited by the unusual situation.

"Fulfilling a fantasy."

Excitement winged through her. "Oh." She heard the breathlessness in her voice.

He clasped her hand and brought her palm right over his heart. The heat and the steady, slow beat dissolved one more barrier inside her.

"I've always had this kinky desire to make love to you in a closet. Where we might be discovered. Where anyone could walk in."

"Oh, God."

"Exactly."

Jack wrapped his arms around her, then plunged his hand into her hair, holding her so securely a piece of paper couldn't come between them. Her hands palmed his chest, savoring the muscled, rounded contours of his pecs.

"If you don't want to be here, walk right out that door now and tell me to go screw myself." His hands smoothed down her arms, and he released her. "In fact, if you want to be out there rather than in here, just tell me and walk away."

She considered for one tiny second. Becoming more deeply involved with him, even in a physical fashion, could threaten her equilibrium. She hadn't come to Clifton intending to start an affair, even a meaningless fling. Before she could phrase a sentence, all reasonable thought flew away under a steady storm of passion, of desire so thick she could barely breathe.

Jack's mouth came down on her lips with drugging intensity. His hands moved over her with searching, tender attention. One hand kneaded the back of her neck, the other slipped down to cup her ass. The soul-deep way he kissed fanned her pulse as he plundered her mouth with his tongue. She responded, moaning and tightening her arms about his neck. She dove into their embrace, the ecstasy of it rocking her down to her high heels.

Autumn pulled up his t-shirt and found pecs and six-pack abs dusted lightly with hair, and when she touched his stomach he jerked lightly. "God, Autumn." Then he dove in to kiss her neck.

Nibbling, licking, he came to stop at the point just under her earlobe. She shivered, moaned, clutched at him, the movements of her body uncontrollable as pleasure built. She searched over his chest, enjoying the way his strong chest bunched with his movements, and the texture of hair felt so sexy, so erotic against her fingers. Desire to touch him anywhere and everywhere filled her. Her body didn't care where they were, or if someone might catch them. All that mattered was now. Her hands traced over his shoulders, testing and admiring the power held in check.

“You’re right. Someone could walk in. Maybe this isn’t a good idea,” she said.

He cupped her left breast, the heat and sensation as he plumped and squeezed gently adding to her confusion. He licked her earlobe, then said, “It’s the best idea I’ve had in years.”

“This is only sex, Jack.”

He drew back long enough to look into her eyes, and she couldn’t ignore the inferno sparking in his gaze. “You think so? What about this?” His fingers drew upward, pinched her nipple softly through the material. A shock of desire darted straight from the tortured nipple to her clit. She squirmed, and his thigh slipped between hers. He pressed his thigh up and she rubbed her clit against him to abolish the misery. “And this? Does that feel like sex to you, Autumn?”

“Yes, damn it.”

“Question is, do you want it? Tell me no, and I’ll stop.” The fierce hunger in his eyes softened slightly. “I’d never hurt you.”

She knew it like she knew her own name. Jack’s feral cravings reflected in his eyes, in the automatic movements of his hand on her breast, his thigh pressing between her legs. “Don’t stop.”

They plunged into another devouring kiss. She felt a tug on her sleeve and the stretchy material of her bodice and the thin bra strap loosened until it slid down her shoulder and bared her left breast. She worked her arm out of the sleeve entirely, and when he stared at her rounded flesh, she felt suddenly inadequate.

As he leaned in and his lips swept over the exposed bud, she cried out softly with pleasure. His tongue darted out to flick her nipple with one delicate stroke, then another. She moaned low in her throat. He worried the tight bead of flesh with lush, tender strokes that brought whimpers to her lips. One lick, then a soft tugging on the vulnerable flesh, and she gasped. Desire twisted, built, demanded a finish. She wriggled in his arms. She plunged her fingers into his thick, wavy hair and held him close as his mouth tormented. One lick. One sweet, gentle rhythm that threatened to drive her mad. Delicious weakness suffused her.

“Jack. Don’t stop.”

“Mmmm.” His assenting murmur muffled as he followed with a steady suckling that made her gasp and moan.

Her clit literally throbbed, wanting satisfaction. She panted as he bunched her skirt up and his big hand plunged into the back of her panties to cup bare flesh. As he continued his tender assault on her nipple, each rasp of his tongue sent answering shocks to her moist pussy. She ached, wanting something, anything to quench the fire raging within her. His fingers drifted to her stomach, palming her smooth skin until they slipped through her pubic hair and found her wet, plump folds. One quick pass of his index finger over her clit, and she almost came.

“Oh.” Her shivering acknowledgement made him bolder. As he licked her nipple with the barest of touches, he gently inserted one finger deep into her.

“You’re so wet.” He sounded elated, aroused. “Soft and fucking delicious.”

She quivered under the sensual acknowledgement, amazed at how quickly they’d reached this level. She couldn’t think. Didn’t want to think. Nothing meant anything but feeling this raging compulsion to find the ultimate fulfillment. His finger moved, thrusting and stroking, then he added a second finger. She gasped and moaned at the

exquisite sensation as his big fingers caressed sensitive surfaces.

His mouth nuzzled the side of her neck, and she shivered in pleasure. He awakened more sensitive nerves with every brush of his lips against her, the pressure of his fingers inside her.

“Jack.”

“Feel that. Beautiful.” He groaned softly. “Take it. Just let go.” He rasped the words against her breast, then plunged in and tugged her nipple into his mouth. “It’s just for you.”

His fingers plundered, fluttering over soaked folds until she melted into the sensations and forgot everything but the moment. She couldn’t think of anything but wanting him closer, deeper, his cock hard and thick and pushing into her body until they both climaxed.

When he stroked over her clit, faster and faster, she panted, desperate to reach the pinnacle. New urgency crept through her, her body moving, tightening, searching for something to put out the unquenched longing inside. His mouth ravaged hers, exploration going deeper and deeper. She writhed in desperation. With a startled cry, she came apart. Quaking, gasping for breath, she held in a shriek as bone-melting satisfaction flooded her body. Struck dumb by the heady, floating sensation within, she drifted on the beauty of it. Jack’s fingers slipped from her body and straightened her dress, sliding everything back into place.

She clung to him, breathing hard. Feeling suddenly shy, she stared up at him. “I can’t believe we just did that.”

He grinned, and when she slipped her hand over his erection, he clasped his hand over hers and brought it to his lips. “No. Ginger will come looking for you. I don’t want us to get caught doing anything more than we already have.”

“Damn it.”

He laughed. “Autumn, you’re something else.”

“So are you,” she said in a breathy tone she couldn’t help.

With a smile that curled her toes in her pumps, he kissed her softly once more, then led her from the closet.

With a smile and a nod he said, “I’ll see you later. For fantasy number three. Stop by my condo.”

She smiled. “Okay. What does fantasy number three include?”

His eyes narrowed. “Like I said, each fantasy is a secret.”

She sighed. “You’re determined to drive me crazy, aren’t you?”

He winked. “It’s my mission in life.” He turned to leave again.

She reached for him and caught his forearm. “Wait. I’ll be interviewing you sometime next week or the week after.”

“I thought you were interviewing Chief Hallam.”

“I am. But be prepared.” She gave him a tentative smile. “I’ll be asking questions about your experiences in New York City.”

For a second Autumn thought she saw reluctance in Jack’s eyes. “I don’t know…”

“Please, Jack? I know it’s difficult to talk about—”

“Difficult doesn’t begin to describe it.”

“I know. But I want to understand. And others will too.”

The music rose again, and he leaned closer to make himself heard. “If it was anyone

else, I'd say no."

She saw questions in his eyes she didn't understand, but she ached to uncover new layers to this man. "Thanks, Jack."

"Don't thank me yet. Wait until the interview is over."

Before she could answer, he placed his hand on the small of her back and walked with her toward the bar. When they reached the bar, though, she didn't see her boss or Ginger anywhere.

Jack cracked a smile and pressed her shoulder gently. "Later."

As she watched him leave, she marveled at what she'd experienced on the dance floor and in the closet with Jack, her mind completely blown away.

\* \* \* \*

The Watcher resented the way Autumn and Dillon had danced. Autumn looked hot and bothered, her lips all red as if she'd been kissed, her hair scrambled from the way Dillon's fingers had tangled in the curls. Her trashy dress clung to her breasts, hips and thighs, designed to make a man salivate like a mad dog. Dillon had watched Autumn like he wished he could lick her from one end of her body to the other. Heavy-duty arousal stirred in the Watcher's blood, along with undiluted wrath. When she'd snuck off with Dillon for several minutes, the Watcher guessed what they must be doing. The big firefighter had probably fucked her good and hard. Part of the Watcher enjoyed the idea and wanted it for himself. He could imagine her juicy, delicious body open wide just for him.

No.

He must concentrate on why he was here and what he must do.

Something must be done to stop them. The Watcher smiled. *I know just how.*

\* \* \* \*

Autumn scanned the crowd looking for Ginger and saw her friend dancing with a tall, good-looking man. Well, she hoped Ginger was having a good time.

Seconds later Elliott strolled up. "There you are. Thought you'd be on the dance floor with Dillon forever." His voice sounded light. He stayed standing and sipped a glass of wine. "No big deal, but I should warn you."

Her internal alarm went off. "Warn me?"

"Don't read too much into that dance."

Shocked at the boldness of the statement, she gaped at him for a full thirty seconds. "I'm not reading anything into the dance that isn't there. He obviously likes to dance."

"I saw the way he held you. Besides, he's too young for you, isn't he?"

Anger roared up before she could halt it. "First of all, I can't believe we're having this discussion. If and when I decide to have a relationship with Jack, that's my business."

Elliott paused, a considering look coursing through his eyes. "I've always called it like I see it."

Right. She loved it when people expressed rude opinions and then qualified them by saying they were simply being honest. "Maybe I don't want your opinion."

She wished she'd never come here in the first place.

Okay, so she would have missed the most thrilling dance of her life. The most exciting, hidden interlude she'd experienced with a man.

Um, yeah. Dance didn't quite describe it. Interlude didn't spell the true sensation, the rush she'd experienced in Jack's arms on the dance floor and with his fingers buried inside her and his mouth stimulating her nipple.

"I'll be back in a minute," Elliott said, heading toward the general area of the rest rooms.

She watched him walk away, realizing that she could have put her job in jeopardy.

\* \* \* \*

Cherry saw Jack cross the room in the opposite direction from her. She bit her lip, furious. She'd underestimated Autumn MacAllister. Who knew the bitch would wrap herself around Jack like a dog in heat?

Half tempted to run after Jack, Cherry was forestalled when George arrived with two drinks. His usual beer and her whiskey on the rocks. She shot George a dirty look as he handed her the sweating glass. Wearing his trademark black muscle shirt and absurdly tight faded jeans, he looked almost edible. The boy had white trash written all over him, and he seemed damned proud of it.

"What are you dreaming about, Cherry?" George slid onto a stool next to her, his gaze drifting across the room toward Autumn. "It better not be that prick, Dillon."

Cherry threw him a disgusted look, and for a second contemplated throwing her drink in his face. "I've got something to do."

"Don't you ignore me."

"Jesus, I've got to pee. You got a problem with that?"

She stood up and headed for the ladies room. She yelped when hard fingers latched onto her upper arm with enough force to bruise. He swung her around.

George's eyes blazed down at her with unconcealed anger. "Where the hell do you think you're going? I didn't come here to put up with your shit."

"You're such a clueless bastard, George."

He snorted. "I'm the bastard? I know what's got you all wet. You've been panting over that stupid fireman for years." He gritted the next words through his teeth. "Now he's doggin' after Autumn and that's pissing you off. Well, if he hasn't screwed you until you can't see straight by now, he ain't going to do it in the future. So get over it."

Steaming rage brought to mind ways she could cut off his head and stick it on a pike. Better yet, she'd do a bob job on his meat and serve it up as sausage. George's huge man meat as a side dish. She laughed, her imagination riving into high gear. A George log. That's what she'd call it.

Cherry laughed harder. "I suppose you think Autumn is going to come back to you after all these years? Conveniently ignore your background and jump into the sack with you? We both know I'm more likely to get Jack into bed. So get your head out of your ass, Georgie."

Muscles in his jaws clenched. "George. Only George."

She reveled in the irritation it caused him, because he hated to hear himself called by the name his overbearing mother and bully big brother always used.

Fury bit at her heels like a rabid dog, but she couldn't afford a scene. Nearby, another reporter at the Clifton Times watched them. Ginger something-or-other. No, she

didn't want anyone getting ideas. After all, people in this town liked to gossip, licking it up like a man getting his first taste of nipple. Aggravated that she couldn't launch into him with everything she had, including a swift knee to his equipment, she smiled.

Laying on her most patronizing smile, she ripped her arm loose from his fingers and headed toward the restroom.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn wondered where Elliott had disappeared to. He'd been gone quite a while for a man visiting the restroom. Maybe he was fed up and left after she danced with Jack. One could only hope.

Dance was such a mild, light word for what they'd done. She felt as if they'd engaged in a mating ritual right on the dance floor for everyone to see. Recalling the way Jack held her and the way his hands cupped and caressed, made her so excited she couldn't see straight. Autumn swallowed hard as sweat popped out on her forehead.

"Oh, God," she whispered, trying to forestall her wayward fantasies.

As she took a sip of her drink, she heard the first whoosh of air. At first, she thought she imagined the sound. Another whooshing noise echoed from a spot near the restrooms, clear across the room from the bar.

It almost sounded like—

Dark smoke billowed from the area near the restrooms. Autumn didn't have time to think about anything. She turned toward the bar.

"Hey!" she shouted at the bartender. "Call 9-1-1. There's a fire in the restrooms."

The bartender let out a startled exclamation. "Fuck me!"

"Is there a fire extinguisher back there?" she asked.

"Yeah." The bartender snatched it from under the bar and started to come around the side.

She grabbed it out of his hands. "Get people out of here in an orderly fashion. Don't panic."

Before the man could agree to the plan, a woman screamed. "Fire! Fire!"

Someone else added to the fracas. "Run! Get out!"

*Oh, damn.* "This is going to be really, really bad," Autumn murmured as she pushed her way through the crowd.

She thought about Elliott and hoped he wasn't trapped in the restroom with the fire. That horrifying idea sent her into double speed. He needed her help.

Fire alarms shrieked, possibly set off by someone opening a fire exit. The high-pitched sound rammed her nerves into first gear. As she ran on her high heels, she hoped she didn't fall and break her neck. She heard more yelling, this time sounding like it came from the first floor.

Then all hell *did* break loose.

A loud blast rocked the club, sending debris flying across the room. The shock wave punched her before she could duck, and sent her into darkness.



## Chapter Nine

Jack was only a few blocks from the club when dispatch sent out an alarm for a structure fire with possible injuries and entrapment. Dispatch requested two aerials, three engines and a task force of ambulances and paramedics.

The size of the fire didn't suck the breath from him. It was the address.

The Top O' the Morning Club.

Gut-wrenching fear punched him as he screeched through a U-turn on the almost deserted street.

He knew a fire this large must have burst out of control in a heartbeat. An explosion? He'd never prayed much, and he didn't often expect miracles, but at that moment he had one thought and one thought alone.

*Autumn, baby, please be outta there and on your way home.*

Somehow, though, he knew if anybody stayed in the building it would be Autumn, considering her stubbornness and determination. She would fight the fire if she could. His breathing quickened. As his mind jumbled with urgency, he took charge of the terror seizing him at the thought of her trapped in an inferno. Not again. Not again.

Control. He must maintain control or he would be of no use to her.

Besides the fact Autumn possessed common sense, she'd battled wildfires for a career. If anyone could survive, she would. As he turned a corner and saw people stampeding from the nightclub, he heard the wail of sirens coming in hard and fast behind him. He turned into a vacant lot so his car wouldn't be in the way of emergency vehicles. He exited the vehicle and after grabbing his extra gear from the trunk, ran toward the pub, a single thought threatening to overpower his training.

*Must find Autumn.*

As an aerial ladder truck roared along the street, people ran away from the building with smoke-smudged, panic-stricken faces. Smoke poured from the building, upchucking more coughing, stumbling people. Paramedics grabbed the ones who looked like they might require medical attention.

The ladder company from his station house roared into the lot, and Hank jumped out of the truck as it came to a stop at the curb. Chief Hallam shouted orders. Two firefighters pulled hose while the others hooked the five-inch up to the hydrant. The aerial ladder went up for access and evacuation.

Hank handed Jack's equipment to him. "I brought it along. Knew you'd be on your way as soon as you heard about it."

Jack wrestled on his gear. "What the hell happened?"

"Someone said the restrooms upstairs are on fire. Said they heard this big whoosh sound, like someone threw a bomb."

"Bomb?"

"Molotov cocktail."

A curse left Jack's lips. Anger lapped at him like the fire, and he used it to fuel his determination. "Autumn's in there. I've got to find her."

Flames shot out of a window on the second floor. Glass flew everywhere, and several more screams echoed as debris fell on people below. Pieces of glass hit Jack, but

he ignored them as he ran toward the building with Hank not far behind.

“Get those hoses in there!” Chief Hallam pointed at the building and two firefighters headed toward the club, one of them in the lead with the nozzle. “Up top with the ax, bring some of that roof down! Put the wet to the red!”

\* \* \* \*

Darkness hovered around the edges of Autumn’s vision as she lay sprawled spread-eagle on her back. Fire alarms continued to wail and water from the sprinklers slapped her body. She realized with dawning horror that the fire could be encroaching on her while she lay here. How long had she been out?

Autumn sat up and noted debris all around her. People dashed by, almost tripping in their haste to escape. They didn’t seem to care if she was left behind at the mercy of flames. She scanned the area for injured people.

*Nope. You’re the only one sitting on your ass.*

She scrambled to her feet and retrieved the fire extinguisher.

Ginger and Elliott. Where had they gone? Were they trapped?

People shouted, shoved and bounced Autumn among them like a ping-pong ball as she tried to approach the fire. “Let me through!”

Ideas raced through her mind like cars on the Indianapolis 500. Had both floors exploded at the same time? It couldn’t have been cigarettes in the trashcans. No way. That wouldn’t have caused the detonation.

Both doors to the restrooms hung from the jambs at crooked angles. Pieces of ceiling, insulation, and other rubble littered the floor. Billowing black smoke rolled into the area. The sprinkler system, which kept the flames from surging into the main rooms, gave a sputter and died.

*Oh God. This is not good. Not good at all.*

Smoke filled her lungs and she coughed. Her eyes filled with tears. Peering through the smoke, she knew toxic gases threatened like a hovering beast. Whoever created this seventh level of hell meant to kill.

She couldn’t afford to breathe this. She would need gear and heavy-duty firefighting equipment to rescue Ginger and Elliott, and she didn’t have either right now. To stay meant suicide.

She backed out of the fiery mess. Time to cut and run. She dropped the extinguisher.

Heat crept up her back, and she started crawling her way to safety. She’d seen a fire escape on this floor, and knew it would be easier to navigate than plunging down the stairs on high-heels.

She came parallel with the stairs. She heard the clatter of shoes to her left. Through the smoke Autumn caught a glance of a tall blonde with wild-eyed terror etched into her face. Before she could offer help, the frantic woman crashed into Autumn and tripped head-over-heels down the stairs. Autumn tried to keep her balance but failed.

*No!*

The stairs came up at Autumn before she could blink, and as her body hit the metal and jarred with bone-cracking impact, pain slammed into her ribs. Autumn couldn’t break her fall as she connected with another stair and red flashed in her vision as pain filled her body.

As she came to rest at the bottom of the stairs, her world went into rolling slow

motion. Her lungs seized and she gave in to a long coughing fit. She shook her aching head as she tried to regain perspective. Through a haze of dizziness, she fought her way in to a sitting position. She glanced over at the woman and realized the woman was sprawled at a funny angle, her head and neck twisted. The vacant stare on the woman's face meant only one thing.

Nausea bolted through Autumn, but she struggled to keep a hold on her emotions. If she wanted to end up dead, all she needed to do was forget common sense. Autumn knew she must make her way to a side exit free of flames. She crawled again. She heard the crackle and pops and knew she must escape fast or she'd be toast. Literally.

She couldn't see where she was going any more. Her breath rasped and another coughing fit hit hard. She hoped neither Elliott nor Ginger had stayed inside looking for her. *Don't you die on me.*

Another thought shot through her mind. *Please, Jack! Find me!*

But there was no reason for Jack to be here; he was off duty and on his way home.

*Only a little farther to go. You can do it.*

She almost heard Jack's voice in her head, telling her she could make it another foot. Then another.

*Hallucinating. I'm losing it.*

Seconds later Autumn saw a blessed sight. Water sprayed into the room from the direction of the front exit, pounding back flames. She wished the spray would hit her and drown the pain, the fear, and the anger boiling inside.

Firefighters surged into the room. She didn't know whether to cry or not, but it didn't seem to matter because tears poured from her eyes from the smoke. Coughing seemed uncontrollable now, and a weird buzzing filled her head as everything went into slow motion again. Seconds later one of the firefighters bent toward her, his eyes wide with something that looked like relief and alarm.

Green eyes?

Jack?

She clutched at him and he pulled her up. Her knee buckled, and as she started to collapse, he lifted her in his arms. He rushed toward the exit, now visible through steam and disappearing plumes of smoke.

Freezing air blasted her face as they emerged from the building. Impressions bombarded her from all sides. Emergency lights dazzled her stinging eyes. The sound of a siren as another ladder truck arrived filled her ears. The coat under her fingers felt cold and wet.

Coughing gripped her as she sucked in precious air. Her head throbbed and she felt nauseated as hell. Her body ached in places she didn't even know she possessed until that moment. The firefighter's arms, strong and reassuring, cradled her close.

The man settled her on the grass away from the chaos. He ripped off his helmet, hood, and breathing apparatus.

"Jack," she choked out.

His hands cupped her face for a second, eyes narrowed with a frantic anxiety she couldn't remember ever seeing in him before. "Where are you hurt?"

She shook her head. Shivers racked her body.

"You're freezing." He took off his turnout coat and put it around her. Command entered his voice. "Lie down and let me help you."

She coughed out her next words. "Don't need ... to lie down."

He managed a crooked smile. "She speaks."

"Therefore ... she lives." She coughed around her next words. "I'm ... okay ... now."

For all of two seconds he looked like he might do something desperate, though she couldn't say for certain what. Anxiety flooded his expression, mixed with equal parts anger. "Stay right here. Don't move."

He ran off and returned seconds later with a medical kit from one of the ambulances.

"Are you in pain anywhere? Be honest with me." Jack quickly opened the kit and set up oxygen.

"No, I'm—" Another cough. "Is Elliott—"

Jack slipped the oxygen mask over her face. "Shh. Breathe deep."

He sounded gruff, as if he didn't give a flip about Elliott. High-flow oxygen poured into her lungs, and the convulsive response to cough eased. Nausea bolted through her again.

As if he could read her mind, he said, "If you feel like you're going to be sick, let me know."

Her head throbbed like a son-of-a-bitch and her insides lurched. Oh, yeah. Getting sick was a good possibility.

"Ginger—" She gasped through the mask. Coughing racked her.

Jack frowned. "What about Ginger?"

She took the mask off. "Ginger is still in there. Oh, God, Jack, we've got to save her."

He gently slid the mask back on her face. "Come on, take it easy. She's probably all right. Concentrate on breathing. Slow. Easy."

She nodded and did as told.

"I'd put you in an ambulance and get you out of this cold, but the last one left with victims. More should be on the way. Hold on." He slipped a pulse-ox index on her finger to check oxygen levels. "Where's all the blood coming from?" When she shook her head in response, he looked even more concerned. "Damn it, Autumn." Jack tilted her face up and peered into her eyes. "Did you hit your head?" Jack probed her skull, his fingers gentle as he tested for injury. "Tell me if it hurts."

The realization she'd made it out of the building alive came over her in a wild sweep. She fought back the reaction, struggling with wild elation and despair that she hadn't saved the woman from death. Ginger and Elliott might also be dead. She gulped on a sob.

"Easy," Jack said as he checked her pupils. "Equal and responsive, thank God. Now tell me, did you hit your head?"

She slipped the mask to the side. "The first blast knocked me down. I might have hit it then. I don't know."

"Here it is. You've got a cut on your scalp." A curse slipped from his lips. "Did you lose consciousness?"

"Maybe for a few seconds. It wasn't long."

He placed a stethoscope to her chest, then removed the jacket around her shoulders for a moment so he could press the stethoscope to her back. "Breathe deep for me. Okay, that's good. Sounds clear."

His soothing voice made her feel better; the oxygen seemed to do the trick as some

nausea slipped away.

He cupped her face again, his eyes melting with a tenderness that stole her breath as easily as the smoke. "Sure you don't want to lie down? You'll feel better."

She put her hand over his and smiled. She took the mask off. "No. I'm fine." More tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "Jack, you saved my life."

"My pleasure," he said softly, a smile lighting his eyes. "You scared the hell out of me. Now put the mask back on and leave it there before I get angry."

Hank ran up to them. "Hey, Jack. She all right?"

"I think she will be." Jack's words came out clipped. "Hank, did you know Ginger was in there?"

Hank's face fell, his face vulnerable and revealing. He looked terrified. "Oh, God. No, I didn't know." Hank turned to Autumn. "Where did you see her last?"

Autumn took a heaving breath first. "Near the bar, dancing."

Hank's eyes blazed. "Oh, God. I've got to find her." He turned and ran away.

Autumn trembled, concern for Ginger and Elliott overriding her other discomfort. Jack seemed to sense this, and he smiled slightly. "He'll find her. She's all right."

She could only hope he was right.

"Autumn!" Elliott appeared from the crowd nearby. He looked smudged, his face marked by soot, with one shirt sleeve torn. He knelt beside her, his face filled with concern. "Are you all right?"

Jack answered for her. "She needs to take it easy while we get her checked out."

"What the hell happened?" Elliott ran his hands through his hair until it stood on end. "I went outside for a cigarette and all of a sudden people were running like jackrabbits out of the doors. I tried to get back in, but there were so many people, I couldn't get through."

Autumn heard the guilt ringing in Elliott's voice, and she took the mask off. "It's all right," she rasped through dry lips and scratchy throat. "You couldn't have helped. The fire went out of control after the blast. You could have been hurt if you went in there."

Elliott squeezed her shoulder. "I was looking for you."

Jack didn't seem impressed with their conversation. When a new ambulance arrived at the scene, he flagged it down. "Come on. You're going to the hospital."

Autumn hated the idea. "But I can't leave Ginger."

"You need to be taken in for observation. At least for a few hours. We need to make sure you don't have a concussion and that you're not hurt anywhere else."

She smiled at his fierce expression. "You're not going to take no for an answer, are you?"

"Hell, no."

A whoop of delight came from somewhere behind them. Autumn turned to see Ginger rushing into Hank's arms. Relief hit Autumn and more tears slid down her face. Hank ushered Ginger toward their little group.

Ginger squatted down to hug Autumn. "God, when I couldn't find you in that mess inside, I thought something bad had happened to you. I escaped out the side exit with a few other people."

Autumn smiled again. "I'm good. I made it out of there, and you guys made it out of there. That makes me feel great. Clifton Times rocks."

A chuckle rippled through the group. Even Jack's expression lightened.

As the clamor around Autumn started to dissipate, she realized firefighters had contained most of the blaze. Elliott hovered, but something told her Jack didn't want Elliott around her, and she didn't know whether to find this annoying or gratifying.

Before she knew it, she'd been strapped onto a gurney and loaded into the ambulance.

Jack reported to Hank what he planned to do. Moments later he climbed into the ambulance and they took off.

"This feels familiar," she said as Jack took her blood pressure and pulse again.

"You know the drill." His voice was grave, his eyes snapping with irritation. "Leave the oxygen mask on."

His blast of antagonism took her by surprise. She felt almost normal, and the ache in her head had eased. Relinquishing herself to his care, she tried to relax and not think about the fact her hide had almost been roasted. Or the fact someone had committed such a heinous act. Or the dead woman lying at the base of the stairs.

Jack went through the routine of checking her lungs and her pupil response. She realized the touch of humor he'd displayed earlier didn't erase his professionalism or his obvious worry for her. When she could remove the oxygen mask for good, she'd make sure he understood how much she appreciated his care.

Before they reached the hospital, Jack went silent, his face a portrait of keen inner concentration. Then he turned that intense gaze on her, and she felt her stomach turn to jelly. Man, this guy could make her feel like this while traveling in an ambulance and after almost becoming the main course at a weenie cookout? What was she going to do?

He put his hand on her forehead, and then smoothed his fingers over her hair, brushing it back with a gentle touch. She sensed he wanted to say something, but he didn't.

Then they arrived at the hospital, and she didn't have a chance to question the intense expression in his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

"Pricks." The Watcher said to no one in particular.

"What?" the short, chubby man beside him asked, his expression bemused.

"The people that started this fire. What pricks."

"Waste of a good place to drink."

"You can drink anywhere."

The short, overweight man nodded and lifted his fancy camera. He took a couple of shots. "Actually, I like fires."

The Watcher took in the last of the smoldering building, feeling the hate and fury dissolve along with the fire. Revenge would be more than sweet, but triumph would come when the enemy perished. He couldn't stick around long. Fire investigators would come soon, and they would try to discover when and why the fire started. Then they might discover who started it.

Fatso still stood there, his body squeezed into a western shirt, bolo tie, black jeans, and worn shit-kicker boots. Probably thought he was a ladies man. Fatso slung his camera over his shoulder. He looked within a millisecond of popping the buttons on his ill-fitting shirt.

The stranger also had cool death in his eyes; the Watcher could always tell when a

man equaled or exceeded his own capacity to hate. The Watcher didn't remember seeing the dickhead before. Rumpled, smelling of an overdose of some dumb-ass perfume, the guy acted as nervous as a fly around a swatter.

Fatso cleared his throat. "I mean, I enjoy a good fire in the fireplace, but this is horrendous. And it's happening so often lately. Must be an arsonist, don't you think?"

The Watcher shrugged. "Maybe. That's what the papers say. But what do they know? Bunch of self-serving, know-it-all bastards."

"Yeah." The fat man's expression went chilly. "There's that reporter that did the piece on firemen. Made them into damned heroes or something. Took too many pictures of that one guy ... what's his name?"

The Watcher's ire built, smoldering like fire resurrected. "Jack Dillon."

Fatso turned small round eyes back to the blackened nightclub. "That's the one. She made him sound like Superman."

The Watcher became amused with the game. "I figure he puts out fires because he can't get it up in the sack. If you know what I mean?"

Fatso snorted. "Yeah, I gotcha. Small penis."

The Watcher laughed. "Hell, it might be a fireman doing all this, don't you think?"

New interest rose in fat man's eyes, and the Watcher decided playing with the puke could be even more interesting.

Fatso nodded and pushed his hand through a head of red, kinky hair. "I was in there when this all started and saw that reporter running toward the fire with an extinguisher. Like the stupid bitch could put it out with that. What was she thinking?"

"She used to be a firefighter. Smoke jumper or whatever they're called."

Fatso appeared surprised. "Oh, yeah? Well, that figures. Looks like the type."

"Yeah, she looks like she could chew fire for breakfast."

Fatso laughed, and the Watcher wanted to punch him out. Hit him right in his white, death-like face.

A sick image rose in the Watcher's mind. Sick and juicy. "Sounds like you and I might have some things in common. The way we think about things."

Fat man smiled as if he'd won a free date with a thousand-dollar-an-hour whore. "Seems like it."

"Then maybe we should talk."

## Chapter Ten

Morning sunlight streamed through the shades of Autumn's hospital room. She pushed the control button on the side of the bed to bring the head and feet to a more comfortable level. The pillow under her head felt as fluffy as a rock.

"Here, let me get that," Bitsie said. After helping her adjust the bed and pillow, Bitsie stayed beside the bed. "I'm so glad you're all right, dear." She patted Autumn's hand as she stood near the bed. "And I hope Elliott doesn't expect you to come into work today."

Autumn clasped Bitsie's hand. "He called before you arrived and told me I have as many days off as I need."

"Good. I was afraid he'd expect you to leap right out of this bed and produce an article on last night's fire."

"Well, he probably does want me to write a story on it. I'm half-tempted to start writing this minute."

Bitsie groaned. "Don't you dare."

"I don't want to stay in this bed."

She also didn't want to think about the woman lying broken and dead at the bottom of the stairs at the club.

Bitsie released Autumn's hand. "I think Jack would have a fit if the doctors let you out of here yet."

Autumn shifted. Every muscle in her body protested. "I've been here overnight and here it is eight in the morning. I'm ready to leave. No concussion, nothing broken, and even my knee is okay. I'm in one piece, so they should release me. I think being in a hospital twice in two weeks is plenty, don't you?"

"That's for certain. If they let you out of here today, I'll fix you soup. It's good for what ails you."

"Sounds great. I think I burned off a few calories last night."

Bitsie lifted one eyebrow. "I'll bet you did. But my guess is the weight loss professionals would argue against your method."

"Gives new definition to baptism by fire." Bitsie's giggle set Autumn to laughing, and soon Autumn clutched her aching side. "Stop, stop. If I hurt myself laughing, the doctors will never let me out of here."

"You're not going anywhere yet," a deep male voice said from the doorway.

Autumn's heart started thumping the minute she heard Jack's husky voice. After he left her at the emergency room last night and went back to the fire, she hadn't seen him again. She'd been disconcerted with herself for caring one way or the other if he returned to visit. Now his stern expression spoke of unhappiness as he walked in wearing his Clifton Fire Department T-shirt and cargo pants. Even as her heart triple-timed at the sight of him, a surge of anger filled her.

"She's going wherever she wants," Autumn replied as he strode to the side of the bed.

Bitsie turned a clever smile on them both. "I can see you two have things to discuss." After giving Autumn's shoulder a motherly pat, she headed for the door. "Give me a call



when you're ready to come home, Autumn."

Jack took the spot his mother vacated, appraising Autumn with a combination of consternation and keen attention. "How are you feeling?"

"Great. You look hacked off."

A little of the steel left his eyes and his mouth softened. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I am. You're not leaving here until the doctors say you can. So don't even think about it."

"As gratifying as it is that you're concerned, please go easy on the bossing around. I don't react well to men who are heavy-handed." She added a smile to ease the message.

He rubbed the back of his neck again. "Sorry. I guess I'm a little uptight."

"Why?"

He made a scoffing noise. "You were almost killed last night. Did you miss that somewhere along the way? And some bastard is out there setting fire to the whole damned town. I'd say that's a good enough reason to be pissed."

She remembered too well what happened last night. "That woman died." Bit by bit she related how the woman had tripped over her and fallen to her death.

"It was an accident," he said. "You're alive and that's all that matters to me."

Impulse made Autumn reach out to him. He took her right hand in both of his and came closer to the bed.

His warm hands brushed over her skin as he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Don't start thinking you could have done something differently. I feel for that woman, I really do. But you can't second guess yourself."

When he kissed her hand again, she stared at him, surprised by his affection and thrilled whether she wanted to be or not.

When she didn't speak he continued. "You saved your own life. You reacted like a professional who understood the fire had them beat." Grimness returned to his features. "You used your head and realized you couldn't fight it on your own. That's what saved you." Slowly he disengaged his hand from hers. A smile curved his lips. "The Chief almost tore a strip off my ass because I ran into the fire without waiting to receive an assignment from the incident commander first."

"Oh, Jack, you got in trouble?"

"Nah. Not really. He said he knew I was there because I wanted to help. He told me that next time I'd better stay and get the assignment, even if someone I cared about was in the building." He swallowed hard.

Although relieved he hadn't been severely reprimanded, the fact he'd lose his composure over her and ignore procedure concerned her.

Anger took over seconds later.

"I didn't help anyone escape, and that's one thing firefighters do." She hated her weakness.

"You warned people, ordered someone to call 9-1-1, and you tried to put out the fire. You were flattened by a blast, knocked downstairs, hit your head, and sucked in a lot of smoke. How were you supposed to save anybody when all that was happening to you?"

She stilled the sadness that tried to ambush her. "You're right. Fill me in on what happened the rest of the night at the club."

"Dozens of people were injured, but no one else died except the woman who fell down the stairs."

"Thank God. All of this could have been so much worse."

"Have the police been by or the fire investigators?"

"Both of them early this morning. After I told them what I saw and heard, they seemed intrigued. But they wouldn't tell me anything about what they suspect." She paused and took a deep breath. "Any clues on who started the fire?"

Jack pulled up a chair and sank into it. "The fire investigators are at the scene this morning. I can trust you to keep this under wraps, right?"

"Of course."

"They think it was a Molotov cocktail thrown through the bathroom window on the first and second floors. The double whammy came when the arsonist threw another cocktail through the storage room window. It landed close to some acetone stored there. That, plus a bunch of paper products and newspapers in the storage area, caused the explosion and rapid movement of the fire." His tight expression became bleaker. "This has got everyone spooked. Me included. When I heard that alarm last night on my radio and knew you were still in that building—"

She waited, watching uncertainty and remembered angst cross his features. A flush filled his cheeks and he stood. "I need to go, Autumn. I wanted to stop by on the way to work and see how you were." He traced her cheek with his index finger, then tweaked her nose. "And if I hear you left this bed before you're officially released, there will be hell to pay."

She winked. "I've already been to hell. Didn't like the scenery."

A small, reluctant laugh came from his throat. "I'm not kidding, Autumn."

"So how do you think you'll keep me here if I don't want to stay?"

He placed his hands on the side of the bed and leaned close. "I have my ways."

His alluring, masculine scent invaded her senses and kept her from thinking clearly. "Like what? Having Bitsie keep me under house arrest?"

Jack's superheated gaze slid down her body in a blatant, no-excuse inspection. "House arrest. That's an interesting concept. I think I might like that. Maybe I'll borrow handcuffs from one of my cop buddies."

It was dangerous territory, but she couldn't resist. She reached up and brushed her fingers over his shoulder. "Depends on your concept of house arrest."

"You," he murmured softly, his voice husky with sexual tension, "tied to my bed."

A flush filled her face and arched through her body until it coiled tight and hot between her legs. "You're into bondage?"

"Are you?"

Her palm smoothed over his shoulder again. "That's not an answer, Jack."

He leaned down and whispered, "I'll keep that a mystery until we can be together."

Little thrills of excitement boogied through her stomach. "I'm sorry we couldn't talk more last night."

"Don't try and change the subject."

"I think what we were talking about is dangerous territory, Jack."

"I like danger. I'm a fireman."

She stifled a laugh and gave him a big grin instead. "With an ego, too."

"Same kind of ego you've got. You know what it takes to stay alive in a bad situation. You're not afraid."

"Any firefighter that doesn't respect and fear fire is an idiot." Memories of last night

tightened her throat.

His gaze turned gentle. "You're right. Bravery is okay up to a point except when it crosses into stupidity. I'm glad you know the difference."

"Next time I'd like to kick the fire's ass instead of it being the other way around."

His gaze turned sorrowful, as if he'd imagined a dozen bad scenarios all at once. In that moment another wave of regret and sadness hit her. Damn it, she would return to firefighting one day.

His lips tightened, but he didn't back away from her. "You have a bum knee."

She dared look in his eyes, and there she saw a challenge. "The doctors in Denver said there's a great chance I'll recover all the strength and mobility in my knee. It wasn't even damaged last night." When he didn't say anything, she continued. "I was a good smoke jumper."

"Never said you weren't." After a pause he said, "You're also thirty-four."

Autumn knew he wasn't putting her down, but she didn't like thinking about her age keeping her from continuing smoke jumping. "They won't put you out to pasture when you turn thirty-four, will they?"

"No, of course not. But when it comes to hiring, they'll look at your age as a down side. Wrong or right, that's what they'll do."

The pain of reality wouldn't relinquish. "They're wrong."

He straightened and jammed one hand through his hair. Light from the window threw gold and red sparks off the surface, and she wanted to reach up run her fingers through it.

"Can we talk about this later?" His voice went quiet. "I'll be late."

She crammed back the urge to push the issue and forced a weak smile. Again, he leaned on the bed, flattening his palms on the mattress. "I could see Elliott giving us dirty looks clear across the room last night. I don't think he wanted anyone horning in on his territory."

Indignant, she bristled. "Elliott doesn't have a claim on me. No one has a claim on me. He just happened to be in the club."

His gaze searched her face for a long time. "I like that about you, Autumn. Your independence is a good thing."

"And yet you want to tie me to the bed." Heat filled her face with flames hotter than the blaze at the club last night. "I mean, keep me under house arrest."

His wide grin, equal parts amusement and clear sexual interest, made her want to squirm. "I'd love to discuss this interesting idea some more. I'll bring it up the next time I see you."

Before she could take a breath or realize his intent, he covered her mouth with his. Jack's lips felt warm, tender, and impossibly good. He pulled back slightly, and she sucked in a breath to find her bearings.

"Why, sir, you take me by surprise," she mumbled, her heart thundering.

"Yeah?" Intent battled with restraint in his eyes. "Well, if you think that's surprising, try this."

He kissed her again, this time launching from simple to sensuous in a millisecond. Slow and gentle, his tongue traced her lips, then stroked inside for one breath-stealing second to caress her tongue. Even lying in a hospital bed, she ached to have her way with him.

He drew back, heaving in a deep breath. "Gotta go. I'll talk to you soon."

When the door swung closed, she smiled.

Autumn replayed their intimacy in her mind a half dozen times, closing her eyes and savoring the melting sensations once more. She fantasized about what would have happened if they'd fucked in the closet last night. It wouldn't have taken much for her to slip off her shoes, her pantyhose and panties. In her mind's eye she allowed the scenario to gather strength.

She plunged into the fantasy realm of the closet.

*He lifts her against the wall, his strength causing new tendrils of excitement to dance in her stomach and make way straight to her pussy. Seconds later his cock slides between her pussy lips and with a solid push, he thrusts inside. Oh. Oh, that's nice. He draws back enough to tease, his cock so thick and long it rubbed along the surfaces of her sensitive vagina with every movement. Stroking, pushing inside her with gentle thrusts, his cock rubs against a special place deep inside.*

She drowned in the fantasy, wishing she was anywhere but a hospital bed so she could put out the fire.

Her eyes snapped open.

*Face it, Autumn. You want the man, and you want him badly.*

As she closed her eyes and imagined his cock plowing straight and deep to her core, she banished all images from last night that threatened to haunt her.

\* \* \* \*

Station One buzzed with activity. Jack heard the men around him talking theories about last night's fire. He waded into his work energetically, trying to forget Autumn lying in the hospital bed. Tried to forget the heart-stopping terror that crept up on him whenever he thought about losing her to the fire.

As Jack set the table for the noon meal, Hank made beef hamburgers, soy burgers for the guys that wanted them, and fries.

Primary emotions ran around in his psyche, threatening to affect his work, and he didn't like it. Affection for Autumn. Genuine concern. Plain, vanilla-variety lust.

When he'd kissed her this morning, he'd given in to lust and a ferocious protectiveness he couldn't ignore. He was lucky she hadn't cracked him over the head with a bedpan. On the other hand, he knew she wanted a physical relationship with him. She'd given in to their mutual lust in the closet.

Hank nudged Jack with his elbow, and Jack realized he'd been staring into space with an imbecilic grin on his face.

"Forks go on the left side," Hank said.

Jack smiled and fixed the haphazard utensil arrangement on the long table. "Like anyone around here gives a fuck what side the forks go on."

Hank returned to the stove, grabbing a spatula and flipping a burger. Jack could feel his friend's stare boring him in the back.

Jack messed with the napkin holder and saltshakers. "What are you staring at?"

Hank plopped down on a hard plastic chair. "I wanna know what's eating you. Is Autumn doing all right?"

"She's great considering what she went through last night. She's trying to act like almost getting cooked isn't a big deal. She's had a lot happen since she came back to

Clifton.” He sighed raggedly. “She could have been killed.”

“Is that the reason why you’re walking around like a zombie with a glum look on its face?”

“Not exactly. I have a weird feeling about these fires. Something I can’t quite put my finger on. It’s driving me crazy.”

Hank’s thick mustache twitched, and he ran a huge hand over his balding head. “No, I don’t think that’s it. I think you’ve got one big, bad boner for Autumn, and you’re not likin’ it one bit.”

Busted.

Jack’s gut twisted. “What are you now? Dear Abby?”

One of the burgers on the stove started a wild sizzle, and Hank rushed to flip it over. “Ginger is teaching me how to reach my feminine side.”

A laugh burst out of Jack.

Before they could say anything more, the station tones sounded an alarm. Jack locked eyes with Hank. Then the dispatch center gave the address and type of call.

Kitchen fire.

Relief slid through Jack. Not that he wanted anyone’s kitchen to burn down, but for a split second he’d seen it in Hank’s eyes, too. The arsonist had them by the throat, scared and uncertain. Jack hated it.

Hank shut off the stove and they both rushed out to the engines, joining the rest of the crew in suiting up.

As Jack and Hank climbed into the first engine out the door, Hank let out a whoop and spanked his hand against the seat in front of him. “Balls to the wall, boys!”

\* \* \* \*

Cherry ran the vacuum cleaner over the carpet, her teeth clenched in silent anger, wondering why fate hadn’t given her what she wanted.

Autumn MacAllister seemed to have more lives than a cat. Bitch.

Cherry flipped the power switch on the vacuum to high and let the roar and vibration speak for her frustration. She pushed the cleaner back and forth over the kitchen floor next, wondering why she even bothered. Not like Jack would ever see this kitchen. Not like he would ever set foot in a freaking dump like this one. She needed money to move out of this pit and find a classy apartment where Jack wouldn’t mind spending time.

If Autumn had died in the fire that would have simplified matters. But no. Jack had to pull Autumn’s ass out of the flames.

When Cherry hadn’t seen George anywhere, she scanned the crowd, hoping Jack would be there. That’s when she saw Jack carrying the bitch out of the building. In that minute she’d felt new fury and new hate. It smoldered inside her now as brightly as it had last night.

So, Autumn hadn’t turned into crisp meat. Maybe, just maybe, something else was wrong with her. There had been blood on her face last night. Cherry called the hospital that morning, disguising her voice and saying she was a reporter checking on Autumn’s condition. They wouldn’t give her any information.

When George didn’t come home last night, she wondered if his ass had cooked in the fire. Just as well. She could throw his stuff onto the sidewalk for the trash collector in the morning. She felt a strange loss at the idea. A strange, itchy, restless feeling made her

want to scream.

A hand clamped down on her shoulder, and she shrieked.

She swung around, her mouth wide open. When she saw who stood there, she turned off the vacuum and almost brained him with it. George, hair tangled, eyes red-rimmed, and mouth slack, looked at her as if she might have landed on earth from another planet.

He cursed. "Where were you last night? Where did you go after you went to the head, eh? I waited for you. Then the freaking place went up like a matchstick."

He reeked of stale beer and sweat, and Cherry wrinkled her nose in disgust. "None of your goddammed business."

For a second she thought he might haul off and pop her one. Instead, he released his tight grip on her shoulder and looked her over with drunken interest. "And you don't even give a shit where I was, do you?"

She wanted to kick him out of the apartment and tell him to get a new life without her. "Frankly, no."

George walked to the refrigerator and looked inside. "What? No beer?"

"You've had enough beer to drown an elephant. Go sleep it off."

Instead of complying, he marched forward until he backed her up against the kitchen counter. "I coulda fried like a chicken and you would've laughed all the way to the whorehouse, right?"

He ground his hips against her belly, letting her feel his massive erection. Incredible. This man could get it up even with his brain cells a quart low.

Weird spirals of desire danced in her loins, and Cherry wanted him with a sudden, sick need that surprised her almost as much as George's dick. She hesitated. She could leave him with the rest of the dirt in the kitchen. Or, she could fantasize he was Jack Dillon.

Yeah.

George's eyes gleamed with feral attention, and she didn't like the way he looked at her. Something was wrong...strange. But then he grabbed her hair, pulled her head back and kissed her, and she no longer cared.

\* \* \* \*

As she slept, fires soared to life in Autumn's dreams. Fire-scorched memories tumbled into her memory; wild images, disjointed and filled with chaos. Then her dreams leapt to the end of her firefighting career.

Jumping from the plane, her heart pumping with the excitement of the dive, Autumn knew the thrill of skydiving matched with the realization she would destroy the fire. She pulled the cords on the chute to align with the drop zone. A powerful wind hit her from the side, jerking her to the left and yanking on her shoulder muscles as the chute twisted and tangled.

Panic tightened her throat as the chute mashed in on itself, no longer a life-saving device, but the instrument of her death. She plummeted, a scream ripping from her throat as she fought to straighten the chute. Then she saw Derek, her jump buddy, mangled in the same wind. He didn't even struggle, didn't try to straighten out. What the hell was wrong with him? They were falling.

Dying.

She screamed.

As she sat bolt upright in bed, her heart thumping like mad, the bedroom door burst open. She jerked in surprise as a man's silhouette filled the door. "Autumn? You all right?"

The quiet concern in Jack's voice cancelled out the shock she'd felt at his appearance. "Jack? What are you doing here?"

She reached for the bedside lamp and snapped it on, flooding the bedroom with soft light.

He closed the door. He stood at the entrance, his hair ruffled, eyes sleepy, his denim shirt open and hanging loose. "I heard you cry out."

His brow looked furrowed and tense, but his concern didn't wash away her embarrassment. "Bad dream."

Without hesitation, he sat on the edge of her bed, and her heart jumpstarted. She sat up straight, well aware of her mussed appearance. Autumn pushed a tangle of hair off her forehead. His gaze traveled her face, and she caught herself assessing him, too. Her attention snared on his open shirt, and the muscled chest sprinkled with blond hair trailing down to cover his ridged, hard stomach. Though she'd felt his strength, seeing all that incredible naked musculature made her flush with longing. She wanted to reach out and touch that wonderful expanse of muscles. She looked away.

*Oh, God, Autumn, what are you doing? Get a hold on yourself, or he's going to know what you're thinking.*

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I stopped by the house on the way from work. You were already asleep."

"Coming home from work? I thought you were on a twenty-four hour shift."

"I was, but the Chief said I looked like hell and should head home early. Mom and I were talking about the nightclub fire and I fell asleep on the couch." His mouth curved in a smile. "Guess she threw a blanket over me."

"I thought you looked a little tired the other night when we were dancing. I mean, you were dancing like a fiend, but I sensed you could use some rest."

"A fiend, eh?"

"I didn't know you could even dance like that."

He cocked his head to the side a bit. "Like what?"

"You know. Fast. Like one of those men in a lambada contest."

Jack laughed. "Think so? Do they even have those contests anymore?"

She shrugged. "I didn't think dancing like that was your style."

*There you go. Insult him, why don't you?*

Lucky for her, Jack didn't look or sound affronted. "After you left Clifton and I found my second wind, I took some dance lessons so I wasn't so damned clumsy."

"In high school?"

"Incredible, I know. After I lost some weight, the lessons paid off."

"So that's where you got those moves, eh?"

"Which ones?"

She saw the teasing in his eyes and wanted to smack him. "You know what I'm talking about."

"Liked 'em, did you?" His husky question caught her off guard.

"Well, sure. You're a great dancer." She decided she should shift away from visions of Jack's hips doing a bump and grind as his cock powered into her pussy. "Um ... back

to your need for a vacation. If you're overworked, that could cause health problems, mistakes on the job, you name it."

"That's what the Chief said when he suggested I take it easy for a couple of days. Told me to take it off as sick leave."

"When is the last time you had a vacation?"

"Around Christmas last year."

New concern wiped the visages of the nightmare from her mind. "Are you burning out?"

Reluctance hardened his mouth, and she wondered if she'd pushed him too far. "No. I've had trouble sleeping lately. Dreams. Nightmares."

Worry made her lean forward. "About what?"

"Before? Mostly the 911 recovery efforts. Since you came back to town, I've been dreaming about the night Dad died. The night your parents died."

"Oh, Jack. I'm sorry."

He turned a little more toward her. "I don't blame you. But seeing you again brought back old memories." His gaze intensified, and she could have sworn she saw more than lust lurking there. "And old feelings."

"Bad?" she managed to ask around the dryness in her throat.

"Some. But that can't be helped. Mostly good feelings about how much I owe you for changing my life."

His gratitude made her cheeks warm. "No, Jack. Please don't."

He placed his left palm on the other side of her legs, and the intimate position reminded her of how he'd encroached on her space in the hospital. "It's all true. And I'll always remember it."

She heaved a sigh and put her hands over her face for a second.

"Want to talk about your bad dream?" he asked before she could respond to his last statement.

"No."

"You feel all right?" His voice warmed with a caring quality that turned her into gooey marshmallow consistency.

Gawd, this man could be so sweet, it made her ache. "I'm much better. But you quizzed Bitsie about that, didn't you?"

"Good guess."

"I have a few aches and pains and the occasional cough."

"If that cough doesn't disappear by late tomorrow, get back to the doctor."

She saluted. "Yes, sir."

"Now tell me about the nightmare."

"No."

He crossed his arms and gave her a mock frown. "If you don't tell me, I don't do the interview on my experiences in New York City."

She huffed. "That's blackmail."

"It's fair."

"I ought to—"

"What're you going to do? Tie me to the bed and torture the information out of me?" he asked.

Images, raw and erotic, spun through her head like a tornado. She gaped at him. He'd



look fantastic naked, sprawled in sweet glory for her to torment in any way she chose.

When she couldn't seem to form a coherent sentence, Jack laughed. And laughed.

"Be quiet. Your mother will think we're having a party in here," she said.

He stifled the laugh, but kept the unrepentant smile. "You tell me about the nightmare, I'll tell you about New York City when you come to do the interview."

She crossed her arms this time and it looked like a face off. "No deal. You tell me about New York, then I'll spill the nightmare."

For a second she thought he might argue, but to her surprise, he said, "All right. But if you renege, I will get the information out of you one way or another. You know that, don't you?"

"I can only imagine." Determined to veer away from the innuendo-laced banter, she headed toward a different subject. "I gave Artemis an interview over the phone earlier today about the fire, but then Elliott called me and said Artemis butchered the story. So I sent him a new story over email."

His face went hard as marble. "Elliott made you work today?"

"It wasn't that big of a deal. It was one of the easier stories for me to do, and most of it was the interview Artemis did. A combined story, actually. Artemis is getting credit with me on the byline."

Jack's mouth thinned in displeasure.

"Does it make you angry he asked me to work?" She had to know what his expression meant rather than assuming. She touched his left hand, still flattened palm-down on the bed. "You make a great watchdog, but I'm fine. I can take care of myself."

He smiled, the tension slipping away. "I know. I was ... worried." His gaze flicked up and down the entire length of her body. "If I'm the guard dog, who is going to protect you against me?"

His question threw her for a loop, and she couldn't think or move. "Jack ... I..."

He leaned closer. "Something else is bothering you. What is it?"

Autumn sucked in a deep breath, her heart feeling extraordinarily heavy. An image of that woman falling down the stairs tumbled into her head. "Damn it."

Jack smoothed his fingers over her cheek. "Talk to me."

Tears surged to the forefront. Damn it, she didn't want this. Wouldn't allow it. "It's nothing."

"Yeah, there's something going on with you. Spill it."

She sucked in a shuddering breath. "I don't need you to take care of me, Jack. I don't need anyone to baby me, or analyze me, or..."

What? She didn't know.

When his gaze lingered on her, his eyes filled with a tenderness she'd never noticed before, she felt the dam start to crack. Tears surged, hovered on the edge and threatened to burst loose.

"I'm not going to do this," she whispered, struggling for control.

"Do what?" His voice had turned deep, husky with gentleness. He brushed his fingers along her jaw line as if memorizing the shape. "Care about people? Grieve?"

She didn't want to hear it. Perhaps the only way to stop him was to—

She reached up, pulled him closer, and their lips met. His mouth conquered immediately, his tongue plunging inside and brushing against hers with deep, hungry searching thrusts. She fought him for control, pushing her tongue into his mouth. He

groaned deep in his chest, and then his arms came around her, his embrace hard and sure. Their mouths mingled urgently, the sound of quickening breath harsh in her ears.

Autumn craved their connection with breath-stealing intensity. When he pulled back from their kiss, she whimpered, “No.”

He caught her in his gaze, the color so deep and mesmerizing in the half light. His hands coasted over her shoulders and around to her back. Without speaking, he drew her closer, his body coming down next to hers. His muscular form felt so good, so masculine. She loved how his muscles bunched and twisted, how her softness molded along his hardness. Doubt and concern—his ever-present consideration for her—altered his features into worry. The light in his eyes drew her closer to emotions she didn’t want to acknowledge. Warmth and caring blazed inside. Attraction was an understatement. He forged a hot desire so encompassing she wondered if she’d burn in his fire. Emotions threatened to well up, and the pressure felt enormous.

No. She didn’t want to think. *Please, just let me enjoy this moment. Only this.*

Without another word, he kissed her. As their tongues caressed and smoothed, heat warmed her belly. When he pressed close she felt the insistent hardness of his erection. Yes. Yes. They’d continue where they left off in the closet. She didn’t want foreplay. Didn’t need it.

Jack pushed up her thin cotton sleep shirt. Wanting his touch, she arched as he cupped her right breast. His tongue plunged deep into her mouth as carnal and rhythmic as his cock into the hot, wet depths of her womanhood. He plumped her breast, his fingers brushing over her nipple. She gasped into his mouth as she shivered in reaction. Again and again, he plucked and strummed her aroused flesh. Aching with want, she arched against him.

His mouth tasted hers tenderly with one quick kiss and then another. He worked his hand down her belly. Each feathery touch made her quiver. A dart of powerful desire pushed her to act faster, to be greedy with passion. His fingers worked under the waistband of her panties. She gasped as his fingers brushed through her intimate curls. Warmth flooded Autumn as she eagerly accepted the thrust of his fingers into the soft folds. He eased deep with two fingers, penetrating and retreating. Slick and swollen with arousal, she shivered in delight.

She moaned in soft, breath-stealing happiness when his tongue feathered her nipple. Gently he continued to thrust inside her, then withdrew to tease the bud at the top of her sex. Her hips moved, a heady dance that stirred his fingers into quicker motion. Her breath accelerated as she was drawn upward, higher and higher into the stratosphere. His fingers brushed and coaxed her into a state so wrought with excitement she didn’t know how much longer she could withstand it. Sweet pleasure made her wild for more. It felt as if she’d never been touched before, never known a man’s passionate caress. When he sucked deeply on her nipple, she stifled a cry, remembering that Bitsie slept down the hall.

“Shhh.” He whispered into her ear, and then he released her long enough to sit back on his heels.

Jack’s eyes were hot; she’d never seen him like this before. He held her gaze as he reached for the waistband of her panties and drew them down her hips, down over her thighs, then down past her calves to her ankles. When he tossed them away, her semi-nakedness felt decadent, incredible. Forbidden. His gaze dropped to her breasts, and she

lifted up high enough to draw her sleep shirt over her head. An eager ache pulsed in her core, and she couldn't wait to feel his length pressing deep. His cock pressed hard against his zipper, and she reached for him, wanting that hardness against her palm.

He caught her wrist. "We don't have condoms."

"I'm on the pill, and I'm healthy." She drew him down until he rested between her thighs.

Jack propped on his elbows so he could look down upon her. "The department tests us. I'm healthy, too."

Delicious friction made her twist, shift. God, she couldn't take this. She must have more. More.

She murmured, "Jack."

Feral heat filled his eyes. "Now."

"Yes."

She reached between them and helped him work open his pants. Moments later he guided her hand to his aroused cock. As she clasped his hot flesh, his breath hissed inward. "God, Autumn."

She loved his honest reaction, and watched his eyes close as she explored his cock with slow, steady strokes. His thick, long length grew larger in her hand. Sweet, aching desire grew within her body with every sure stroke she bestowed upon him.

"Please, Jack. Now." She recognized the hunger in her voice, the growing frantic eagerness to grab onto the moment.

Without another word, he kissed her deeply. She wrapped herself around him, her arms about his neck, her thighs cradling his hips. Seconds later his cock brushed her inner folds as he found her. Pressed. Slipped slowly inside. Her flesh parted steadily as he forged a path. She moaned into his mouth as he thrust hard, seating the rest of his hot flesh to the hilt. She squirmed in relief, impaled so deeply. Her hips moved as she encouraged him to start the movement that would bring them to the edge. Mindless with pleasure, she dove straight into the fire. She'd waited too long to feel this with him, to experience it.

As his kisses drew her into the heat, he started to move, his thrusts steady as he drew out slowly, then drove deep with measured pumps of his hips. Autumn bucked against him, wanting to reach the plateau and forget anything but this physical joining. She wriggled, writhed under his body, driving for that final pinnacle. Arousal screamed through her as Autumn closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the sensations building with incredible quickness. She wanted him to move faster, to take her to a place she'd never been. He growled low in his throat as he slowed the speed of his strokes.

"No," she gasped. "Faster."

He smiled, and kept the torture exquisitely slow. "Easy, sweetheart."

She whimpered again and closed her eyes, unable to take the way he smiled, so sure, so willing to keep her hanging on a fine precipice. Only in the fire of climax would she find peace.

She gripped his shoulders, trying to reach for the heights. Each thrust of cock into her sensitive tissues caused a soft moan to part her lips. She no longer cared if anyone heard her.

Time drew out as he refused to allow her to go over. As if sensing her urgency, and lost in his own furious upheaval, he thrust harder until the pace was relentless, a fiery

joining.

As his lips fastened around one nipple and he tugged mercilessly, his cock dragged along sensitive tissues, then pressed forward, stroking over a spot inside her so satisfying she thought she'd explode. She cried out softly as the steady throb increased, her vaginal walls pulsating toward climax as Jack's powerful thrusts escalated. Panting, quaking under the onslaught, she flew straight into the inferno. She muffled her pleasure against his shoulder, gritting her teeth as spasms broke loose. Orgasm slammed her, and she gasped and shivered under the exquisite bliss.

Jack came unglued. He pushed his hands beneath her butt and gripped her securely as he fucked with fierce abandon.

Another orgasm built in her center, and it drove her straight aloft. He covered her mouth with his and they cried out together. He moaned harshly as he drove into her once. Twice. A third time. His entire body shook.

He released her mouth, panting, his body quaking from the experience. He opened his eyes and she saw more than sexual exhaustion, more than heady pleasure. Emotions swirled inside her so fiercely, tears came to her eyes. God, what was she feeling? Why? Everything she'd tried to hold back threatened to pour forth in a gush of messy, complicated words, impulsive declarations.

The very thing she hadn't wanted was happening, sweeping her up in mixed emotions she couldn't understand. Didn't want to know.

He smiled. "Hey."

She couldn't speak. Couldn't respond to that sleepy, yet intense pleasure and tenderness she saw on his face. When he rolled to the side and tried to draw her into his arms, she panicked and pulled away.

"What's going on?" he asked softly, concern clear in his voice, sharp in his eyes.

"Nothing. It's just..."

He brushed his fingers over her cheek and looked deeply into her eyes. "Autumn, that was the best sex I've ever had in my life. Incredible. You're incredible. I..."

He went silent, and she could have sworn she saw bewilderment in his gaze, as if he'd discovered something about himself he hadn't known before. It scared her to death.

When she rolled away from him and burrowed under the covers, he didn't try to touch her, and as the minutes passed, she listened to his quiet breathing.

"Autumn, what's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing is wrong." She felt tears pressing harder, threatening, demanding her attention. When she spoke next the ache in her throat was so strong, she thought she might choke on it. "Can we just leave this for what it is? A good time."

He reached for her then, pulling her around so that she was forced to look into the depths of his worried eyes. "Yeah. A good time."

His voice sounded doubtful, as if he wanted to express more, to understand what motivated them both.

Then a new emotion flickered over his face, a closing off of emotion she didn't want to see even though it was for the best. "I'd better go."

"Yes."

He quickly rearranged his clothing, and even as he did, she thought it was the sexiest

thing she'd ever seen. Again the tears surged into her eyes, and she struggled to keep them inside. Her vision swam as she took a deep breath.

As he put on his shoes, he said, "I'll see you soon."

She turned away, sinking into the covers once more, crawling into a fetal position. Soon she heard him leave, the door closing behind him.

When her alarm rang at six a.m., she hadn't slept another wink.

## Chapter Eleven

“Hey, Dillon, you got a visitor!” Lieutenant Ray Hardwick leaned in the doorway to the dorm, his grin as close to shit-eating as it could get. “And she’s not bad looking either.”

Before Jack could ask him anything, Hardwick let the door slam. Closing his locker, Jack headed downstairs with anticipation causing double flips in his stomach. A good-looking woman stopping by to see him didn’t happen. He headed toward the front of the station, and passed by Hank.

“Go get her, Jack.”

Jack gave him a smile and flipped him off.

He wanted to see Autumn so much. To understand what had happened between them the other night. The sex had blown his fuckin’ head off. He couldn’t remember ever experiencing sex that fantastic in his entire life. Then she’d shut him out. And the crushing weight in his chest had surprised the hell out of him.

A woman stood near one of the engines, and when she turned toward him, the excited butterflies in his stomach did a three sixty and left.

“Cherry,” he said as he came to a halt quite a distance from her.

She’d unbuttoned her long leather jacket, black and expensive, to reveal a tight, low-cut purple sweater and a black leather mini-skirt that might as well have been slit up to her neck it revealed so much. Her curvy legs were encased in black hose, and her high-heeled boots screamed sex. Her grin said everything.

Her gaze cataloged his body with a slow assessment. She perused the juncture of his thighs and up over the rest of his body with a blatant review. The other night, when he’d talked with Autumn in her bedroom, he’d seen her gaze trail over him in a similar way. The effect on him, though, had been totally different. Jack craved Autumn looking at him with admiration, and he wanted more of it.

“What’s up?” he said casually, keeping his distance from her.

She stepped closer. “I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d say hi.” Cherry’s voice slid into a soft purr that held sex, sin, and promises many men wouldn’t hesitate to enjoy. “It’s been a long time since we’ve talked. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were avoiding me.”

What a concept.

He smiled, knowing her temper flared when she got pissed off. “I’m really busy.”

Her eyes narrowed, and he waited for the famous display of anger to erupt. But she seemed to jam it down, hiding it behind a smile that didn’t hold real amusement.

She sidled closer to him. He almost stepped back and bumped into a vehicle. “I understand how hard this is for you. Especially since you’re in such demand now.”

“Demand?”

“Didn’t you hear? You’re famous.”

“What?” He knew he sounded like an idiot, but none of this made sense. “Since when?”

She smiled softly. “The Chronicle in Billings already has a photo of you carrying Autumn MacAllister out of the nightclub the other night. There was a reporter from out

of town that had a camera on hand and took some photographs.”

“Oh, great.” Jack sighed and placed his hands on his hips. He gazed at the ceiling for a moment in exasperation.

“I think it’s fabulous you’re getting the attention you deserve.”

He made a sound of disbelief. “I don’t deserve anything, Cherry. I was doing my job.”

“Is that all it was?” Her question came out sharp and edged with meaning he couldn’t decipher. “You seemed more interested in helping Autumn than putting out the fire.”

For a second he couldn’t respond, uncertain if he heard jealousy in her voice. “People are more important than buildings.”

“And her in particular?”

She smoothed one hand down the lapel of her coat, and her hand lingered near her breasts. Yeah, no doubt about it. She wanted him to look there. He kept his attention glued to her face.

*Say it and maybe she’ll get the message.* “Autumn’s a good friend. I was very worried about her.”

“A good friend in less than a month.”

“We’ve known each other for years. You know that.”

“You and I have known each other for years, too, Jack.”

*Okay, how will you circle the wagons on this one?*

Before he could form a response she took a step closer, and he backed up.

Chief Hallam strolled by and nodded to Cherry, his greeting a little terse. Jack decided he’d better cut the conversation short. “Cherry, I’ll see you around, okay? I’ve got work to do.”

Without bothering to wait for her reply, he turned and headed back to the dorms.

He could add dead meat to his last name. With Cherry you could never be sure. She made friends fast and enemies faster. Not that he worried she could do anything to him. It was a shame all that beauty went to waste in a woman with few morals and even less common sense.

Since he didn’t want a relationship with her, he didn’t care what she said or did. Despite her made-for-sex body that screamed fuck me, Jack didn’t find her desirable. She was a disaster waiting to happen.

He climbed the steps back to the dorm when it hit him. Hell. Only one woman in this town made him so crazy he wanted to screw her until he went unconscious.

Autumn MacAllister.

She occupied a place in his thoughts that nagged him night and day.

Oh, yeah, he was a dead man.

“Something wrong?” Hank said from the bed where he sprawled on his back. “Heard Cherry is down there hunting for game. You gonna take her up on it?”

Jack threw a pillow at him, but Hank caught the missile with one hand. “Fuck no.”

Hank laughed. “Sure you’re not interested? She’s been after your bones for years.”

“She isn’t getting my bones or any other part of me. You know what a shark she is.”

Hank shrugged. “Well, it might take the tension off.”

“Give me a break. Would you rather go to bed with someone like Cherry to take the tension off, or be with Ginger?” Hank’s face reddened and Jack figured either he’d hacked him off royally, or hit a significant nerve.

“Mind your own business. What Ginger and I do is personal.” Hank threw the pillow back at him. It skipped over Jack’s fingers and landed on his bunk instead. “All I’m saying is that, man, you’ve got the willpower of a wily beast.”

“I don’t want George Beckett after my ass, and I don’t want the problems that come with her. She is mega bad news.”

“You’re right. You know, you’re pretty fuckin’ smart for a kid.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Jack threw the pillow back at him.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn set the phone back in the cradle and sighed with frustration. She loved Ginger, but sometimes the girl was an airhead. Her co-worker had left her wallet in the office and asked Autumn to locate it and drop it off at Ginger’s apartment.

After that, she could go home and take a bubble bath to calm her nerves. The clatter of keys, the rustle of papers, the ringing of phones, all had soothed Autumn in a strange way. She liked being back in the office, even when fatigue still threatened. Last night’s encounter with Jack wore her down to the last nub. She’d consumed about a gallon of coffee to offset the fact she hadn’t sleep last night.

Who needs sleep when there’s fabulous sex?

That morning, as she prepared to start a new day at work, she realized Jack had become a major distraction in her life. She couldn’t stop thinking about him and was annoyed at the loss of control. But what should she do? When nothing presented itself as a solution, she decided to work harder. At least if her brain went numb she wouldn’t think about him so often.

Five o’clock came and went and everyone left the building. She peeked out the window and realized night had descended on Clifton long ago. She flipped the blinds closed, then shifted in her chair, well aware of various aches and pains. And like a building thunderstorm, her mind returned to the nightclub fire whether she wanted it to or not.

Sure, she’d kept her cool to a certain extent during the fire, but she didn’t believe Jack when he said she’d done the right thing. She stared at her desk blotter and the scene formed in her mind again.

Heat. Panic. People running in every direction. The tremendous impact of the woman’s body as she fell down the steps to her death. Autumn kept seeing the woman’s face, imprinted like a brand, over and over in her mind’s eye. Other images from another time, from that last, fateful jump from an airplane, cluttered her psyche. She didn’t want to remember it, but since fire played such a huge role in her past and present life, memories leapt into focus.

She was obsessing and she knew it. To put things in perspective, she remembered the face of a savior hovering over her as he lifted her into his arms and raced from the flames into blessed fresh air.

Jack.

Pure, uninhibited longing seized her and uncoiled in her loins quicker than she could blink. She closed her eyes and recalled when she’d sucked life-giving oxygen into her lungs, and the upset in Jack’s eyes as he’d held the mask over her face.



No. She had to stop thinking about him.

Deciding she'd better find Ginger's wallet and head home, she moved around the room, hoping Ginger left her it in an easy-to-find location. She had her back to the front door when someone cleared his throat.

Her imagination at once carved a picture of a madman standing in the room, ready to light a match and torch the place. Her heart slammed her ribs, her breath hitching in her throat as she whirled around.

"Autumn."

"Jack. God, you scared me. How did you get in here?"

"The security guard let me in."

Jack leaned against the doorjamb, one foot hooked over the other, arms crossed over his chest. He smiled, but that grin faded as he saw her expression. He straightened, his lazy posture fading like mist and turning into lethal masculine concentration. At the fire, he'd been smeared with soot and his hair a tangled mess, his body covered with turnout gear.

You couldn't see much about a man when he was covered in bunker gear. But tonight he qualified for world-class hunk. A navy turtleneck hugged his broad shoulders, chest and arms. He wore faded jeans that intimately molded to his hips and sinewy long legs. When she simply stared at him without saying another word, he walked further into the room.

"You look like you're about to jump straight out of your skin," he said.

She swallowed hard. "I'd be fine if people didn't sneak up on me."

"What are you doing here? It's late." He took a few more steps, and she stepped back. His frown deepened as he noted her movement. "Autumn, you're acting like you're afraid of me."

Afraid of him? Maybe. But not the kind of panic that overcame a woman when she thought she might be harmed physically. No, she was terrified of all that untamed virility swirling within him. She was petrified that one more touch from him would bust loose something inside her.

"It's your imagination, Jack. Ginger called me from home as I was leaving. She left her wallet in the office, and I told her I'd look for it and then drop it at her house."

Jack strolled forward, breaching her normal comfort zone as he stopped within a foot of her. Her breath accelerated, and a steady tingle started in her stomach and moved downward. As she looked up into his eyes, he regarded her with warm attention.

"You shouldn't be here alone, Autumn."

"I wouldn't be, but for Ginger. How did you know I was here?"

"I was talking to Mom and she said you hadn't come home yet. She was about ready to call and check up on you. I saw the SUV was still here." He sobered, leaving the glimmer of a smile on his mouth. "You know, you are one tough lady."

"Not so tough. I've been thinking all day about that woman and what happened. I hate it. I think my brain is fixated on the fire," she said. "It's stupid, I suppose, but I can't seem to get my mind off what happened."

"That's natural. I think you should have had a week off to recover both mentally and physically."

Out of nowhere, the tears came again, and he must have seen the floodgates start to open. "It's okay. You can talk to me."

Tears spilled onto her cheeks. She wiped at them, then grabbed a tissue off the desk. "It's not okay, Jack. She's dead. And I didn't ... I couldn't do anything to help her."

"Autumn, her death isn't your fault. We talked about this in the hospital."

"I'm allowed to feel bad about it, aren't I?" The words snapped from her mouth like a whip. "I keep seeing her face over and over. It's horrible. I hate being like this."

She inhaled deeply, trying to recover a sense of balance.

"I know." His clasped her shoulders. "You didn't cry much that night, did you? You've been holding it inside."

Autumn saw deep understanding in his eyes, and the balm on her soul made her want to weep even harder. "I needed to make it through the night. I had to be..."

"Strong?"

"Yes."

He slipped his hand into her hair to caress the back of her neck. "You've been through a lot lately. Not too many people I know have a car wreck, then almost get killed in a fire. That's too much stress all at once. You need to ease up on yourself. And yes, you're allowed to feel it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take it out on you."

"It's okay. And I think there's more you're not telling me."

"There's nothing else to tell."

"I don't believe you. It isn't only the woman's death that's bothering you."

He rubbed her neck, and while the feeling of his strong fingers shot thrills up and down her spine, at the same time it made her want to cry more. His touch felt so good she almost moaned. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of his caresses turning her muscles into gelatin. She hadn't realized how tense she'd become until he touched her. Tears continued to pour from her eyes; she couldn't seem to halt that reaction.

His tenderness undid her one string at a time. Without warning, she was trembling and shaking, her resistance shattered.

"Ah, damn," he whispered.

Autumn thought she saw the telltale sheen of moisture in his eyes, too, as his arms slipped around her. His fingers tangled in her hair, and he continued to stroke her neck as he brought her tight against him.

"It's all right," he murmured against her hair. He kissed her forehead and smoothed his hands over her back. "It's all right. I've got you."

Under his reassurance, she released the floodgates. She couldn't remember the last time she shook and sobbed so hard. Crying never felt this bad and this good, and it seemed to go on forever before his presence lifted some of the heaviness in her soul. As he touched her hair, stroked her arms and back, she drifted into a new reality where pain turned to pleasure. Now his touches swept fire into her belly and made the trembling a result of raw, sexual tension. Suddenly she realized her hands wadded his turtleneck.

"God, I'm all over you." Her fingers twisted deeper into the fabric.

When she looked up, he owned a lop-sided grin. "I don't mind you being all over me. With the death grip you have on my shirt, I don't think it'll ever be the same."

"I'm sorry." She smoothed the rumpled sweater and gave herself permission to enjoy the sensation of rock-hard pecs.

"You have nothing to be sorry about. You know we haven't talked as much as we could. Last night was..."

“Fun,” she said nonchalantly, automatically on the defense, unwilling to go too deep. His arms loosened and dropped to his sides, and she thought she saw disappointment cross his features. “Yeah. Fun.”

She gave him an irreverent smile and wiped at the moisture on her cheeks. “Hey, you know what? People are already giving me goofy looks because I’m driving your SUV.”

He stuffed his hands in back pockets. “So what if they think something is going on between us? I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

She shrugged. “Maybe you should. People claim sticks and stones may break their bones, but we all know words can hurt. You heard about the photograph of you and me making it to The Chronicle in Billings and to national papers, right?”

“I heard. Everyone will forget it by next week.”

She didn’t think a week would be long enough to forget the fire, in any case. At least not for her.

Time stretched as he gazed at her, his attention unflinching and admiring. “Come on. I’ll help you find Ginger’s wallet.” Once they found Ginger’s wallet in her desk, he held out his arm, “I’ll walk you to the car.”

After she grabbed her purse and coat, Jack stopped at the door to the reception area. “If you’re going to stay late again do me a favor. Call me and let me know you’re safe? If I’m free I’ll come by and escort you home.”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“It isn’t safe for you to leave this building alone at night. You know that.” His voice went husky, a naked tone hinting at something dark and worrisome. “You saw what happened when Beckett came in here.”

She realized she was being unreasonable. “You’re right. Thanks again for being here for me.”

Tension knotted between them again, and she felt it this time deep in her belly. He moved closer. “I can’t stand this.”

“This what?” she asked softly, half certain she knew what he meant.

“Whatever this is between us.” He tilted her chin up so she looked into his soul-searching eyes. “God, you are so pretty. And I want to kiss you so badly.”

She saw his intention but couldn’t make a move to step back. His mouth closed over hers gently. Jack didn’t touch her anywhere else, a soft joining of their lips so feather light it stirred her heart like the touch of butterfly wings.

The door opened and they broke the kiss. Jack swept a protective arm around her shoulders.

“Howdy,” the old man in the security uniform said, his smile wide and full of mischief.

“Sorry, Hammond,” she said quickly. “We were leaving.”

“Take care.” With a nod and a wave, the man closed the door.

She pulled away from the heat and weight of Jack’s arm. “I need to take Ginger’s wallet to her.”

Autumn and Jack left the building and she saw a question in his eyes. She knew what the questions were. What would have happened if Hammond hadn’t shown up?

\* \* \* \*

Day moved into evening as Autumn drove toward the firehouse, and the Watcher

followed her several cars back.

Slick, molten heat lanced through his loins. A heady sense of power boiled in his gut, a mixture of pleasure, pain, and curious excitement. Disturbed by the mixed emotions, the Watcher thought about what they would do next. How to remove this blistering mixture of fury and desire writhing inside like snakes? Set fire to something new? Wait until both Autumn and Dillon were somewhere vulnerable and then make sure they died?

No. Too early. Soon, when the time felt right, a new, glorious burn would ignite and teach Autumn and Dillon the true meaning of suffering. Autumn and Dillon thought they understood pain, but they didn't. Not yet.

As traffic thickened on the main drag, the Watcher became bored. Not as if the Watcher could follow everywhere Autumn and Dillon went. There was not enough time, and he had a job to do other than observe the bitch and the fireman playing mental footsy. The air crackled with Autumn and Dillon's worry as they wondered who set the fires in Clifton. And the Watcher nearly laughed.

Few things excited the Watcher like confusing his enemies. Soon his enemies would be far more than mystified. They would be dead.

\* \* \* \*

## **Seventeen years ago**

### **Day of the fire**

#### **Noon**

The scents of cinnamon rolls and spices drifted from the kitchen, and Jack heard the clang and bang of pots and pans.

"Are you almost ready, Jack?"

"Mom, I don't wanna go."

Jack knew his voice sounded like a four-year-old brat, but right now, he didn't care. He'd rather lie on a bed of nails and walk on hot coals than go to a stupid picnic. He slid down in the recliner in the living room, as if sinking lower would hide him.

"You are going with me to the picnic. That's all there is to it. And I'm not leaving you here without a babysitter."

He looked at the ceiling. "Mom, I'm not a baby anymore."

"I know that, sweetie, but I don't feel comfortable leaving you here."

"But there'll be dumb girls there and I don't wanna talk to them. Cindy Pickett is always hitting me, and Jeremy and the Mafia Boys will be there."

"Mafia Boys? Who are they?"

Mom had this convenient habit of forgetting things she didn't feel were important. "You know. The Mafia Boys. It's what Autumn calls them."

"Whatever. Now run upstairs and get ready."

"Mom!" He let the word come out in a whine. "They'll kill me!"

"Who?"

"The Mafia Boys."

"Oh, for God's sake, Jack, they're just two boys. I doubt the one boy will be bothering you now that you punched him in the stomach."

Jack groaned and slid down even farther in the chair until his head almost lay in the seat. "So you *do* remember them."

He rubbed his eyes. Man, adults could be so weird.

Since he couldn't get out of going to the park with Mom, he sucked in his disappointment and hoped maybe Autumn would be there. Naw. That would be too cool. No chance she'd just happen to be there. Of course, many people from town would be at the Spring Fling. Stupid name for it. Seemed like a good excuse for the old women in town to dress up in hats and act superior. Of course, Mom helped on the Spring Fling committee. But she didn't like the old ladies in hats, either, so he guessed that meant she couldn't be called one of them.

Once he changed and came back downstairs, Mom herded him into the garage and into the car. After he buckled his seatbelt, he almost groaned. He cringed inside. He'd made the mistake of drinking orange juice this morning and his stomach turned into Acid City.

Mom backed out of the garage and once underway, he considered asking her again to leave him at home. "Is Dad gonna be there?"

She stiffened, and her whole face went blank. Dad had moved out a week ago, and since then Jack felt weird about asking her anything about him. That nasty word, divorce, kept popping up in conversations all around him. He pretended he didn't hear it. Dad lived at the firehouse on an almost permanent basis now.

"Mom?"

"I don't know, Jack. I suppose if he has the time. I'm not sure he can be bothered."

*Not sure he can be bothered.*

She said that a lot. If he can be bothered. They can't be bothered.

Bitterness and contempt dripped from her voice. He noticed she had a brittle sound all the time, and he hated it and wanted it to end. Heck, he wanted the whole year to end.

No. That wasn't entirely true. 'Cause if this year ended he wouldn't see Autumn, and the idea made his heart sink. She wouldn't be around much this summer and if she went to college next year, he could forget about seeing her then.

When they arrived at the park and took the picnic basket from the trunk, Jack volunteered to carry it for Mom. Dad told him he had to be the man of the family sometimes, since he wouldn't be there much anymore. That hurt big time. He wished he could hear Dad's booming voice and hearty laugh. Instead, he endured Mom's frowns and short answers. Did she know what she sounded like and how she acted, or did she miss Dad so much it made her angry and sad?

They reached the big gathering area near the massive gazebo. Jack didn't like what he saw. Dozens of people ... no, hundreds sat on blankets, picnic tables, and fold-up lawn chairs. They all looked happy, enjoying the nippy air. He, on the other hand, could feel acid gathering strength in his gut and he wanted to run screaming.

*Yeah, do that and see how embarrassed you are.*

Oh, man. Not only was Cindy Pickett sitting on a blanket with Jeremy, but the Mafia Boys sat there, too. Jack felt that inevitable sense of fate, as if no matter which way he turned, life seemed against him. Why did he keep running into these people anyway? What had he done to deserve this never-ending torment?

The Mafia Boys saw him, and then Jeremy and Cindy, too. They resorted to pointing and laughing, a game sure to make the other person wonder what kind of mean stuff they said. Jack had a sixth sense about conspiracy. When people plotted against him, he knew it with one hundred percent accuracy. This was one of those times.

His feet slowed as they neared the area, and he gestured to a place far from Cindy, Jeremy, and the Mafia Boys. "Mom, can't we sit over there?"

"That's in the sun."

"It's kinda cold out, so what difference does it make?"

An exasperated sigh left her throat, but she continued walking toward the trees near the Mafia Boys. Jack swallowed hard, his heart pounding so fast he thought he might pass out. He tried sucking in a breath but it felt like he might die first.

"Jack! Mrs. Dillion!" Autumn appeared, walking swiftly toward them across the grass. She waved and Jack's heart did a leap of joy and settled down.

Whenever he saw Autumn, he always felt safe. A huge grin spread over his face, and he knew he looked goony. He didn't care. Autumn was here and that was all that mattered. He looked up at Mom, but she watched Autumn coming toward them.

He couldn't forget his first sight of her as she'd walked down the hallway in junior high. Her flowing blonde hair had looked pale silver in the light. Her full breasts had been covered by a green, stretchy sweater and her short skirt hadn't done much to hide her long legs. For the first time his male instincts had reared up and taken notice of a woman in a different way he didn't quite understand.

He liked and respected Autumn more than anyone he knew. Maybe even more than Mom and Dad. The idea shocked him down to his athletic shoes.

Sometimes he didn't like Mom or Dad at all. Especially not the last year while they fought all the time and never seemed happy about anything he did. Autumn gave *him* respect.

"Hi," Autumn said as she stood in front of them. She shook hands with Mom. "It's great to see you again. Jack and I finish up with lessons in about two weeks."

He didn't want to hear that, because every time Autumn mentioned it his heart felt like it might snap in two. 'Course he knew it wouldn't really do that, but *jeez*. It hurt to think about it.

Mom pressed his shoulder. "Won't that be great?"

"Yeah, great." A better idea made him smile. "Mom, can she sit with us?"

Mom frowned. "Autumn must have other plans."

To his surprise, Autumn shook her head. "No, actually I don't. My Dad's here, but he says he's got some things to do. I'd love to sit with you guys if you don't mind? I've got some lunch to share, including some apple pie." She held up an enormous picnic basket.

Jack thought his heart would explode from happiness. "Cool!"

Autumn laughed. "I know the place to sit. Come on."

Jack sighed in relief as she led them to a spot close to a tree and far away from the Mafia Boys. Once they'd spread out their blanket and picnic basket, Autumn said, "I didn't think you wanted to sit close to Todd and Micky."

Jack smiled. "See, Mom, even she knows about them."

Instead of looking irritated, his mother grinned. "Where on earth did you get that name for them anyway?"

Autumn cleared her throat. "It's my fault, Mrs. Dillon. I called them that after I saw how awful they were treating Jack." She took a piece of fried chicken and munched. "Did he tell you what they've done to him in the past?"

"He's told me some things. I thought he might be exaggerating a little." Mom looked

at Autumn with clear curiosity. “Maybe Jack hasn’t told me everything.”

As Autumn told Mom more about the Mafia Boys, Jack filled his plate with two pieces of fried chicken and a big helping of potato salad. Then he looked at his plate and felt guilty. He’d tried to avoid eating so much junk. Now that he had two pieces of chicken, though, he couldn’t put one of them back.

Autumn left nothing out as she described the first day she’d met Jack. “Those boys were standing over him ready to kick him. They’re horrible boys. I think they’ll be in jail one day.”

He couldn’t read Mom’s expression at first. He thought maybe she didn’t believe Autumn. Then Mom’s expression softened a little as she reached inside the picnic basket and brought out a napkin. “I’m sorry, Jack. I should have helped you more this year. I was distracted.”

His heart eased a little. Mom rarely apologized for anything, so he felt better right away. He shrugged and smiled. “It’s okay.”

Mom patted his back. “No, it’s not. I didn’t realize what those boys were doing to you.”

A warm glow replaced the uncertainty. “Autumn helped me a lot, Mom.”

His tutor smiled and took another bite of chicken. “Jack’s a great kid, Mrs. Dillon. He’s smart and funny and very nice.”

Jack’s face filled with heat. He looked down at his plate and realized he felt full before he’d even started eating.

Mom sighed. “Yes, he is a great boy. And you’ve helped him so much this year.”

“It was my pleasure.”

As Mom and Autumn talked about the play she’d auditioned for, he looked back to see if the Mafia Boys and Jeremy and Cindy still sat around acting like jerks. They’d drifted away, though, and he sucked in a grateful breath. Good.

“I didn’t get the part.” Autumn’s mouth looked thinner and almost pale. “Cherry did.”

“Cherry Guillett?” Mom asked. “Really? I didn’t know the girl was even interested in theater.”

“She wasn’t. Until recently.”

Conversation drifted to Autumn’s plans for college, and Jack felt his insides sink. He didn’t want to think about her leaving.

“You’re going to be an engineer?” Mom asked Autumn.

“I want to be a firefighter like your husband, and my Dad, Mrs. Dillon.”

Jack glanced up at his Mom as he shoveled potatoes into his mouth. Mom frowned, and that weird tension rose inside him again. He once heard someone say a person could feel like they walked on eggshells. Well, that’s what he felt like right now.

Mom’s expression hardened. “Firefighting is dangerous. In more ways than one.”

Autumn looked uncomfortable. “That’s what Dad says. I know he doesn’t want me to do it, but I’ve always wanted to.”

“There are plenty of sacrifices you make in that job.” Mom put her paper plate aside. “Your family might have to make allowances. Are you sure you want that?”

“It’s what I want. I’m not sure I’ll have a family anyway. I mean, a husband and kids.”

Since Autumn broached the subject, Jack jumped into the ring. “I’m going to be a

firefighter, too.”

Autumn’s teasing grin said it all. “You’ll make a great one.”

Mom didn’t speak, but he felt her anger and her unhappiness. He always could tell when she didn’t like what someone said or thought, even when she didn’t say a word.

Conversation faded, and as high clouds spilled over the park, the wind picked up. Several people dashed toward their cars as if they expected rain.

“I’d better go, Mrs. Dillon. Jack, see you next week, okay?” Autumn stood. “I’m sorry I invited myself like that.”

Mom smiled, and Jack felt a surge of happiness that she didn’t look mad anymore. Sometimes his Mom’s feelings made him react like a puppet, and he didn’t like that. But he didn’t know how to stop it.

“We loved having you here with us, didn’t we Jack?” Mom asked.

“You bet.” Jack hopped up. “See ya next week, Autumn.”

As Autumn waved goodbye and walked away, Mom returned food items to the basket. “We’d better get home, Jack.”

“Aw, Mom, do we have to? There are games and rides and things.”

“Rain is coming.”

He looked into the sky and realized clouds moved into the sky over their heads. A strange feeling, dark and nasty, came to life inside him. He didn’t say anything, though, as he helped Mom with the basket and they headed toward the car.

All the way home he thought about Autumn and how he loved being with her. Still a nagging, weird feeling wouldn’t let up, and as the day went on it worsened. With the black feeling came rain, torrential and thunderous. His nerves seemed to jump, and he wanted the storm and the day to be over.

By the time the entire day finished, he discovered his feeling signaled things to come.

\* \* \* \*

Jack looked up from the stove as Hank strolled into the kitchen with a grin on his face.

“Are you cooking again?” Hank asked.

“It is my turn, you know.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s been a few days. I think Becker bribed you to make filet mignon or some damn thing.”

“Wrong again.”

Hank looked down at the assortment of spice jars near the stove. “Well, what the hell is this, then?”

Jack chopped up defrosted chicken. “Moroccan chicken.”

“Fuck.”

Looking up at Hank’s disgruntled face, Jack continued cutting the chicken. “Taste it first before you decide you don’t like it.”

Hank grimaced. “Watch what you’re doing, Dillon. I don’t want a finger in my food.”

“What’s the matter, you don’t like fiber?”

“You’re sick.”

“Be of some use, will you? Otherwise you’re blocking the light.”



As Hank helped him with dinner, he asked, "So when do you think the excrement is going to hit the proverbial fan?"

When and if the arsonist would strike again haunted Jack more than he would admit. "I'm trying not to think about that, thank you very much." As chicken, onions, garlic and spices sizzled in the pan along with other secret ingredients, Jack inhaled the exotic scent. "This is all I want to worry about for the next few minutes. Making a good dinner."

Hank picked up a can of chickpeas. "You're gonna put these in there?"

"Yeah."

"Uh-huh. Right."

"Doesn't Ginger ever feed you?"

Hank's smirk said he wasn't thinking about food. "Oh, yeah. She feeds me."

As Hank grumbled, Jack concentrated on the exciting thought that Autumn's appointment to interview him tonight included eating at the station. She should be here any minute.

"Ready for that interview?" Hank asked as he set the table.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"You don't sound too happy about it."

Jack used the can opener to free the chickpeas and dumped them into a strainer in the sink. He stopped long enough to look at his friend. "I'm not sure I want to relive a few of the things I saw in New York."

Hank, for once, didn't look amused or ready to toss wisecracks. "I know what you mean. Maybe if she's satisfied with your interview she won't talk to the rest of us. That would be fine with me."

Rinsing the chickpeas, Jack said, "You don't have to talk with Autumn unless you want to. As a matter of fact, I'm the only one who consented to talk about Ground Zero."

Silence held sway over the room for a moment as Jack stirred the chickpeas into the skillet with the chicken and turned the heat down to simmer.

Ray looked around the corner seconds later. "Smells good. What is it?"

Jack's lips twitched. "Slop on a stick."

"Yum." Ray grinned. "Looking forward to it. You've got a phone call, Jack. Want me to take a message?"

"I'll get it." Jack handed Hank the spoon. "Stir. Keep it low and don't do anything else, or I'll have to kill you."

Hank saluted. "Yes, sir."

Jack left the kitchen for the back office, grabbing the phone Ray had put on the desk. "Jack Dillon."

A woman's sexy, smooth voice purred over the phone line. "Mr. Dillon, this is Miranda Butterfield from KTMM in Billings."

Jack had listened to the station before on the way through Billings. He also had a sneaking suspicion why this woman wanted to talk to him. "What can I do for you, Ms. Butterfield?"

Ms. Butterfield's voice turned perky. "Have you ever heard my morning features show?"

"No, can't say that I have."

"Too bad. Well, out there in Clifton you only have two country radio stations, right?"

A twinge of resentment built inside him. He preferred jazz and rock music over

country, but had nothing against country music per se. “One country station, one oldies, and one rock station.”

“Oh, I see.” She breezed ahead. “In any case, Mr. Dillon, we at KTMM have a proposal for you. We heard about your heroic efforts at the nightclub fire, and we want to interview you. We also learned you participated in cleanup efforts at Ground Zero.”

Damn it. He didn’t like the sound of this at all. “I don’t think I’d be interested, Ms. Butterfield.”

“But people are so fascinated by what you experienced. You’re quite the celebrity all of a sudden.”

His patience wore down at the same moment tightness stretched across the muscles between his shoulder blades. “I don’t think people are as interested as the media likes to imagine. I appreciate your consideration, but the answer is no.”

A sigh spilled over the line. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, they hung up.

## Chapter Twelve

Autumn looked up at the old brick firehouse. Mellow light from the fading sun turned the bricks red. Built in 1905, this building was the first firehouse in the newly founded Clifton. Over the years the structure was expanded to keep up with the requirements of the community. Since 1905, four more firehouses had sprung up within the district. Jack's father had worked here until his death and so had her father.

Autumn walked inside, not sure where to go. Though she'd been in a fire station many times, something about entering this one made her feel as if she was intruding. She didn't understand the feeling, and she didn't want to decipher it right now. She'd called Chief Hallam earlier in the day to confirm the appointment. The Chief explained since he had several unexpected things he needed to accomplish today, Jack would be the only one she would interview.

Nervous, she hesitated near a ladder truck. Her purse and briefcase felt like lead weights. Deciding that taking in the lay of the land might calm her, she walked deeper into the building. She caught the distinctive scent of wax and all the engines looked spit shined. The entire place appeared organized.

A firefighter stopped to ask if he could help her, and she explained she was there to see Jack. Quicker than she expected, he strode around the engine, a ready grin on his face. His eyes sparkled, and her heart leapt at the sight of him. She shoved back the emotion.

"Hi, Jack. I'm a bit early, so if you have things to take care of, I can wait."

"I want to talk to you before dinner. In fact, you have some explaining to do before this interview goes forward. If it goes forward."

He gently took her by the elbow and marched her back toward an unoccupied windowless office, closing the door with a definitive thud and locking the door.

"What's wrong?" she asked, worried.

He didn't offer her a seat; instead he stared down at her from close range. Before she could react, he slipped his arms around her and drew her close. He pressed a hot, devouring kiss to her lips. She moaned softly, shocked and wildly aroused. Need spiraled through her body. His tongue plunged deep and without mercy, stroking inside with pure sexual intent. He slipped one leg between hers until her womanhood rubbed against his hard thigh.

She tore her mouth from his, her breath coming fast, her pulse pounding. "Jack. This isn't exactly a good idea."

"Yeah, it is. I needed to kiss you, and I figured I'd take advantage before you could think of some reason to keep your distance."

Disturbed by his perception, she slowly pushed free from his embrace. She plastered on a smile. "I don't know what you mean."

He crossed his arms and looked down at her from his superior height. God, he looked delicious. Sexy. Powerful. She wanted to eat him up, lick him all over. The temptation to reach for him blindsided her, and she took a deep breath to find restraint.

Before he could do or say anything that might push her back into his arms, she said, "I never knew you were so impulsive, Jack."

His lips twisted in a sardonic smile. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It can be. Sometimes."

"Like last night when I kissed you before the guard came in?"

*Oh, last night. I don't know what to think of that. Don't want to think of it.*

She shrugged, a small panic welling in her throat. "It might have been."

He seemed to consider her statement and his gentle smile disappeared. "Keep it light and easy, right?"

She nodded.

An awkward silence ensued until he launched the conversation in another direction entirely. "I got a call from a Miranda Butterfield less than an hour ago."

He explained about the call in detail.

"And you don't want to do it?" Autumn asked.

"It's bad enough I'm doing this interview with you, now some radio station wants to make a big deal out of what happened at the nightclub?" He jammed his hands into the pockets of his uniform pants. "This is spiraling out of control. All I was doing was my job, Autumn. Nothing more, nothing less."

She admired his modesty, even as she allowed doubts to creep into her psyche. She knew he'd done his job carrying her out of the fire, and would have done it for any woman who couldn't walk on her own. Yet, for a wild second she wondered if she might mean something extraordinary to him. That Jack felt a special urgency to find and save her. Autumn thought she'd seen out-of-his mind worry in Jack's eyes as he'd cupped her face and begged her to tell him she was all right.

Irritation warred with reasonableness. "I didn't realize you were that put out about me interviewing you. I know you didn't want to at first, but now that I hear you saying it's bad enough, well if that's the way you feel about it, I can call this off."

Emotions flickered through his eyes, rapid fire and difficult to read. She waited, almost holding her breath.

He shook his head. "Elliott wants a good story and you're the one he's tapped for it."

She decided to give him an olive branch. "If you don't want to participate, he'll have to understand."

"But will you?" he asked softly, exasperation draining from his face.

"Of course. But I'll have to renege on my part of the deal, too."

He nodded, then said nothing.

"Jack, I'm blown away by the craziness the photo caused. Maybe if people heard about your experiences, this frenzy would stop. We'll saturate them with details and they'll eventually have their fill."

"Cherry stopped by and made a big deal out of my sudden popularity." Jack shrugged. "Most of the women who stopped by here to bring us cookies and cakes and things like that were people's grandmothers. They didn't want a date with me."

She didn't know whether to be relieved or amazed. "Did that bother you?"

"I don't want to find dates that way. I don't think a man is something special for just doing his job."

Gratitude filled her heart. She touched his arm. "I'm so glad you did your job."

They stood, silent and still, for what seemed a lifetime. She couldn't take her gaze away from his, locked in a sweet battle that tugged her from happiness to apprehension. Autumn's heart thumped wild and free in her chest. She loved the feeling of his warmth

beneath her fingers. She couldn't ignore the strength beneath her touch and the heady pleasure it gave her to touch him. A sweet, aching need rose low in her belly, reminding her of the excitement she'd experienced in his arms not so long ago.

She pulled back with reluctance, away from the languorous, steady-building exhilaration strumming in her system and threatening to remove every shred of her professionalism.

A loud knock on the door made Jack reach for it and he jerked it open. Hank stood on the other side with a curious gleam in his eyes. "Hey, the Moroccan surprise is starting to get a little brown."

Jack smiled and gestured for Autumn to proceed in front of him. "Dinner is served."

During dinner several men from the firehouse gave her curious glances. She had to admit eating with these guys made her a little twitchy. It didn't seem to matter she'd once fought fires for a living. Once a firefighter, always a firefighter. The brotherhood didn't leave a person because they no longer did the job. She hovered between respect, apprehension, and a sense of belonging. Most of all, she liked seeing Jack in his element, joking and having a good time with true friends. Envy played a part in her emotions.

Jack's Moroccan chicken turned out to be a hit, despite Hank's good-natured ribbing about exotic dishes. By the end of the meal, Hank rubbed his stomach and declared the recipe a winner.

"I'm leaving you buzzards to clean up the mess," Jack said as he stood up.

Boos came from the table, and Autumn laughed as she followed Jack toward the unoccupied office they'd retreated to earlier. "Dillon strikes again. That was a great meal. Can I have the recipe?"

"That depends."

"Depends on what?"

"If you follow through with your promise and tell me about that nightmare."

"Whether you tell me about Ground Zero or not?"

"Yep."

"Gawd, you drive a hard bargain." She didn't want to tell him about her nightmares, but she had to be fair. "It's a deal."

Jack closed the door as she sat at the small desk near the wall. The room, lit by florescent bulbs, looked utilitarian. Devoid of decoration, the office seemed dreary. Rows of bookshelves filled with firefighting manuals lined another wall.

Jack remained standing, scrutinizing the micro recorder she retrieved from her purse.

"I won't record the interview if you'd rather I didn't." She kept her hand on the small instrument, ready to place it back in the bag. "But it helps me keep track of things."

"No, it's okay. Go ahead."

Jack settled in the chair across the desk from her. As he folded his hands in his lap, he sat in typical male fashion with his legs sprawled apart. Her glance landed on his crotch, and she instantly recalled how his cock had felt inside her. Heat rose in her face as her body responded, nipples tightening and her clit tingling with awareness.

Professionalism be damned, she couldn't ignore the strum of arousal and attraction that sprang to life whenever she was around him. Good thing she wasn't a firefighter at this station—she'd have one hell of a time keeping her mind on business with him around.

She retrieved a sheet of questions from her notebook, then turned on the recorder. She noted date, time, place, interviewer and interviewee. She then launched into a series

of questions she'd ask any firefighter. How long had he been a firefighter? What motivated him to leave his firefighting career in Detroit and return to Clifton?

Her mind raced, wondering what he would answer to her next question. "What was your original motivation for becoming a firefighter?"

Tape spun in the recorder for what seemed an eternity before Jack answered. "I wanted to help people. Since I was a little kid I've been interested in fire, but I never wanted to see it destroy things. It's a desire to tame the beast, I guess."

"Did it give you an adrenaline rush to see fire?"

He sat forward slightly as he warmed to the subject. "That's it, exactly. Arsonists want to start fires, firefighters want to stop them. We're both fascinated by it, but at opposite ends of the spectrum."

She discovered his hobbies—weight lifting, reading, swimming, and chess. He gave her a breakdown of the duties required of each firefighter.

"And you have the added responsibility of being a paramedic," she said.

He nodded. "I wanted to do more. If I pulled a victim from a fire I wanted to be right there to help them if they needed medical attention."

Autumn thought she saw memories flicker through his eyes. Or was it because she remembered the night he'd saved her?

On impulse, she asked a question not on her original notes. "Your father was in the profession. Did losing him to a fire motivate you to become a firefighter, too?"

While he didn't look offended by her question, she saw a trickle of caution there. "I wanted to be a firefighter before his death. You could say his passing cemented the concept for me." He looked deep into her eyes. "You always wanted to fight fire, too. You know how it is."

"Yes." She couldn't deny it. "I understand very well." She leaned back, disconcerted by the intimacy of his gaze, as if he might want as many answers from her as she wanted from him.

Autumn almost didn't ask him the next question. Nevertheless, if she didn't, she would wonder until it drove her bonkers. "What qualities do you think a firefighter's spouse should have?"

Jack didn't take long to think about it. "Someone who is independent and has his or her own job and hobbies. With the strange hours and the physical and mental demands of the job, a firefighter's spouse needs strength and understanding. They can't be clingy or needy." When he paused and she didn't ask another question right away, he asked, "What do you think? What kind of man would be a good husband to a female firefighter?"

Taken aback, she hesitated before answering. "This interview is about you."

"Yeah, but I want to know what you think."

The man owned enough cheek to drive a woman insane, but his adorable half-smile made her want to kiss him as much as made her want to chastise him.

"A man who doesn't have outdated, chauvinistic ideas about what a woman can and can't do. A guy who is secure in his own masculinity and has empathy and compassion for people. A man who isn't afraid to tell a woman he loves her."

She clenched the pencil too tightly and she almost broke the lead as she jotted an inconsequential note. God. Why had she said that last part?

He reached for another pencil she'd left on the desk and twirled it. "Admirable qualities."

She watched his big, gorgeous hands play with the pencil and it stirred a vision of those fingers sliding over her naked skin, drifting with steady, intoxicating caresses over her breasts. Coiling heat settled in her stomach and refused to leave. She shifted in her chair, trying to ease the ache between her thighs.

"A firefighter has a lot of mental and physical demands on the job. What would be your ideal day off?" she asked.

After putting down the pencil, he put his hands behind his head. Her gaze slid over the bulging muscles in his arms and almost stayed there. She longed for his arms to slip around her, to feel his exhilarating kiss once more.

"Probably sleeping in late, having sex, eating a big breakfast on my patio, taking a hike in the mountains, coming back to my place and taking a nap." His eyes crinkled at the corners as he gave her a salacious smile. "Having sex again."

Surprise and arousal hit her with a jolt. Her nipples tightened and moisture pooled hot within her pussy. "Jack."

"What? It surprises you that I like to hike?" Once again, the tilt of his mouth and the unrepentant light in his eyes told her he loved taking her off guard. His voice deepened and went husky. "Or that I like ... naps?"

Speechless, she swallowed hard and tried to dredge up an answering smile. Instead, her heart went supernova and tried pumping its way out of her chest. She wanted to climb over the desk and sit on his lap.

"Naps are good." She cleared her throat. "Hiking even better."

He leaned his arms on the desk and slid his chair closer. She thought she might die right then and there. A hot, totally intense look entered his eyes. "What about sex?"

"Jack," she said, breathless. "You know I won't put that into this interview."

Relentless, he kept her gaze tangled with his. "I know." His voice turned to a low, satin and silk quality. "But I wanted you to know what my ideal leisure day would be like. I always tell the truth, Autumn."

"Even if it makes people uncomfortable?"

"Sometimes. It depends on the situation. I think people spend too much time lying to each other, don't you?"

Appreciation mixed with apprehension. "Probably."

"Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about sex?"

She looked everywhere but him; she didn't know what to think, and her thoughts spun out of control. Images of Jack making love with her danced in her head. Jack naked, sliding between her legs and thrusting his big cock straight to her core, stuffing her full with the length and fullness until she didn't know where he began and she ended. His hips pumping, fucking in a rhythm that would send her over the top.

She shut off the recorder and stood. She went around the side of the desk and stood over him, hoping her stance would intimidate him into backing off a little. At the same time, she knew she treaded on dangerous ground. He eased back in his chair, his legs sprawled open once more. What would he do if she terminated the interview by pulling up her suit skirt and settling down on his lap? Her breath caught in her throat.

"This isn't about me," she said.

"I'd like your honest opinion."

Tempted beyond reason by the come-hither quality in the way he looked at her, she continued with an impertinence she hoped Jack appreciated. "Talking about sex isn't easy

for me. It feels risky. I once considered myself a risk taker, but when it comes to physical relationships, I learned early on that caution is smart.”

He didn’t budge from his rapt attention. “What made you want to be so cautious? Something bad happen?”

“Yeah, something bad happened.”

His gaze turned curious, and he leaned forward, placing his forearms on his legs. Slowly but certainly, he touched her thigh just above her knee. She shivered, but didn’t move. His index finger slid upward so feather light, she could barely feel it. His touch rasped along her pantyhose, and a sharp, sweet jolt filled her lower stomach with melting heat. “When we kissed ... when we did more than kiss, I didn’t feel you holding back.”

Oh, good. He would have hit her with pure honesty and remind her how his kisses and caresses had opened a new world of physical excitement. When his big fingers slipped around and gently clasped over her mid thigh, she almost gasped at the exquisite ache. Her pussy filled with a gnawing desire she wanted to fulfill as quickly as possible. What if he went higher?

But they couldn’t. Not here.

“Autumn?”

“It’s ... it’s different with you.”

His hand slipped higher on her thigh. “How?”

She swallowed hard as the fire he’d started blazed. She took a deep breath. “With you it’s hotter ... like the excitement of beating down a fire.”

“Yeah?” His eyes burned. His gaze pinned to her in fine-edged concentration. His hand moved, inching a little higher yet.

“It’s a firestorm, Jack.”

*Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Did I just admit that?*

One of his eyebrows twitched upwards. “Damn. I think I like the sound of that.”

Deciding she had to regain control of the interview, she jumped ahead. “Let’s finish your story before we run into mine, okay?” She stepped away from his touch and moved back to the chair behind the desk. As she sat down, she took a deep breath to steady her heartbeat and dampen down the excitement humming deep in her belly. “Speaking of motivations, what made you decide to volunteer time at Ground Zero?”

His gaze went from warm and open to hard and unapproachable. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Jack, you promised.”

He rubbed his hand over his jaw. “I know, but I—”

He cut himself off, and pain shimmered through his face. Vulnerability showed clearly in his eyes, and what she saw there made her stop pushing. “I’m sorry. If you don’t want to talk about it, then don’t.” At first she almost didn’t say it ... hesitated to speak her mind on the subject entirely. Something vague pushed her forward. “Are you going to keep this inside you forever?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I promised I’d tell you. Give me a minute.”

An idea burst into being inside Autumn, and she wondered if he would go for it. “I have an idea. It might be crazy, but then again, it might be brilliant.”

A glimmer of a smile touched his mouth, and he stopped rubbing his neck.

“Brilliant? Oh-oh. I’m almost afraid to ask.”

She licked her lips, her own nerves jumping and snapping. “What if you go ahead



with the interview in Billings? I don't think it could hurt anything, and it is good public relations for the fire department here. I could coach you on how to answer any questions she might throw at you."

"Autumn, I don't know about this."

"That would give you more time to ease into the idea of talking about it."

"What about your article?"

"I'll tell Elliott this is all we have for now." She snapped her fingers. "Or, better yet, we talk about Ground Zero for our paper and then you do the radio show." When his face clearly showed skepticism, she said, "I'll tell you about my nightmares if you tell me about New York."

She hung on a precipice until he answered. "I'll tell you about Ground Zero. But not here or now. We don't have enough time. Maybe I'll even do the radio show, but I need to think about it." Jack held her gaze. "I'm off Saturday night. Come over to my place that evening, and I'll fix you dinner. We can talk in private."

Pleasure gave her flirtatious side a pair of wings. "Why, Jack Dillon, are you asking me out on a date?"

A boyish grin widened his mouth. "Yeah."

"Interview over, then. We'll finish up Saturday night." When he didn't say a word, but kept that keen assessment on her, Autumn continued. "I'd better go."

As they both stood, she decided she could use the extra preparation before she saw him again. The man knocked her off her feet; every time she saw him, she seemed to sink deeper into feelings she couldn't afford. If she fell for him, she'd have to stay in this town and maybe never go back to her smoke jumping career. Acknowledging that to herself gave her a feeling of uncertainty and confusion.

Before she opened the door, she paused. She wished she hadn't. Jack's gaze trailed from her eyes to her mouth and fixated there. He had that hungry, engrossed expression a man sometimes has right before he kisses a woman.

Gently he brushed his fingers across her cheek. "I want to kiss you again so damn bad, Autumn, but I'm going to wait. I will kiss you Saturday night, and that's a promise."

Trembling deep inside, she nodded. "Saturday night, Jack."

As she left without another glance or word, she realized she couldn't wait for that night to come.

\*

Jack's breath heaved out as Autumn closed the door behind her, his entire body edgy with needs he wanted to act on so damned badly. Saturday night. Oh, yeah. Would she tell him about her nightmares? God, he wanted to know her deepest, darkest secrets. He wanted, with an all-consuming need, to show her again how powerful their physical relationship could be.

One night just wasn't enough for him.

During the interview, he'd thought he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her and when he'd cupped her thigh and saw the flush of desire in her eyes, he'd wanted to lay her across the desk and fuck her. Temptation had threatened and he'd almost thrown caution aside, pulled her into his arms and taken another deep, double-or-nothing kiss. Professionalism meant he couldn't make love to her at the firehouse, no matter how much he wanted her.

\* \* \* \*

The Watcher grew restless as Autumn left the firehouse. He sat in his car far enough away that she wouldn't see him. He tossed the last of his fast food hamburger in the bag on the seat, then picked up his soft drink to take a slurp.

He waited until she started her vehicle and pulled out of the parking lot.

Jamming the car into drive, the Watcher followed her from place to place, but his insatiable need to see everything she did, and would do, made him tired. She thought she was so superior, and the hate mixed with his desire for her.

Deep, undeniable hunger built to appease the craving that seemed to eat through his stomach lining. So much rage poured into the Watcher's gut, filling him with a powerful desire to create in order to destroy.

Destroy before Autumn and Dillon somehow learned the truth.

## Chapter Thirteen

A shadow loomed from around the corner of the station house as Jack headed toward his car in the parking lot the next day. Jack's muscles went on three alarm alert. He came face to face with George.

"Hey, Dillon."

Surprised at the man's appearance, he said nothing. Play it calm and cool and maybe the idiot will disappear.

No such luck.

"I've got some serious business with you, Dillon."

George's voice sounded gravel-filled, as if he'd been chewing on rocks for dinner. His eyes were bloodshot and his skin pale. Although Jack didn't smell any alcohol, maybe George had other drugs in his system.

"Make it quick," Jack said. "I haven't got all day."

George clenched his fists at his sides. "Stay away from my women."

He can't be serious. Jack took a long, slow breath to settle the jumpy feeling in his muscles and his rising anger. "Which women would that be?"

"You know who I'm talking about."

Jack shook his head. "Afraid I don't. If you mean Cherry, I'm not interested in her."

When George moved forward a step, Jack didn't budge. "You know, I'm not sure I give a rat's ass what you do with that bitch. Maybe I'm ready to share her."

Revulsion made Jack's stomach burn. For a second he felt like a pudgy boy of eleven being picked on by the Mafia Boys. With a swift, mental kick in the pants, he pulled back from the history that promised to undermine him.

"I said I'm not interested in Cherry. Back off."

"I don't think so."

"I don't care about her, all right? Just take it easy."

"Who said anything about caring for the stupid whore?"

While Jack heard cursing around the firehouse on a regular basis, he hated men talking trash about a woman. Lightning snapped in his nerves, tightening and responding to a rush of adrenaline.

George's smile stretched into an ugly caricature. "Now Autumn ... hell ... there's a sweet piece of ass. I guarantee I'm going to get me some of that."

Jack almost lost it then. Almost shoved his fist through the creep's face. Instead, he held onto a thin thread of control. If he turned and walked away, he knew George would take it as an affront and attack. Since he doubted he could reason with the man, he would have to either fight him or intimidate him some way. No way would Jack run.

*Now or never. Let him know where you stand and see what happens from there.*

"Look, I think it's time you listened up. First, I have no interest in Cherry. Second, if you touch Autumn MacAllister again, as you did the other night at the newspaper, I will personally see to it that you regret it for the rest of your life. Third, Autumn is my woman. Don't even think about coming near her again."

Jack braced, anticipating physical aggression. If he had to, Jack could knock that smirk off George's face with one swing of the duffle bag clutched in his fist.

Instead, George smiled, his grin oily and adding to his already manic appearance. "So you wanna fight over her, eh?"

"No. I don't want to fight. I want you to leave her alone. She's not interested in you."

"What makes you think she even likes you?"

Jack took the plunge, willing to lie to get this creep away from him. "She more than likes me. She loves me."

George threw his head back and laughed, high pitched and screwy.

"This ain't finished, Dillon." George punched the air with his fist as he turned and started to walk away. "I'll be watching you. I'm gonna take her away from you! No one is going to have her but me!"

Once inside his truck, Jack roared down the road, his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. Damn it all to hell. He had to warn Autumn about George. Primitive feelings raged through Jack that he'd never experienced before. Then he realized something with one startling jolt. When he'd told George that Autumn belonged to him, he'd meant it with a primeval feeling of possession and determination.

Jesus. What did it make him if he found such satisfaction in declaring aloud that Autumn was his woman?

*Fuck me.* He realized with a growing sense of panic and gratification that he'd just revealed something he wanted to be true in the worst damned way.

\* \* \* \*

"What?"

Autumn heard Bitsie's concerned voice from the kitchen as she sat in the living room chatting on the phone. Apprehensive, Autumn peeked around the kitchen door at her landlord.

Bitsie sat on the couch, her ear glued to the cordless phone. "Oh, Jack."

Autumn's heart did a flip at the mention of his name.

The worry on Bitsie's brow made that seem irrelevant. Bitsie looked up at Autumn, then frowned.

"Certainly, darling, she's right here." Bitsie handed Autumn the phone, then headed toward the kitchen. "It's Jack."

Alarmed and curious, Autumn spoke into the phone. "Jack? Is everything all right?"

"I just got home from the stationhouse and needed to warn you about something."

"Warn me?"

"Keep your eyes peeled for George. He stopped by the firehouse and was acting strange." He gave her a quick run down of what George said, then added the final touch. "He seems to be under the incorrect assumption you're one of his girlfriends. He told me to stay away from you."

She rubbed her forehead. "Oh, God. How stupid can one man get?"

"There's more. You may not like this, but I had to tell him something to make him back off. I'm not sure if it'll work, though, and I'm worried."

Sighing, she said, "Go ahead."

"You know as well as I do he's a throwback to another age, right? A real Neanderthal. I decided I had to give back a little of what he was giving."

"What did you do?"

"I told him you were my woman and to stay away from you."

His admission startled her so much she almost dropped the phone. "Your woman?"

"Yeah. And there's more."

She decided she needed to know the entire gruesome tale. "Yes?"

"I told him that you love me."

Stunned, she asked, "Why did you say that?"

"I figured it would throw him off."

"How?"

"I thought if he believed you love me, he'd stop pursuing you."

"I see." She sighed. "He didn't try and fight you, did he?"

"Believe me, he was thinking about it."

Relief made her sink into the chair by the bay window. "Oh, God. I'll keep on alert."

"I don't like the idea of you and Mom being there alone."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, suddenly weary. "We can't let him intimidate us."

"I realize that, but what do you think you'll do if he shows up on the doorstep?"

"Call the police." A long pause made her ask, "Jack?"

"I don't want him that close to you."

"If I went to the police and put a restraining order out on him, it might do the trick."

She could almost feel his approval across the telephone. "It sounds like a good idea, but he hasn't actually done anything. The police won't put a restraining order on him for verbal threats."

She sighed. "You're right, damn it."

When she went silent he said, "Look I'm near your area. I'm coming over now. We need to plan strategy."

"What? Why?"

But he'd already hung up.

Bitsie was alarmed about the possibility of trouble, but Autumn reassured her that nothing would happen. "Jack and I'll talk about it and come up with a ... plan."

Bitsie shook her head, but she smiled and reached across the short expansive between their chairs to pat Autumn's hand. "You know, this is none of my business, but I can't hold this back any longer."

"Oh?"

"I think my son is falling head over heels for you." Bitsie stood, her smile growing. A wicked twinkle sparked in her eyes. "And I think if you look deeper into your heart, you'll realize you're falling for him, too."

Surprised by Bitsie's sudden assessment, Autumn practically croaked her next word. "What?"

"Think about it."

And before Autumn could tell her she'd lost her mind, the older woman yawned.

"Since Jack's coming over, I'm going to make myself scarce."

"But..."

Bitsie winked and left.

Before Autumn could even think about the implications of what Bitsie said, Jack pulled into the driveway. Jack came to the door quickly, and once inside, didn't waste much time. He tossed his coat onto the couch and sank into the chair Bitsie had vacated.

"This is so crazy, Jack." She returned to her chair. "I can't believe this is happening."

“It makes me crazy. I don’t want him anywhere near you.”

As his gaze flickered over her, she felt his deep concern envelop her. “Thanks, Jack.”

“Maybe if the bastard thinks you’re my woman, he’ll stay away from you. I don’t like playing games to suit the jackass. Short of running away from the idiot every time we see him, I don’t think there is anything else we can do.”

My woman. “Jack, this idea is archaic.”

“Which idea?”

Nervous, she licked her lips. “You know. Saying I’m your woman. I know about a half dozen women who would tell you to shove it up your ass.”

“So are you going to tell me to shove it up my ass?” His tone held a hint of amusement.

“Not as long as I understand your motivations.”

“You mean a lot to me.”

Rough with emotion, his declaration sparked genuine surprise within her. His actions had always said he cared, but hearing the words startled her in the deepest way possible. Feelings she’d shoved to the background the night they slept together threatened to reappear with a vengeance.

Recklessness pushed her to ask a dangerous question. “What do you propose we do to make it seem like we’re an item?”

“Date me.”

Her breath seized. “Really date you?” Somehow it sounded corny and old fashioned considering they’d already slept together.

“We’ll give George a show. Hold hands, embrace.” His voice went smooth and rich as mellow whiskey. He tossed a heat-filled gaze her way and wiggled his eyebrows. “Kiss.”

Silence reigned for a minute.

“I take it by that mile-wide frown that was the wrong thing to suggest,” he said.

“No—I—no.”

He chuckled. “That answer will do for now.” His gaze smoothed over her. “I think I like the idea of spending more time with you, even if it’s because of scum like George Beckett.”

“Other people will think we’re a couple, too.”

“Do you object to public displays of affection?”

“Yes and no.”

“Which is it?”

She rubbed her temples and heaved a tremendous sigh. “Yes, I think it’s great when a man and woman show how much they care about each other.”

Imagination kicked in and she saw herself entwined with Jack on a park bench, his hands coasting over her body while he engaged her in a triple layer, hold-nothing-back kiss.

*No. No. They were having a no-strings-attached fling.* They’d specified they wouldn’t get heavy, and she wanted to keep it that way.

“I’ll admit it,” he said. “I’m past the point of pretending I don’t want you in my bed again.”

She inhaled deeply. *Oh, boy.*

“When I saw George at the newspaper harassing you, I wanted to kick his ass clear

to Kentucky because he touched you,” Jack said. “When he started spouting weird crap about you tonight, I got this sensation in my stomach.” He touched his stomach right above his belt. “Something like a mule kick. I knew right then if he ever, ever hurt you I would make sure he paid and paid dearly.”

His gaze, determined and so unlike the timid young boy she’d known years ago, sent her heart speeding into the red zone. Tiny thrills raced over her skin and unfurled in her body, popping like sparklers on Independence Day.

She cupped his face, feeling the rasp of whiskers over her fingers. Heat spilled up her arm as he covered her hand with his, holding her in place.

Jack closed his eyes for a moment. “God, that feels good.”

“You’re a caring man, Jack. You’re the best.”

A sweet, tender glow entered his gaze. “Thanks, but if I was the best I might be able to keep that creep away from you.”

“You warned me. That’s all anyone could do.”

Doubt filled his gaze, and she knew he wouldn’t be satisfied with her declaration. Before she could draw away, he grasped her fingers and pressed a soft, almost reverent kiss to the back of her hand. Then he held her hand in both of his, his fingers caressing her palm with feather-light touches that sent desire plunging into her loins.

“I’m happy you’re here with me right now. In this place,” he said.

He kept stroking her hand in that maddening fashion. She almost gasped, the sensation beyond bearing. She’d never realized how much of an erogenous zone her palm could be.

Autumn enjoyed his affection, but doubts encroached and removed the blaze of excitement she’d experienced. “Jack, this is nutty. Crazy. You and I…”

“You and I what?”

She couldn’t say it. Couldn’t tell him a relationship between them was doomed. She would return to smoke jumping and leave Clifton. “Nothing. Thanks very much for your help. I’ll see you Saturday night.”

Before she could slip from his grip, he slipped his hand around the nape of her neck and drew her nearer. His head tilted slightly to the side. “Kiss me, damn it. Put me out of my misery.”

*Kiss me.* The request, spoken in his deep voice, sent shivers of exquisite need darting around her body. She met him halfway, their lips meshing in an instant explosion of desire. Without preliminaries, his tongue thrust and took, caressing. She moaned into his mouth, allowing the plunder as she slipped her fingers into the cool softness of his thick hair. His arm slipped around her waist to bring her closer, and before she knew it he’d slipped her out of the chair and onto his lap. The meeting of mouths, the carnal territory they explored, sent a fire deep into her, demanding a release for the buildup inside. His lips caressed, cajoled, eating at her mouth and breaking her resistance. She wanted everything his kiss promised—a fiery joining of bodies, a tongue-thrusting, pounding bout of sex that would leave them both drained. She plunged into sensations, mindless with the pleasure. She wanted to feel once more what it was like to have his cock drilling inside her, fucking her hard. Soft and slow would be beautiful, but what about unrestrained, wall-banger sex? Yeah. She’d have to have him quickly again. Hard—to detonate the initial explosion.

She wanted him so fiercely she almost suggested they go upstairs. She drew back

slowly, and his hands left her. She climbed from his lap, staggered by the war of feelings battling for supremacy inside her.

"I'm exhausted, Jack. I'll see you Saturday."

Afraid of the tenderness, of the heightened emotion, she slipped upstairs before he could say another word. Once inside her bedroom, she sank against the door and closed her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

The Watcher let loose a string of curses as a report about a new fire came over his car radio. How dare someone take fire and use it for their glory? Brilliance belonged to him and no one else. As anger danced inside, his fingers tightened on the cold steering wheel.

"This is WWKT Country in Clifton. We've received news a fire was started at an all night laundry in downtown earlier this evening. At this time, fire officials are saying it is of suspicious origin, but they aren't giving details. The situation is one hundred percent under control. This string of fires has us all on pins and needles. Everyone is wondering if these fires will continue. Keep safe."

The Watcher laughed at the announcer's melodramatic tone. Then realization erased the anger bursting inside him. He'd forgotten his new friend in fire starting.

Since the blaze at the Top O' the Morning Club, the Watcher felt new confidence and happiness. Now that a friend was helping, his plan would be easier. More exciting. Almost as thrilling as starting a fire himself. Almost.

An urge to start a conflagration bloomed hot, but the Watcher held back, wondering what to do next. Police would be on the lookout for suspicious activity. No. He would let his friend take all the risk and lie low until things calmed.

The Watcher grinned again. Time for more action would come soon.

\* \* \* \*

"Can I have a moment?" Cherry asked Autumn after they'd bumped into each other on Main Street. "I was going to call you this weekend."

"Of course." Autumn's voice sounded as enthusiastic as hell.

*Not.*

Autumn looked puzzled. But more importantly than that, she looked dowdy. She wore a blue peacoat that had seen better days, a white turtleneck, and jeans that were slightly frayed at the hem. The white turtleneck looked a little pulled out of shape. Wind blew through Autumn's hair, mussing it into a tangled mess. Cherry secretly liked that. Her own hair was secured with industrial strength, designer label hairspray. The kind of spray that cost an outrageous amount of money and practically guaranteed a hairstyle could withstand gale force winds.

Cherry plastered on her best smile; the kind of grin that deceived men on a regular basis. "I've wanted to talk with you for a long time. What if we meet on Monday for lunch?"

"Sorry, Cherry. I'm busy. If you don't mind, I've got some shopping to do."

God, she is such an idiot. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot. The litany ran through Cherry's head, and she hated the sudden lack of control over the situation.



“Oh, but there’s something I think you should know about Jack.” She lowered her voice so that Autumn would think she was sincere and interested in her welfare. “As an old friend I think you should know.”

Vulnerability shone in Autumn’s eyes and Cherry knew she should seek and destroy. Attack would be so easy now.

“Okay. Tell me now,” Autumn said. “I have a feeling you will anyway.”

Cherry kept her expression purposefully nonchalant. “Have you been coming on to Jack?”

Cherry loved the way Autumn’s gaze danced with surprise and maybe a hint of irritation. “Whatever our relationship is, it isn’t anyone’s business. Not even yours.”

Renewed anger slid into Cherry like hot acid. She almost let loose ... almost said what she really thought of the little bitch in front of her. Instead, she took a steadying breath.

“You mistake my intentions. I wanted you to know that Jack is quite persuasive when he wants to be. I didn’t want you getting the wrong impression about him.”

“So what is the right impression?” Autumn asked, her voice cold.

“I’m trying to be delicate and not hurt your feelings.”

“You’re not being delicate, Cherry, you’re being obtuse. Spit it out.” Hard and definitive, Autumn’s voice held little patience.

Surprised and hating the idea that Autumn might understand her motivations, Cherry let it rip. She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head to the side a bit. “Jack and I are close, Autumn. Very close. I like him and I plan on moving our relationship to the next level.” Cherry threw a shrug into the mix. “We’re intimate. I thought you should know before you get any ideas about having him for your own.”

“Do what you want, Cherry. I could care less.”

Clipped and final, Autumn’s last statement took Cherry off guard. Before Cherry could form another reply, Autumn walked down the street toward her car.

Fuming, Cherry wanted to bake Autumn MacAllister’s ass on a bed of hot coals. Then a new idea came to mind that erased the building sense of disappointment that Autumn appeared to know the game. Maybe George could help her with this woman for the last time.

Part of her worried George would become pissed when she suggested a plan to bag Autumn. He might hit Cherry, and she knew it. He liked a woman to pretend she was unwilling on occasion and didn’t want him to do her. Therefore, she gave him an opportunity once a week, at least, to play dominant male to the quick. She let him shackle her to the bed, and pretended she didn’t like his hard, punishing thrusts. Instead, she experienced the biggest orgasms she’d ever had when he rammed into her like a rutting dog. Anticipation high, she started toward the front doors.

George appeared at the entrance of the sporting goods store he spent too much time in. She followed George out to his rickety car. They slipped into the vehicle, but instead of starting the engine, he turned to her. He slid his arm over the back of the seat behind her and moved closer until their bodies touched.

“What are you doing?” she asked, injecting her tone with as much mildness as she could manage. She didn’t want to rile him here where everyone could see them.

His gaze sparked with that weird glitter. “You talkin’ to Autumn? I saw her out here with you.”

“We just exchanged pleasantries.”

He snorted a laugh. “Yeah. Right. I also heard you visited Dillon the other day at the fire station. You don’t freakin’ get it do you, Cherry? Stay away from Dillon, or you’ll regret it.”

Cherry stared him right in the eye. “I don’t have time to argue about him. Don’t get any stupid ideas.”

“Everything has to do with screwing you, Cherry. Every man wants to do you. I want to screw you.”

*George you are such a sicko.*

“You want Autumn MacAllister, and I know it,” she said. “I want Jack Dillon and you know it. So what’s keeping us from having what we want?”

His cruel lips curved into a lopsided grin. Seconds crawled while he filtered the idea through his thick skull. Impatient, Cherry started to shift away, but he pulled her toward him.

“You saying you want to break up with me? You want to move out?” he asked.

“No. But if you want a little extra on the side I won’t bust your balls for it. Go for it. If you want the bitch, I won’t stop you. But I want Jack, and I’m going to have him.”

She hung, for an excruciating moment, on the precipice of danger. George could snap her neck like a chicken and not have a microsecond of regret. His gaze darkened.

He licked his lips and reached for her. “Come here.”

\* \* \* \*

Autumn walked steadily toward the bowling alley where she planned to bowl with Bitsie and Ginger. Autumn’s agitation over the conversation with Cherry still simmered in her veins. She realized a second too late that the Mafia Boys stood near the bowling alley entrance, smoking cigarettes.

“Hey, pretty lady,” Micky said as he stepped forward with his partner.

Todd’s grin grew wide and imbued with anticipation. “Well, lookie what we got here. The little troublemaker.”

She turned to enter the bowling alley, but Todd clasped her arm and drew her back.

“We got some business with you.” Todd’s voice rang deep and full of malice. “Serious business.”

Her mind lurched between panic and reason. Her throat, dry and tight, almost kept her from speaking. Sweat broke out along her body. Trapped, she would have a difficult time escaping or defending herself. She yanked on Todd’s grip, and to her surprise, he released her. Steeling against the urge to run, she put her hands on her hips and said nothing. Instinctively she knew if she ran, they would hunt her down. She stared at the two predators and put all her malice into the look.

Micky closed ranks. Barely twelve inches separated her from him. “You got us in trouble with the police.”

“What?” she asked, incredulous.

*This is too rich. First Cherry is berating me and now these creeps show up.*

Todd grinned, and she noticed the deplorable condition of his teeth for the first time. She could smell his rancid breath. “We don’t like it when little princesses come into town and disturb things. The police been talkin’ to us about those pictures you took of us at that fire. Makin’ out like we started the fires.”

Everything inside her stiffened. "I didn't take those pictures to get you into trouble. I took photographs of the entire crowd."

Todd punched the air with his finger to emphasize a point. "Some other fuckin' reporter took pictures at the club fire and the police looked through his pictures, too."

Recalling that she'd seen Todd at the Top O' the Morning, she nodded. "And that has what to do with me?"

"The police are always on our asses, that's why," Micky said, his voice gravelly. "And you knew we'd get in trouble when you showed them our pictures."

"You've got to be kidding. They asked me to turn over my photos that first time, and I did."

When they glared at her, she decided to take a road they didn't expect. If she argued with them in a strident tone, they'd feed on her anger. They wanted her to react.

She headed toward the front of the building again and what she hoped would be relative safety. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Micky stepped in front of Autumn and pinned her with a malicious smile. "I don't think so."

Todd snickered. "You shouldn't have come back to town."

Wildly she questioned if she'd stepped into a reeking, bad rendition of an old west movie.

Micky reached for her arm and before she could move, he latched onto her left wrist. Pain lashed into the joint and she gasped. He yanked her against his body.

She tried to pull back, but the pressure sent stinging hot pain through her arm. Unable to hold back a gasp, she glared at the man imprisoning her. "Let me go."

"I think I'd listen to the lady if I was you," a dark-as-night, hard voice said somewhere nearby. "She's more dangerous than you think."

Jack.

He stood at the side of the building. His stance was one-hundred-percent business, his feet apart and fists clenched at his sides. Autumn sighed in unadulterated relief. He never took his attention off the two men, and she felt his anger and concern like a hot blast from an oven. Fear returned as she realized Jack faced down two men. Hot pain pierced her wrist as Micky's fingers tightened on her flesh.

Jack glanced at her, and she saw worry flicker higher in his eyes, then harsh fury. He remained in place, not moving, his grim expression trained on the men. "Let her go, or I guarantee you'll regret it."

Soft and calm, the lethal tone in his voice said he'd tolerate no argument.

Micky's small eyes squinted until he looked like an insane pig. "This ain't any of your business. You're still a fuckin' candy ass, Dillon."

With all three men fixated on their high-fuel testosterone, Autumn saw her opportunity.

She swung up with her knee and landed a thrust right into Micky's balls.

Micky's breath whooshed out and he grabbed at his crotch with both hands and bent over with an agonized groan. Autumn felt a stab of pure delight to see him incapacitated. Pathetic moans escaped the man's mouth.

Jack crossed his arms and gave the men a pitying smile. "I told you she was more dangerous than she looked."

Todd spewed obscenities and remained frozen to the spot.

Walking with calm strides, Jack came to a halt in front of her like a protective angel and faced the men. He seemed coiled and ready for anything.

Tremors wracked her limbs for a moment and settled in her stomach. Electricity seemed to crackle in the air. Anything could happen and probably would if she didn't defuse the situation.

She reached for Jack's forearm and touched him gently. His muscles twitched, but he didn't look at her. "Jack."

Micky straightened with difficulty. Pain strained his mouth. "Yeah, candy ass, this ain't none of your business."

"Anything concerning this lady is my business." Jack's voice remained hard.

Todd laughed, a high-pitched squeaking that grated on her nerves. "You think you can take us on?"

She sensed rather than saw Jack tense, and she reached for his arm again instinctively. "Jack."

"I'll watch these dogs while you leave, Autumn. Now." His bicep tightened and flexed under her touch.

No way. She wouldn't leave him alone with these scum. At least with the two of them here it came to better odds. She might not have the strength of a man, but she did possess some tricks. She could do some damage to these two dog-faced assholes.

"I'm not leaving you here," Autumn said softly. "And if you think my ball-buster knee was something to behold, you haven't seen anything yet."

She couldn't believe she'd said that. *Nothing like false bravado to get your butt kicked, Autumn.*

Todd looked at Micky and both men hesitated, uncertainty flashing over their faces.

Micky shrugged. "You ain't heard the last from us. You tell the police any more lies about us startin' fires, and you'll be burned all right."

Todd spat at their feet and then the two men headed for their Mustang. Autumn and Jack waited until the men left before moving or saying a word.

He turned and clasped her shoulders as he looked down at her. His gaze mingled relief, anger, and something else she couldn't register. "Are you hurt?"

Now that the two men had left, the shivering in her body turned up to high vibration. Her voice shook. "No. But I think we should call the police. I'm sick of those creeps and this time, I'm filing charges."

\* \* \* \*

Autumn shivered in reaction the entire time the police took her statement inside the bowling alley. They questioned Jack after that. Bitsie and Ginger stood with Autumn, refusing to leave her alone.

Bitsie slid her arm around Autumn and gave her a hug. "I can't believe they tried to hurt you. God only knows what they would have done if Jack hadn't decided to come bowling too, and looked for you."

Autumn returned her hug, then pulled back. She smiled weakly. "I'm just glad I got in one good hit."

Bitsie managed a sad chuckle. "I'm also sorry that you've had so much trouble since you came back to Clifton."

Ginger sighed. "George Beckett acting like a gorilla, and now those thugs. It's

enough to make me scream.”

Screaming sounded good to Autumn right now. Her nerves jumped and twitched and her entire body felt wired for sound. She couldn't seem to get warm.

After the police officers left, Jack turned to Autumn. “I want to talk to you. Right now.”

Jack directed her away from the main crowd of people to a side area. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I'm fine.” She shuddered. “I don't think I could have fought both of them, and I don't even want to think about what they had in mind.”

His eyes and mouth hardened, and she saw a touch of the man who'd protected her against the Mafia Boys. A man who wouldn't have hesitated to jump into a fray if it meant keeping her safe. Unwanted tender feelings entered her heart, and the seriously mushy sensations caused her heart to beat faster.

He stepped closer, the deepness of his eyes filled with an emotion that frightened her. She'd seen that look before; it revealed things she didn't dare believe.

Trapped.

Trapped by her feelings and wondering how she could escape. Before he could speak, she explained the encounter with Cherry. For a long time he stared, and when she couldn't take it any longer she gazed down at her clasped hands. “She wants you, Jack.”

“Yeah, she doesn't get the hint I don't want her. She wants to do the horizontal tango.”

Autumn almost laughed at his description, but instead she cleared her throat. “She believes that before I showed up in town that you were hers.”

“Bullshit.”

His succinct statement, without any sugar on top, made her smile wearily. “Well, it's what she thinks.”

His gaze searched hers.

Imagining Jack tangled with Cherry in an intimate embrace bothered Autumn. A lot.

He stepped forward again, and this time she didn't pull back. Jack stood so close she could smell a hint of aftershave. His fingers went to her chin, brushing over her skin with a tender touch. His nearness started a riot in her body.

He tilted her face up, so that she looked at him. “Are you jealous?” A heart-melting smile touched his mouth. “There's no reason for you to be. But I'm flattered if you are.”

Embarrassed that he saw through her, it took her a moment to answer. “She's a beautiful woman.”

“Beautiful, yes. But I don't feel anything for her.” Jack's voice turned husky, his gaze hot. “I'd never be involved with a woman like that. We need to get something straight right now.”

Worried, she asked, “About what?”

“Us.”

Us.

He stepped even closer. So near, his off-the-chart masculinity made her tremble. She itched to touch him. Instead of welcoming the warmth she saw in his eyes, she backed away.

Heady sensations mixed with sheer terror. The kind that came from realizing he'd caught her in a web of attraction she couldn't escape. All her nerves prickled with raw

awareness. The heat in his gaze confirmed Jack felt the attraction.

“Ginger and Bitsie are waiting. Let’s go,” she said.

She walked away.

## Chapter Fourteen

As Autumn parked the SUV in the parking lot near Jack's condo, she wondered what he'd thought of the newspaper headline in the small features section. *Local Hero Shares Thoughts on Firefighting* was the innocuous title Elliott had used for her article. She'd tried several more catchy headlines and none of them appealed to him. The article was overshadowed by the main news headline on the front page: *Police and Fire Marshal Say No Leads in Arson Fires*.

Her emotions bounced from tranquility to annoyance in a heartbeat. Now, sitting in the parking lot, she took two more cleansing breaths.

Calm and controlled. *No reason to wig out, Autumn. Whatever happens tonight happens.*

Her nerves felt jangled, and she didn't know why. Even the hot bath she'd indulged in earlier hadn't made her feel better. Perhaps the encounter with Cherry and the Mafia Boys had shaken her up more than she realized.

Or was it something else all together? Being alone with a man she wanted so much it ached?

Autumn decided she didn't know the answer, and turned her attention to the condominium. She admired the unusual two-story colonial red brick features incorporated with modern touches. All the condos, several in this block, nestled near each other with no room for backyards or romping room for kids.

She started to lock the car when she saw the television news vehicle stationed in the parking lot a few cars away. "Oh, great. What's this?"

She knew the answer to her own question. Billings had promised to send up news crews to question anyone and everyone they could. She hesitated, aware that the reporters would zero in on her the moment she arrived at Jack's front door.

*Bombs away. It's now or never.*

Grabbing the bottle of wine she'd promised to bring, she climbed out of the car. Excitement percolated in her veins as she trudged toward his front door. Before she could reach the small porch, she spotted six reporters hovering nearby. When they saw her, one of them gestured toward her and they all came running. Autumn quickened her steps.

One woman, a brunette with a huge smile, shoved a microphone in Autumn's face. "Miss MacAllister, I'm Jana St. James of WKKN in Wyoming. We see you're here at Jack Dillon's place. Are you two an item?"

Autumn could almost hear the woman's thoughts. *Inquiring minds want to know. Ick. Good, God. People in Wyoming wanted to know?*

She ignored the woman and knocked on the door. She hoped Jack would answer fast.

A short, pudgy guy walked up. He held a notepad, his pencil poised for action. "Miss MacAllister, everyone knows that you and Jack Dillon were tutor and student years ago. Was there anything unusual in your relationship at that time?"

Revulsion made her belly churn, adding to a steady stream of anger. "I beg your pardon?"

"Is the fact Mr. Dillon is younger than you a problem in your relationship?" the short man asked.

*That does it.* “Does the fact you’re short explain why it’s difficult for you to get dates?”

Blanching, the short guy took a step back. Before Autumn could tell the man to take his recorder and ram it up his ass, the front door popped open. With a broad smile, Jack nabbed her arm and helped her slide in the doorway. He shut and locked the door.

“Welcome.” Jack waggled his eyebrows. “Step into my parlor.”

She grinned at his wicked expression and handed him the bottle of red wine. “Ingredients for the sangria.”

Before she could take a breath his strong arm slipped around her, and he pressed a slow kiss to her forehead. “Thanks.”

Pleasure danced in her stomach, starting a slow pirouette and strengthening to a rush in a heartbeat. “Jack.”

Another tender kiss landed on her forehead. “Sorry about the reporters. They turned up earlier today and keep waiting for me to come outside. Crazy people. I figured they’d be off questioning the Chief or the Fire Marshal. Anyone but me.”

She nestled into his warmth, gathering strength from his affection. “If the angle of their questions is any indication, I’d say they aren’t into arson fires right now.” She related what the reporters had asked. “The short guy will probably blast me in whatever rag he writes for.”

“Don’t worry about it.” With a wry grin touching his lips, he gave her a heated look that singed her down to the core. “You’re wicked, you know that?”

“I try to be.” She knew her statement came out breathy and provocative, but the way he was looking at her and holding her sent thrills deep into her body and soul.

He kissed her forehead again, then a soft rumble of laughter issued from him. Pleasure, mental and physical, overcame all common sense. *God, I love the way his arm feels around me and the touch of his lips is ... heaven.*

Desire simmered in his gaze. “You look beautiful.”

Self-conscious, she almost downplayed her appearance. A long navy blue wool coat, big red cable sweater and denim broomstick skirt and knee boots didn’t qualify as haute couture.

“Thanks.” She hated that she sounded so breathless, but even his chaste kisses had made her dizzy.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, as if he wanted to kiss her again.

Jack looked good enough to eat in a navy blue wool sweater and black jeans. His sweater tickled her fingers as she pressed her hand against his chest. His heart beat strong, steady, and maybe a little fast. Heat shimmered between them, and Autumn wondered if she kept quiet and dared to lock eyes with him what would happen. He released her.

Silence stretched until she had to say something. “You don’t look so bad yourself, Dillon.”

He gave her a flirtatious wink and reached for her coat as she took it off. “Thanks.” He started toward the kitchen in the back. “Dinner’s almost ready and you can help me make the sangria.”

“What? No house tour? Or is that a girly thing to do?”

He laughed. “None of the guys from the station would ask for a tour of the condo.”

“Humph. Well, I *am* a woman, Jack.”



Another sweeping glance, starting at her head and working downward with slow deliberation, told her he appreciated her appearance. "I can see that. I promise we'll start in the kitchen and work our way around the place."

Resolving to keep her cool, she followed him to the kitchen. Pots and pans scattered around testified that he'd been cooking.

She closed her eyes and inhaled. "That smells so good. Your chili was always better than sex." The words slipped from Autumn's before she realized what she'd said, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. She mumbled around her fingers, "I mean ... you know."

As he reached for a glass pitcher high on a shelf, he laughed. He settled the pitcher on the counter and turned toward her. Close proximity made her more than aware of his big body. She caught a whiff of his leather-and-spice manly scent.

Again, Jack's eyes turned passionate and his unwavering appraisal swept over her. "No, I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell." She started mixing the sangria ingredients. "It's just a saying."

His smile said he didn't believe her. "Right. If chili is better than sex, you've been having the wrong kind of sex. Before you came home to Clifton, that is." He wagged his eyebrows.

A strong flush rose up her neck and into her face as she avoided his probing glance.

After she finished helping him mix the sangria, he gave her the tour of the house.

Generous windows let plentiful light enter the rooms. The living area, large and comfy, featured casual but attractive dark green furniture. A fire crackled in the fireplace, taking the chill off the winter day. A sectional couch looked perfect for relaxing in front of the television. She glanced to the left of the foyer and saw a small room arranged as a combination den and office. Upstairs he showed her a sparsely furnished guest bedroom, then his room. When she stepped into the master, she inhaled the distinctive and pleasantly male scent that said Jack lived here. The entire room, with hues of blue, gray, and green, screamed with masculinity. A king-sized bed dominated the room. Jack had decorated the room with a few prints of wolves.

"You loved wolves as a kid," she said, delighted he still did.

"You remember that?"

"There are many things I remember about you when you were a snot-nosed kid, Dillon." She cocked a finger toward the door. "Now let's get down there and chow down before I drool to death."

She helped him set the table in the dining area, and soon they ate bowls of thick, delicious chili, French bread and tossed salad.

Autumn tilted her head back and closed her eyes as she tasted the first bite of chili. "Mmm. This is almost orga—I mean exquisite."

Jack's smirk said he knew what she'd almost said. *God, try to keep sex out of the conversation.*

"Glad you like it. Not too spicy? Hank's hair almost caught on fire eating this recipe."

"What hair?"

Jack chuckled. "His chest hair, I guess. The man's a beast. Anyway, he didn't like it."

“You know I like it hot.” Autumn looked up at him, unable to restrain herself. “I mean—”

“Yeah, I know.” Jack’s unrepentant grin said he recognized the accidental double entendre. “You’re digging yourself in deeper.”

“Tell me about it. Maybe I should just eat and not talk at all.”

“So when are you going to tell me what happened between you and George all those years ago?” Jack took a swallow of sangria. “And about the nightmares.”

“Time to pay up, eh?”

“You got it.”

She inhaled, drawing strength from the deep breath. “All right.” She chewed a spoonful of tasty chili, then swallowed hard. “I don’t know where to start. I feel like I can’t tell anything quickly or I’ll miss something. It seems imperative I tell you everything.”

Jack nodded. He’d finished his chili and salad. “We can move out to the living room and talk about it if you want.”

“You’ll tell me about Ground Zero after that?”

Jack shoved his plate and bowl to the side. “I keep my word, Autumn. You know that.”

As delicious as his chili tasted, she didn’t know if she could eat another bite. “All right. I’ll start with George.”

Jack shoved back his chair and snagged his sangria. “Let’s get comfortable.”

Once in the living room, he slipped a CD in the player with quiet, sexy jazz music that reminded her of the night at Top O’ the Morning Club. Soft light from the fireplace illuminated the room. As he settled near the middle of the sectional couch, she nestled near one end.

“If you sit any farther away, I won’t be able to see you,” Jack said.

“Very funny.”

The boyish glint in Jack’s eyes said he didn’t care. “Sit closer so I can hear you, too.”

She scooted over until one cushion separated them, knowing full well what he wanted, but playing his game nonetheless. “You must be kidding, Jack. You can hear me perfectly well. This is a ploy to get me closer.”

With a straight face he said, “Yes, it is.”

Exhaling an exaggerated sigh, she decided now was the time to start from the beginning before she lost her nerve. “George was very friendly when we first dated. We went out a couple of times before he started to get ... aggressive.”

His eyes filled with anger, and for a moment, she saw the warrior glint inside. She remembered that steel-hard gaze from the night George had accosted her in the newspaper offices.

He placed his mug on the knotted wood coffee table. “Aggressive how?”

“Touching me when I didn’t want him to. It was too much, too soon. And I didn’t like his kisses.”

“Was he the first guy to kiss you?”

Uncomfortable, she put her drink on a coaster near Jack’s sangria. “Yes. He was also rough with me.”

“What?” His tone was tense. “Are you saying he physically abused you?”

She smoothed her hair back from her face with both hands, and the sudden memory caused tears to surge into her eyes. "Um ... he..."

When she faltered, Jack shifted closer. "Hey, it's all right." He reached out and tucked his fingers into her hair, a soft caress that comforted. "Take it slow and tell me what happened."

Autumn saw banked rage fighting with tenderness in Jack's eyes, and it turned her to pudding. Waves of reassurance flowed from where he touched her straight to her heart. She'd never imagined a man could be so gentle.

She fought back the tears. "The day before the fire, we were up on Bullet Point."  
"The lover's lane of Clifton."

Embarrassed and ashamed of the memory, she sighed. "I didn't realize he thought I was going to have sex with him." One tear escaped and slid down her face. "I should have known better than to head up there in total isolation with him. I wanted the male attention so much I guess I was willing to take any kind of attention even if it was negative." She saw questions in Jack's eyes and didn't blame him for wondering. "My parents were arguing a lot and I felt terrible. I was so mixed up and depressed."

"I know the feeling. That was about the time my parents self-destructed and were on the way to divorce." His fingers brushed over her cheek. "Our families caused each other so much pain. Ironical that we're here now, talking like this."

"That's for certain. I think back then I was on the path to self-destruction with George, too. I didn't recognize it at first. Then when he took me up to Bullet Point, reality came home." She clutched at her skirt, wadding material between her fingers. "I thought he wanted to neck a little. Things progressed and he kept at me even though I didn't really want to. It didn't feel right." Autumn gulped, swallowing a knot of tension in her throat as large as a small country. "He pushed me down in the back seat and before I knew it he tore my panties—"

"Jesus H. Christ!"

She flinched, memories of George's strength resurrecting as if it happened yesterday. Long shivers rocked her body, icy and relentless.

Fury scorched Jack's eyes. Sharp anguish flickered over his features. "Are you saying he raped you?" She didn't answer, and the tears slipped down her face without pause. He cupped her face with both hands, caressing her cheeks with his thumbs. "Oh, God. Sweetheart."

Even the soft endearment couldn't unclog the logjam in her throat. As if he expected her to bolt like a frightened deer, he slid his arm around her shoulders and tucked her close. Calm chased away the cold knot forming in her heart as she recalled that horrible night. Under the strength of his arm around her, she felt protected. Memories couldn't harm her.

His chin rested against her forehead as he nestled her close. She closed her eyes. "I fought George, but he was too strong. I kicked and screamed."

"Oh, God," Jack whispered again.

"The only thing that saved me was another car. George heard it driving up and he let me go. It was another couple in a convertible."

"Then he didn't..." His voice sounded strained.

"No. He didn't."

Jack squeezed her gently, and he pressed a kiss against her hair. "But it was still

attempted rape.” He pulled back and gazed into her eyes. “You didn’t report it?”

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Why, Autumn?” She saw disbelief and disturbance in his face. “Why?”

“I was scared and young. I couldn’t believe what had happened. Besides, my parents were suspicious of George and had told me I couldn’t see him anymore.”

“So you would have been admitting you were out with him that night if you confessed that he almost raped you.”

“Right. I wasn’t thinking clearly, and I was ashamed.”

“You had nothing to be ashamed of. It was him. Beckett tried to rape you.”

She nodded. “I know. I know. But you can’t imagine what it feels like to be so helpless. That point when you realize all the kicking and screaming and biting and scratching won’t stop someone from hurting you.”

She burrowed deeper as his arms tightened around her. “It’s all right. I’ve got you.”

She waited a few moments before she looked up at him, almost afraid to see his expression. He looked sad and ready to kill George all at once. “I’ve never told anyone about it until now.”

“I’m glad you told me.” More heated anger added to the chaotic emotions rioting through his face. “He’s a motherfucker of the first order.” He broke off, and she saw him struggling to hold back his language. “He’s a stinking piece of filth. He sexually assaulted you. God knows how many other women he’s hurt.”

Even though she knew Jack would never harm her, the intensity and unadulterated wrath in his words caused her to cringe a little. She drew back from his embrace. “Don’t you think someone would have reported him by now?”

He shrugged and jammed one hand through his hair. “Who knows? I heard he was in the army for a few years and overseas for a chunk of that time. He probably hurt some women over there and they never reported it.”

“But what about here in Clifton?”

“Maybe if they’re afraid of him they haven’t said anything to the authorities.” He pressed a feather light kiss to her cheek. “You probably wanted nothing to do with men for some time after that.”

She nodded. “I dated a nice guy in my senior year in college, but it didn’t work out.” She smiled weakly. “A few years back, when I first started working in smoke jumping, there was another man. A guy I thought I could fall in love with. But he…”

He frowned. “He what?”

“He was killed in the smoke jumping accident that took my career away from me. Derek Colligan was my lover and my partner.”

He didn’t look surprised. “I heard about the accident.”

She wanted to be straight with him, and so she plunged into the rest of the story.

“Derek and I were called into the Bakersfield wildfire in Wyoming.”

She halted, absorbing the sounds around her as if just noticing them. The crackling fire and the sound of harsh wind battering against the windows, all reminded her that she was here and now with Jack. The past didn’t have to take control of her if she didn’t allow it.

His touch swept over her hair, slipped through the strands with a sweetness that brought more tears to her eyes. “You’ve been pretending it didn’t happen and now that you’re back here in Clifton the arson fires are bringing it back. That’s why you’re having

nightmares. We're both haunted by our memories."

His perceptiveness took her off guard, but Autumn understood he'd seen his own share of trauma. Of course, he also probably recognized the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. While never diagnosed with the disorder, she knew if she hadn't come to grips with her feelings, she might have suffered more.

"Tell me what happened, Autumn."

"It was a freak accident of the worst kind." Recalling the circumstances, she closed her eyes and relived it step by step. "We were in the C-130. The choppy air was bad. It was a clear, cloudless day."

She remembered the thrill she felt jumping into air, sailing like a bird on currents until time to pull the cord on her chute.

"I can still remember every detail of my gear. The tight cap over my hair and the helmet over that. I had an ax, shovel, map, compass, water, first-aid kit and a knife to cut away the shroud lines if my first parachute failed and I had to use the second chute. The second chute was always strapped to my front, and the first to my back."

All that weight could drag her down fast, and once she reached the landing zone the hikes to the fire area could be miles away. With twelve hour or more shifts to accomplish, she had to be in top shape to take on arduous fire breaks.

"The plane carried ten of us that day and it was freezing. Derek was only seconds behind me when I jumped. I'd checked the altimeter on my wrist and flattened out to slow down my descent. Before I could pull my cord, there was this downdraft. It slammed me so hard I almost lost my breath. I saw Derek pull his cord and then his chute began to stream. He couldn't get the shroud lines to separate and he was struggling. I watched in horror for a second before I knew I had to do something. If I didn't he'd die."

Her heart banged in her chest as if she'd leapt from the plane in that moment. Jack's arms tightened around her, and she almost pressed her face into his sweater.

"Since that day, I've retraced what happened dozens upon dozens of times." Tears slid down her cheeks and her throat tightened. She swallowed hard. "His second chute crumpled, Jack."

"Oh, man."

She continued. "I dove toward him because I knew if I didn't do something Derek would die. I made a grab for his shoulder harness. I caught him. I thought the weight was going to rip through my gloves and break my fingers."

Heavy breaths issued from her, and she felt Jack's hands slip over her hair with gentle, warm strokes. She barely registered the comfort he gave, her memories ripping at her with sharp claws. "My chute opened and Derek started to slip from my grasp. He was holding tight to my harness but the force was awful when my chute opened. I thought for a moment I'd lost him. I held on for all I was worth. But it wasn't enough."

"Autumn." Jack's voice sounded strained, and she knew what he thought.

"We came in too fast. Our combined weight was too much for the one parachute." She brushed tears away from her face. "We hit the trees because we were blown off course from the landing zone. Derek was jarred loose on impact. When we hit my knee jammed against a heavy branch."

"That must have hurt like a son-of-a-bitch."

"The pain was so bad I was sure I'd broken my leg. Something hit me in the back of the head. When I woke up, I was sprawled face down on the ground. I wanted to get up

and check on Derek but I couldn't stand on the knee. Then I saw him about twenty yards away. I thought he might be unconscious, but when I crawled my way over there—" She closed her eyes and remembered Derek's crumpled form. "He was already dead. Apparently when he hit a branch his neck was ... broken."

"The woman in the club. When you saw her neck broken, it reminded you of Derek."

"Yes." Silence settled over the room for some time before she spoke. "The wind blew Derek and me closer to the fire than we should have been. The rest of the crew hit the landing zone as expected. When they realized what happened, some of them set out to find us. They located us a considerable time later. We weren't that far off course. Just enough to kill Derek and end my career."

"What happened then?" His question came so softly she almost didn't hear him.

"It took me time to recover. My knee was busted up big time."

"You've been carrying around that guilt, haven't you?"

"I thought I had a handle on it until I returned to Clifton."

His fingers brushed over her jaw, and he tilted her face upward. When her gaze connected with his, she saw compassion in the depths of his eyes. "It wasn't your fault, Autumn."

She inhaled a cleansing breath. "I know."

"Talking can help. I'm here if you ever want to talk more."

"You're reading my mind." Another tear slid down her face, and he brushed it away with his thumb. "I might take you up on that again sometime." Autumn wanted to slip away from the horrible memories, and she knew that questioning Jack about Ground Zero wouldn't help. "My experience doesn't equal what you experienced in New York."

"That doesn't make it any less valid."

His confirmation warmed her, removing some of the lingering pain.

His arms slipped from around her, and all traces of emotion washed from his face. Cold, hard truth permeated her, and she realized she couldn't ... wouldn't push him to confess his experiences at the World Trade Center. "Jack, if you don't want to do the interview in Billings, I don't blame you. You don't have to tell me anything, either. It's your choice."

A deep sadness, stronger than any emotion she'd seen on his face, spilled into his expression. "You're sure you want to hear this?" He shook his head as if banishing a horrific vision. "Everyone there who survived has a story. Everyone who went to clean up afterwards has a story. It's old hat, isn't it?"

"Every story is unique, Jack. There's nothing less important about your story than anyone else's. You told me that a moment ago." She added a gentle smile and gazed straight into those wary eyes. "But I won't hold you to your promise to tell me if it's too painful."

"I never make promises I can't keep." He leaned his head back on the couch and closed his eyes. "I've waited for what seems forever to talk about it, even if it's been less than a year. It seems like yesterday in some ways, and a thousand years ago in others." When he opened his eyes he said, "If anyone can help me with this, you can."

That he would trust her with his feelings and thoughts told her a great deal about their relationship. She cared for Jack with a soul-deep longing that tugged at her heart with every beat.

She reached for his hand and clasped it. "Then tell me."

## Chapter Fifteen

Jack turned his hand palm up, and Autumn's fingers interlaced with his. "Where should I start?"

She reached for her recorder and snapped it on. "Where were you when you heard about what happened?"

"At home sleeping. Hank called me. When he told me to turn on the TV, I growled at him. You know, what the hell did he want? Then when told me what was happening, I ran downstairs and turned the TV on and there it was in full color. Like a movie, everyone said. But I was thinking about the firefighters and what they'd be doing. I was wishing I were there right that minute, helping out. Then I saw the buildings pancake, and I knew that very few, if anyone, would survive the collapse."

She put her other hand over his, and his skin felt hot. "Then you decided you had to help." He nodded, but didn't say a word. "I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for you at the firehouse the first day. You all probably wanted to leave for New York right away."

"You've got that right. Hank, Ray, Dan and I are single, so the Chief said we could leave as soon as possible. Many of the married guys wanted to, but the Chief encouraged them to stay in Clifton with their families."

He stared at their twined fingers. Autumn's soul ached, the hurt multiplying as she absorbed the undeniable wave of anguish simmering below the surface of his calm exterior. She reflected on how he opened his eyes every day without thinking about what he'd seen.

"It was extraordinary that so many people made it out of there. It could have been much worse," she said.

"Much worse." He paused a moment, then continued. "Then I think of the families of the deceased and it isn't just three or so thousand lives affected anymore."

She saw him retreat within, his concentration delving deep until he reached the core of his memories. His gaze went blank, as if excruciating recollections scorched him, and he couldn't allow his emotions to show. "We arrived on September fourteenth. It was a strange thing that started to happen to me then, and it happened day after day, night after night."

"Nightmares?"

"No." His voice lowered to a quiet, rough quality. "That didn't come until much later, after I returned to Clifton. Hank and I found out that two firefighters were pulled out of a deep void the day before we arrived. We wished to hell we'd been there for that. It was a temporary morale booster. The search parties thought that if these two men could survive, there had to be more people trapped down there alive."

"And then they were disappointed?"

"Disappointed is a damned mild word."

She didn't hear chastisement in his voice, but then she realized she wasn't playing this interview hard core. She couldn't ask him pointed questions designed to push him to answer. In fact, she was lucky if any questions formed at all. At the same time, an odd anticipation hung in the air and surrounded her. As if she must know everything he saw

and experienced in his life, or she would be incomplete.

“What was the strange thing that happened to you?” she asked.

“I started to think if I’d been at the site earlier, I could have found someone else alive. It was wrong thinking.”

“Guilt that had no basis in fact.”

“Yes. And arrogance born of pain.”

“Perhaps your anger turned inward?”

He nodded. “I was so angry when I watched the television the day of the attacks. When I got to New York and saw the extent of the damage, well, my anger turned to something different. In my mind, I thought if I could pull one person out of the wreckage alive, that I’d feel as if I accomplished the best thing I could. It would have been a relief from some of the pain I felt.”

She dared to look into his eyes, and that’s where she saw new agony bloom. She knew the answer to her next question, but she asked it anyway. “You didn’t find anyone alive?”

“No.”

The word hung there like a nasty, unforgettable blow. Hard and final, the single syllable made her heart squeeze with sorrow for Jack.

His mouth tightened and became a thin line. “I wanted to be there on the day of the attacks. I felt like I could have helped at least one person to survive.”

Autumn’s heart contracted with delayed fear. Thinking about what could have happened to him made tears threaten her eyes.

She swallowed dark thoughts and redirected her mind to the interview. “You’re saying the placed obsessed you.”

He turned his gaze to her and searched her face. “While we worked there it consumed our lives every minute of every day. It was almost as if I could feel all the evil. The evil that drove those terrorists to decide to kill innocent people. To kill anyone. That evil was still there.”

Autumn couldn’t ask him another question. Not yet. Not while she digested the enormity of what he’d said.

She studied the contents of her glass. “I don’t think that’s crazy, Jack. They say scenes of great trauma leave impressions on the world around them. Maybe in those steel girders and in the concrete dust, the malevolence lingered.”

“You believe that?”

“I think it’s possible. Some memories are like a haunting. Did you feel the same thing at each arson fire you’ve gone to? Evil?”

He shook his head. “Not like this.”

Another long pause gave them time to think. Then she swung the interview back to a central point. “You said you got to the site on the fourteenth?”

“Actually, we traveled to New York on that day. Early the next morning we were bused in with other volunteers.”

“What was the first thing you saw?”

His gaze hardened and the tightness of his mouth gave his answer. “War.” Another ugly word hung in the air. “You know how your stomach feels when you’re on a roller coaster and heading into that first drop? Shell-shocked doesn’t quite describe the emotions you feel seeing something like that. When you see the destruction and



recognize the type of force it took to create this disaster, you have trouble imagining the scope of it beforehand, but this ... this was like the worst earthquake you could imagine. The worst tornado.”

“What did you feel then?”

His gaze caught and held hers. “More rage than I felt the day my Dad died.”

She drank in every angle of his handsome face, and what she witnessed in his eyes brought her a fresh wave of grief.

“There are two things I don’t think I’ll ever forget.” He turned a tired gaze upon her. “The animal-assisted crisis intervention is the first thing.”

“Rescue dogs?”

“No. Animals brought to the site for therapy. So that people could spend time with animals as a relief from the stress.”

“Did it help you?”

“Yeah. The unconditional love was great, at least in the short term.”

“What types of pets did you visit with?”

“A golden retriever named Buck, and this huge German shepherd called Tiny.”

An involuntary chuckle escaped her lips. “Tiny?”

Jack leaned his head back on the couch. “Yep. He was a great dog.”

Silence settled over them again for a short time. “What else won’t you forget about what you saw in New York, Jack?”

He continued, his voice rasping and deep. “Seeing the pancake effect of the building. They say the South Tower fell at the speed of one hundred twenty miles per hour. It took approximately twelve seconds for it to come crashing down. Twelve seconds, Autumn. You can see those buildings falling on television and can’t grasp the impact until you hear statistics like that. Brings things straight home where it hurts. Those people never had a chance. But there was more. I saw the overturned and crushed cars and rescue equipment. I watched body parts carried away in Stokes baskets every day. I witnessed front loaders and dump trucks carry away tons of debris day after day.”

She needed to give him a small measure of comfort; the necessity burned a deep hole inside her. He stared into the fireplace, and the firelight reflected on his profile, turning him golden. He disengaged his fingers from hers and speared his hand through one side of his hair.

He said, “I remember hearing people say what happened that day was unimaginable.”

Dry and tight, her throat almost refused to let her utter one word. “Did you imagine it could happen?”

“Oh, yeah. In a way, I wasn’t surprised it occurred.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a tremendous ability to believe in the malice of mankind, I guess. It was like I knew it was going to happen without really knowing.”

Interested, she leaned forward a smidgen. “Like precognition?”

He eyed the recorder. “Don’t put this part in your news report. It’s not something I want to show up in the newspaper.”

“Of course not. Do you want me to shut off the recorder?”

“Let it run.” He reached for his glass and drained it in one long gulp. He placed it back on the table. “What I felt might have been precognition. That sort of thing has

happened to me before. Not often. And it isn't something you tell other firefighters."

"I thought you didn't care what anyone thinks?"

"Even I have my limits. It's better if the entire firefighting community in Clifton doesn't think I'm one ladder short of an engine."

She smiled as a glimmer of amusement slipped through his eyes. "No problem. I won't say anything."

"I'm getting off-track here anyway."

"No time limits, no content limits. I want to know it all."

He shook his head solemnly. "No. You don't."

She slipped her hand over his forearm and squeezed. "Then tell me what I do want to know. What I should know. Tell me so that other people can understand and never forget."

"That's where you're wrong. Once it's all said and done—and it can never be done for some people—once it's said and done, we have to release some of it. If we don't, it'll eat us alive."

He stood and walked toward the kitchen, his footsteps muffled as he moved over the carpet. She heard the refrigerator door open and then he brought the pitcher of sangria out with him and sat it on a potholder in the middle of the coffee table. As he refilled their glasses, she wanted to reach out and provide him some of her strength. Some instinct or fear held her back, and so she waited for him to speak. He sat again and sipped his drink with a thoughtful, almost detached air.

He gave her a fatigued smile. "It's weird, you know? I'm not so sure I'm feeling anything too powerful right now. Perhaps I've run out of emotions. Maybe I poured every feeling I had into working the ruins of the towers, and now there's nothing left."

"You've got those emotions in there. You spent so much time staying strong and keeping them back. You didn't want to feel out of control or useless, so you didn't cry while you were there."

"No. Not even when we found firefighters' remains. Not even then."

"Then you're not so different from me," she said.

Satisfaction and unhappiness mingled inside her, if that was possible. She liked that he could understand her desire for control, but at the same time, she didn't want him to suffer.

His gaze altered, turning tender. "Not so different."

He cupped her cheek, and the hot touch of his fingers sent pleasure rushing up and down her body. If she didn't get back to the interview she'd do something outrageous like kiss the stuffing out of him. Not that she'd mind it, but she had to finish what she'd come for first.

"Hey, Dillon. Stop distracting me. I'm trying to conduct an interview here."

"Slave driver."

She felt their shared moment of quiet, their smiles and a sensation of sweet warmth surrounding them. "Tell me more."

He shrugged. "The days started to run together. Each day we were on a bucket brigade using these five-gallon buckets that were heavy as hell once they were filled. We shoveled away debris. We wore masks or breathing apparatus most of the time. We knew concrete dust and the smoke and gases were bad news. Not everyone there wore protective gear. I had a difficult time understanding why they didn't. Some people used

their bare hands, but I used gloves. Kept my skin from getting all sliced up.”

“Describe more of the scene.”

He stood and went to the fireplace and stoked the dying embers, refueling with wood until the blaze flickered high. “There were volunteer service workers helping out the rescue personnel with their needs. Water and food. Smiles to cheer us up. I don’t know if we could have done it without their help and support.” When Jack came back to the couch and sat down, he spoke as if he’d never paused. “Cranes lifted steel girders and tractor trailers took debris away. Steel workers tried to get a handle on the mess. You should have seen them climbing around on those high piles of junk. They were like acrobats.”

“Just like firefighters.”

“We were all in it together. Eventually the National Guard replaced some of the police as security. Canine units worked the scene. The place looked like a war zone, but a war zone that wasn’t finished being perilous.”

“How?”

“The debris was unsteady and people got hurt despite precautions. Other buildings around us were still smoldering and some of them on the verge of collapse.”

“How long were you there?”

“A couple of weeks. That was all the time the Chief could spare having us away from Clifton. I didn’t want to go back home yet. I guess in some twisted way I thought I would still find someone alive, even though I knew that wasn’t possible.”

An epiphany came to her, held for seconds in her mind. The thought, dangerous and possibly offensive to Jack, refused to let her go. “In some small way were you trying to find and rescue your father?”

He blanched. At the same time her stomach dropped, worry that she’d hurt him launching into her with the impact of a bullet.

Jack left the couch again and stood near the big window, looking out on the cold, darkening landscape. “That question on your cue cards?”

“No, but it might be on Ms. Butterfield’s if you allow her to get personal. She might ask some hard-hitting questions.”

“I don’t have to answer them. If I go to that interview it’ll be to talk about firefighting in general, not my personal life.”

“Of course.” She sighed. “But you want to be prepared if she blindsides you.”

He didn’t turn to look at her. “I don’t have to prove myself to her.”

“Of course you don’t. But you also can’t know her true angle for the interview until she starts asking the questions.”

She wanted to hear what Jack had to say as much as she wanted to help him answer Butterfield the right way. She hadn’t helped him all those years ago when he needed her to ease him through his grief. Maybe she could do that now.

She stood and went to him. Almost afraid to touch the broad plane of his shoulder, she hesitated. Seconds sprawled until she broke her fear and lightly palmed his back.

“Is it true, Jack? Were you trying to save your father in a symbolic way? Maybe without even knowing it?”

His back heaved in a sigh, and she let her touch drift to his shoulder. He turned toward her, and instead of seeing anger in his face, she saw resignation and maybe a little disappointment.

“Hell, I don’t know. Maybe. If I’d wanted psychoanalysis I would have gone to a shrink.”

Sadness made grim progress over his features. Then he firmed his jaw and took a shuddering breath. She reached up, cupped his face with one hand, and caressed his jaw in tender reconciliation.

“Maybe talking with someone you care about from time to time can help,” she said.

Her fingers slipped away from his face, but Jack caught her hand in both of his.

His dark lashes fanned downward as he pressed a kiss to her hand. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Desire started to smolder in his eyes. Attraction, potent and unrelenting, moved between them. She could feel each pulse of gathering yearning ripple from his skin to hers in acknowledgment.

“Maybe a little part of you still needed to grieve, and when you went to New York you couldn’t find the answer there,” she said.

“I discovered I was stronger than I thought. That I could get some satisfaction digging through that rubble day after day. I was doing what I could to help. That’s all anyone can do.”

Raw and exposed, her nerves prickled with fresh pain. “You know you can talk to me any time. We’ll be a mutual support society. I’ll show you my nightmares if you show me yours.”

He seemed to be trying to decide something, and she kept her gaze locked with his. “You got it. And I can think of one other thing you can do to help me.”

“Yes?”

“Travel with me to Billings.”

She gaped at him for a second. “What?”

“Maybe we can convince Butterfield to do the interview on the weekend and you and I can make a weekend of it.” He winked. “Interview on Saturday, play on Sunday.”

*Play. Wow.*

Spending an entire weekend with Jack made her tingle. Right then she felt more than the heat of the fire, and the lingering taste of sangria on her tongue. Jack’s essence reached for her, and his delicious masculine scent caused thrills to spill through her body in a heady tide. At the same time, old fears and doubts threatened to stall her. A weekend with Jack would mean no interruptions. They’d have to fill that time with something. And that something might be dangerous to her heart.

“A whole weekend?” Her voice sounded tiny to her ears. “Why do you want me with you?”

“To give me courage.”

“You? A big brave firefighter needing courage? Ha! I don’t believe it.”

One of his brows arched upwards. He edged nearer, and as his body came to within inches of touching her, her breath caught. “Then believe this. You know why I want you with me. I know why I want you with me.”

Husky, serious, and laced with potent sexual ammunition, his voice nearly unwound her there and then. “Oh?”

“Oh, yeah. Every time I’m near you I almost lose my mind. You’re one hell of a woman, Autumn.” All teasing left his face and transformed into off-the-charts longing. “Let me convince you why you should come with me.”

*Forget struggling, Autumn. You’re a goner.*

Matching the sultry hint in his tone, she pressed him for an answer. She needed to hear the truth pass his lips. "Why should I come with you?"

"What if I show you?"

When she dared look into his eyes, she saw desire and an overwhelming yearning for action. A promise of paradise, if she would allow it.

He slipped his arms around her waist and pressed their bodies together.

Her hands went to his shoulders, and she realized her fingers trembled. "Jack? What are we doing?"

"Plunging into the fire," he rasped.

His mouth came down on hers, and his arms tightened. Jack launched all missiles. No more tender brushes of lips against lips. No more tentative touches designed to test.

As his mouth slanted across hers, fierce arousal darted deep into the muscles between her legs. She gasped into his mouth, and his tongue flicked across her lips. He tasted fresh. Delicious.

Hungry.

He made a primal sound deep in his throat. His tongue swept into her mouth, his assault on her senses rocking her to the core. Everything cautious within her melted, incinerated by her feelings for him. She responded, taking his deep kiss to the next level. She moaned softly as she enjoyed the heady, arousing sensation of his tongue hot and seductive against hers.

Stark sexual hunger erupted. As the longing rose in her body, it flowed in a rhythmic action like a wave. She wanted deeper, harder, more aggressive contact.

Jack pulled away, his breath stuttering, his chest heaving. "God, Autumn."

She didn't give him a chance to hesitate. She reached down and slipped off her boots, then peeled off the knee-high stockings. Good. Less impediments for what she had in mind. "Come here."

With a tug, she moved him to the couch, and when he fell into a sitting position against the cushions, she straddled his hips, her skirt rucking up around her waist.

He stared at her and she stared at him until the tension exploded.

"Damn." He caught the back of her thighs and arched his hips.

A startled moan slipped from her as a wild, erotic image filled her head. Jack naked. Her naked. She closed her eyes and imagined him seated to the hilt inside her, touching so deep she would feel every long, thick inch. Again, he arched his hips. Only his jeans and her panties kept them from joining right now. She clenched the muscles between her legs, wanting his hardness thrust all the way inside. She itched for completion, a stunning rise to the top of arousal. She kissed him.

He plunged his fingers into her hair, fisting strands and holding her in place. His tongue moved against hers until little sparks turned to a full-fledged inferno. She found his shoulders, his strength an intoxicating aphrodisiac. Heat lapped through her body as he slipped under her skirt and cupped her butt. His fingers tensed and gripped, squeezed and skimmed.

*Oh. Yes. Yes.*

Tight, tingling heat built in her core and threatened to go supernova at any moment. Seconds later his fingers shoved down the back of her bikini panties and touched bare ass. She gasped into his mouth, wild for more. His fingers explored, one hand reaching between her butt cheeks and tracing the crevice. Autumn moaned into his mouth,

writhing against his intimate caress. As seconds turned into minutes, she loved how he searched, touched, and mapped her like a traveler bent on knowing each inch of the earth. His kisses built a relentless, unfathomable heat.

Her heart pounded and her breath seemed suspended. His hands slipped over her back, gathering the material of her shirt in his hands until he touched bare flesh. His hot palms made her shiver; she wanted everything he could give her.

He tipped her backwards onto the couch, and his hips nestled between her legs again. On impulse, she grabbed his butt with both hands and yanked him closer. He pressed and rubbed along her clit and the aching valley where she needed him the most.

Jack broke the kiss. A wicked, sexy grin covered his mouth, and the light in his eyes said he liked her sudden assertiveness. "Holy tamale."

"That's my line. And don't you forget it."

His mouth turned up in a teasing grin. "What are you going to do if I say it again? Hurt me?"

"Punishment will certainly be in order." She arched her hips, starting a motion that rubbed her clit and created sharp pleasure.

He groaned softly. "Oh, man. Something slow and torturous, I hope."

Her eyes widened as she gasped in fake shock. "Honestly, Jack, you have a dirty mind."

"And you don't?"

He had her there. She made a delicate shrug. "Well, I've been known to talk people to death in a moment of uncertainty."

Jack's hands skimmed up her arms, caressing and coaxing. "Is that what's wrong now? You're uncertain?"

"Yes."

"What will it take to convince you there's nothing to be indecisive about?"

"I don't know. You're ... we're so complex. This could all blow up in our faces. Jack, all of my ..." Oh, God. Could she confess this now? "All my sexual relationships with men have been disasters. Unsatisfactory for me, and probably for the men. Except for ... you."

His eyes widened a little, then a somewhat cocky grin spread his lips. "Sex wasn't good until you met me?"

She sighed. "Yes. I mean ... don't read too much into it."

"You mean our relationship? The fact that I want you so much I ache?" He nuzzled her neck, pressing tender kisses against her neck until she quivered in enjoyment. She wiggled under him and he groaned. "Oh, baby."

His hips started to move once more, a steady cadence of cock over clit that caused her breath to hitch and her heart to slam. Jack cupped one breast and his thumb brushed her nipple.

She sucked in a breath of sharp pleasure and arched against him again. She matched his rhythm, writhing, reaching for the ultimate peak. "Jack."

"Ummm?" His voice muffled against her neck as he drew his tongue along her skin and to her ear. He nibbled, and she shuddered as desire ached in her loins.

She couldn't wait any longer. "I want you. God, how I want you. Now."

"Then take me."

## Chapter Sixteen

With a smoldering look Autumn would remember all her days, Jack covered her mouth with his. All sensations melted into one ecstatic odyssey. He drew the sensations out, torturing. She knew this time the sex wouldn't be sweet and soft and gentle. Urgency pushed their actions, and she relished the drive, the force that brought them to this combustible point.

They plunged into another voracious kiss, and her senses went into a riot of arousal so forceful, she knew she'd never experienced it before. Too insane, too frantic, her desire demanded that she take him into her body and appease the craving. All she wanted was his hard cock thrusting as deep and as hard inside her as possible. Friction built steadily as he kissed with his entire body. His chest rubbed over her breasts, and she wrestled with his sweater to help him pull it over his head. Seconds later, he sat up long enough to wrestle with his shoes, his pants and toss them away.

*Oh, oh my God. He's so damned gorgeous.*

Yes, she'd seen him naked before, but something about this time did her in. Her heart pounded, her body liquid with a desire so unrestrained she burned with it.

Broad, muscled shoulders led to powerfully constructed arms. Arms that could force a fire hose to cooperate, or shelter a woman. His stomach, taut with muscle, made her itch to touch him. Plain white briefs covered him, but there was nothing plain about what they concealed. No doubt about it, Jack was hard, heavy, and ready to make love.

"Jack," she said.

He stood slowly, and a twinkle filled his eyes. "What?"

Her mouth dropped open as he yanked his briefs down and pitched them away. His chest rose and fell, his eyes burning with intent. Everything about Jack screamed alpha; from the breadth of his shoulders to the narrowness of his hips and the powerful construction of his legs, he was striking.

Before she could admire him more, he tugged at the elastic waistband of her skirt and slipped it down her legs and off. He discarded it along the back of the couch. She sat up, and he helped her pitch away her bra and sweater.

"Fuck me," he said softly as he reached for her, his fingers brushing over her nipples with a reverent touch. "You're beautiful."

Pleasure flamed inside her, mentally and physically, until the two melded into potent arousal that demanded a quick finish. She was feverish to ease the need burning her alive. Nerve endings sizzled, demanded. As he lowered his body over hers, his powerful thighs parted hers. His cock probed her soft, wet folds as he rubbed the head over her clit.

"Oh, Jack!" The exclamation burst from her, and she pressed upward, wanting him in her now. He thrust, and her body resisted.

She whimpered. She was so wet, so swollen with need, that she couldn't wait to have him inside.

"Relax, sweetheart." His breath came out raspy, eager. "You're tightening up because you're so excited."

"Excited is an understatement."

Autumn opened her eyes. His gaze burned, need etched in his face. A wicked grin

slashed over his mouth. "Good." He kept her gaze trapped with his, and the intimacy sliced deep to her heart. His hips moved, pushed, eased farther into her channel. "I won't hurt you."

Another slow retreat, another steady thrust. Her pussy spread around the head of his cock as he slid within. That his body was bare within her once again excited Autumn to an excruciating level.

Her wet heat stretched as inch by inch he thrust. Inner muscles clenched around him, grasping him deeper. He drew back again. Another solid push seated his cock to the hilt. Oh, God, yes. He felt incredible. Thick. Hot. So big.

Again he thrust. Again.

A wild sound erupted from her throat as she wriggled and practically begged. She felt half-mad from the onslaught of sexual need pounding through her. And, oh, he felt it, too. His heart pounded against her fingers like a sledgehammer. Autumn recognized violent hunger when she saw it, felt it.

Pushing steadily but not roughly, he thrust, then retreated. She opened her eyes and saw the raw desire etched across his features. Male animal at his most primitive and raw form, Jack looked sexy as hell.

Again, he thrust and the rhythm became everything. Each thrust pulled her deeper into that special place where thoughts ceased to exist, and physical dominated. Thick, hard and so long, he touched all the way to her womb until he couldn't reach any farther.

She clenched, tightening with muscles that ached for orgasm, burned with a need for movement and friction. "Jack. Please."

His breathing came harder. "Easy, sweetheart."

He ground his hips into her, and her clit zinged with sweet pleasure. Molten bliss darted and expanded until she felt the tickling, the rising excitement ache high inside her. She closed her eyes and sank into the sensation, reached for it, wanting it desperately. He possessed her more totally than any man before, and comprehension caused tears to prick in her eyes once more.

\*

Jack knew he'd died and found paradise as he drew his hips back, then sank into her hot, tight cavern. With each long, excruciatingly delicious thrust, his body ached to take it to the next level. The animal within him wanted more than this slow joining.

He wanted to fuck.

He wanted to claim her as his.

Slick, wet, so damned hot, she incinerated him. Her rising arousal teased his ears, soft and needful and harsh with pleasure. This time they weren't in his mother's house, and they could take this to any level they wanted. He groaned, guttural and without remorse. He kept his movements measured, even though his heart felt like it would explode it pounded so hard, and his breathing went into overdrive. He settled his body lower onto hers, resting on his forearms so he wouldn't crush her into the couch. Even the idea of doing her on the couch fired him up. His hips wanted to pump and pump, his cock to fuck and fuck. Instead he didn't move. Just kept himself as far up inside her as he could. Her pussy squeezed him again.

"Jesus, sweetheart." No. He had to make this last. Bring her to an orgasm so shattering she'd never forget it. "Open your eyes. Watch us together."

She did, and he saw the surprise and the exposure. Her eyelashes fluttered. He drew



back so excruciatingly slowly he didn't think he could stand it. Her gaze burned into him and he realized that watching her like this turned him on even more. Jack didn't know if he could stand another minute, the arousal was so fucking profound.

He moved within her with long, slow strokes, and her body quivered. Yes. Fuck yes. She was going to come. God, he wanted to see her, wanted to witness the bliss racing over her face. Her gaze became unfocused, and he knew she'd fallen into sensation, blind with the rapture.

\*

Autumn shivered on the brink of orgasm, but the tight pulsation high inside her wouldn't hit the pinnacle. The slow thrust and drag of his cock along her sensitive tissues threatened to drive her mad. Though he'd asked her to watch them, she closed her eyes and gave into the feelings, trying to reach that incredible place hovering on the brink of explosion.

"Feel that, Autumn. Feel us."

Oh, she did. She did.

"Come on, sweetheart. Fuck me."

His words, solid with passion and raw with sex, drove her into motion. Her hips worked as he impaled her on his cock again and again. He groaned, he panted, his body reaching for the ultimate satisfaction.

"Jack, please. Oh, please. Harder. God, harder."

He gave in, grinding her pelvis against his as he drew back and surged into her with a dominant thrust. She cried out, the cross between whimper of surprise and stunned arousal sending him into a whirlpool of no return. He pistoned into her with strong, hard strokes.

She panted as her arousal jumped off the charts. He held her still for each jackhammer of merciless cock into soft, wet flesh.

He kissed her and filled her mouth with his tongue. One swift, hard stab deep inside her touched to her womb and set her off. *Yes. There. There.*

The tightness coiled deep within sprung apart. She shivered, convulsed as she groaned into his mouth. He didn't stop kissing her as she heaved into a cry, writhing beneath him in climax, hips moving as she worked herself on his cock. Her body clenched, gripped.

Jack fucked her through the orgasm, continuing his hard thrusts until a harsh, rasping cry left his throat. He shouted, an incoherent cry wrenched from somewhere deep in his gut and erupted inside her, filling her with his seed.

Autumn lay under his weight for only a few seconds. Before she could say a word, he left the couch and then reached down to lift her into his arms. She gave a cry of surprise and gratification. Jack headed toward the hallway, his strides certain and steady. She closed her eyes and put her head on his shoulder. A man had never carried her anywhere, never cradled her in his arms as if she was precious. She savored, with all her senses, the scent of sex, their harsher breaths, the muscles in his body.

When he laid her on something soft, she realized they'd entered his bedroom. Light filtered in from the hallway. The sight of him towering over her, all broad muscles and strength, fired her libido once more. She wanted, incredibly, to feel him within her right now.

Instead, he cuddled her to his side, their heads side by side on a pillow. They didn't

speaking, the silence a gentle, wonderful reminder of the lovemaking they'd shared. She reached up to touch his face, and he rolled toward her. In the dim light, she couldn't see much of his face. When she touched him, the five o'clock shadow under her fingers abraded her skin pleasantly.

He kissed her lightly, without hurry. She sank into his tenderness, content, and before long fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn woke lying on her right side, Jack spooned behind her. She opened her eyes and realized morning encroached, sending soft rays of light under and around the shades over the two windows in the bedroom. Day would intrude on the fantasy and reality would come too soon. She sighed, content. Jack moved, his body sliding against hers, his arms pulling her closer. Her heart picked up pace as one hand cupped her breast, his fingers plucking gently at her nipple.

His fingers slipped over her mons, then between her legs and pushed into soft folds already warm and moist. She moaned as one finger pumped and stroked, then he added another finger. His fingers dipped inside and then swirled moisture over her clit. She moaned and pushed her butt back into the cradle of his thighs. His hard cock nestled between her butt cheeks.

"Jack," she whispered.

Torture started this way, and she could tell he planned no mercy. He added a third finger to her pussy, and she clenched on his fingers.

His breath puffed in her ear, and he licked along her lobe. "Mmm, God, I want to fuck you."

His blunt statement fired her desire, and she turned over onto her back. "That sounds like an excellent plan."

She reached up for him and he levered himself slowly, so slowly down upon her. His hips lowered between her thighs, and as the cock head bumped her clit, she sucked in a sharp breath. His mouth found hers, and as his fierce kiss sent her into meltdown, she arched her hips against him in a wordless plea. Without pause, his hardness penetrated her wet depths. She sucked in a breath of heady satisfaction. This man got her wet instantly, something she'd never believed could happen to her. Full of him, surrounding his cock, she drove her hips upward. He gasped, then started to move. As he undulated, pushing with agonizingly slow thrusts that caressed a sensitive spot deep inside, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the ride. Emotions burst inside her, and she felt the tears coming before she could stop them. As they leaked from her eyes, he stopped.

"Jesus, Autumn. You all right? Am I hurting you?"

She opened her eyes, and as a soft sob left her throat, she cupped his face. "No. God, no. I just feel... I'm overwhelmed. You feel so good and this is so right, and I don't want it to ever end."

Scary words. Yet when he smiled and his hips started to move again, she saw a dawning understanding glow in his eyes. "You just said the magic words."

He dipped his head and licked her nipple, sucking hard as she raised her hips higher to give him better access. She welcomed him, begged him with every sobbing breath. A sharp, hard orgasm wrenched from her, fierce and sudden. She cried out.

Autumn felt Jack lose it, his hips hammering as he took her harder. He filled her with

agonizing pleasure that wouldn't ease, the climax rising and falling, a never ending ascent into her own perfect heaven. Suddenly he stiffened, a jagged cry leaving his throat. A hot stream filled her, then another and another as he panted and groaned and shivered.

When he collapsed on top of her, he grunted. "I'm dead."

She laughed, the giggle loud and definitely full of enjoyment. "And heavy."

"Sorry."

He rolled away, and when he gathered her into his arms, she felt a contentment so solid and true, she wondered how it could be possible. Warm, powerful man surrounded her, and the sensual feast she'd enjoyed for hours sank into her pores and refused to release her.

"Jack?"

"Mmm?"

"I've never... That was..."

He chuckled softly. "Hey, I think I like that. I've never made a woman speechless before."

She grinned, then plucked at his nipple until he sucked in a breath. "What I was trying to say is that I've never been so turned on in my life."

He pulled back to look into her eyes, and the serious expression in his eyes looked profound and important. "I think I like the sound of that, too." He pressed a quick kiss to her mouth. "You don't have to explain anything to me." He slipped his fingers into her hair again. "Come with me to Billings." His gaze remained filled with passion. With a soft brush of his lips, he tasted her again. "And if, while we're there, I manage to convince you that we should get naked together again, it'll be great."

"Get naked. How romantic."

He grinned. "It could be."

"Are you a romantic kind of guy, Jack?"

"Very. I'll prove it to you."

"You're so sweet."

He rolled his gaze to the ceiling. "There you go again, revealing my deepest, darkest secrets. Is that going to show up as a headline in the newspaper? Jack Dillon, sweetheart firefighter?"

She laughed and wiped away one tear as it escaped. "Not hardly."

Jack's hair had the bed-head effect. It might be styling, but it didn't fit him. She smiled and ran her hand through it to smooth down the tousled curls. "You're a mess. But I like you anyway."

He closed his eyes. "That feels great."

She had to leave before the husky, sexual cadence in his voice turned her to mush and she launched herself at him.

They finally left the bed, showered, and he offered her breakfast. But she knew she needed distance to decipher the heavy-duty feelings battering her from moment to moment. When she'd dressed and gathered her purse and coat, they stood at the front door.

He gathered her into his arms for a hug. "You're good for me."

Deep sincerity filled his voice, and she knew he meant every word. If he didn't stop being so nice, great ... incredible... No. She had to keep this whole thing in perspective. Jack was a great friend. A great man to fulfill sexual needs.

She needed to keep reminding herself of that.

She pulled back from his embrace. "Thanks for listening to my tales of woe."

He pressed a quick kiss to her nose. "And thanks for listening to mine."

"I'll let you know about Billings."

"Okay." Jack's expression held fierce longing. "Call me when you get home. I want to make sure you're all right."

"Will do."

"And you'd better be on your guard."

"Why?"

"Because even if you don't go with me to Billings, I'm letting you know right now that you're in trouble." His lips touched her nose, then lingered with the softest of touches against her lips. "I want you. And I'm pulling out all the stops to get you."

A strange thrill mixed with absolute unease, and she stepped closer to the door. "All the stops? What are you saying?"

"I'll try every dirty trick in the book." He gave her a sultry grin that turned predatory. "Whatever it takes to seduce you again."

*Run away. For now.*

"Jack, I've never seen this side of you before."

He put his hands on his hips, his look one hundred percent male and unrelenting. "I'm not the little boy you once knew."

"No kidding." She knew she had a silly grin on her face, but she couldn't stop it. "You're full of surprises."

With a wave, and a long, lingering look, she opened the door and left before the storm of mixed feelings inside her threatened to destroy all her carefully constructed distance.

\* \* \* \*

The Watcher saw Autumn leave Dillon's house.

"I should burn you," the Watcher hissed.

Tempted to turn the car toward Autumn and run her down in the street, the Watcher clutched the steering wheel with white knuckles. When Autumn fired the big SUV to life and wheeled it out onto the street and through snow, his temples ached with desire to follow. But, no. *Can't have that.* She might uncover his identity.

While Dillon and Autumn were in the house together, setting fire to the house had occurred to the Watcher. But no, it wouldn't work. Autumn would escape her punishment because Dillon would save her. The Watcher knew the man would fight to the death for her, and that made him sting with hatred for both of them.

The Watcher wanted satisfaction. Something slow and agonizing would be more appropriate. Too much time had passed since he'd seen flames and felt heat. Finding the next reason, the next need for fire came easily.

With a grin, the Watcher decided to take his time and plan the next burning so it was inescapable.

Dillon and Autumn would roast like chickens on a spit.

## Chapter Seventeen

Sunday morning dawned cold but clear, an inch of already melting snow on the ground. Autumn had finished dressing when someone knocked on her bedroom door.

“Autumn, it’s Bitsie.”

Autumn opened the door, and Bitsie held out a huge bouquet of flowers. Surprised, Autumn laughed. “I know you have to be under all that greenery somewhere.”

The older woman peeked around the large green vase of a dozen pink roses. Her grin looked mischievous. “This just arrived, and it sure isn’t for me.”

As she took the flowers, Autumn inhaled the rich fragrance with pleasure. “They’re beautiful. I can’t imagine who would send them, though.”

“I’m not telling.” Bitsie said and then grinned. “See you downstairs.”

When Bitsie left, Autumn put the vase on her dresser and then plucked the small envelope from the holder.

*To Autumn, from Jack.*

Anticipation zinged and popped in her body like champagne. Her heart beat faster. She slipped the little card from the envelope and read.

*Autumn,*

*I can’t wait to see you again.*

*Love,*

*Jack.*

“Love,” she whispered.

*Oh, Jack. Don’t.*

The thought Jack might be falling for her did strange things to her. She didn’t want it, couldn’t handle it. At the same time the incredible upsurge of excitement and tenderness inside her sent a riot of strong need through her. Toying with Jack’s emotions would hurt his feelings. Problem was, she didn’t know if she could trust her chaotic emotions.

She called his number to thank him but got the answering machine. “Jack, I got the flowers. They are so beautiful.” Her throat went dry and she paused. “Thanks again for the wonderful dinner last night, and the interview.” Then she did the most impulsive thing in her life. “I’ll go with you to Billings. Call me when you get a chance.”

\* \* \* \*

When Jack heard Autumn’s message on his machine later that morning, he almost shouted with triumph. He’d come in from a jog and needed a shower, but decided to call her first. He dialed her number, waiting impatiently as the phone rang.

Autumn. He almost groaned every time he thought of her. Kissing her, holding her, and making love to her had almost driven him crazy. Despite needing her so much he ached, the possibilities in their relationship scared the hell out of him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this uncertain and this excited at the same time.

His mother’s voice came over the line first, and after making small talk for a minute, she passed the phone to Autumn.

Jack felt so nervous he had to clear his dry throat before he could speak. "Hey, good morning."

"Jack." Her voice sounded a little breathy and reminded him of the way she'd uttered his name last night after her first orgasm. "You got my message."

"I'm glad you're going with me. I'll make reservations."

"Um ... could you hold on a minute? I want to take this upstairs."

"Jack?" Her voice came back on the line a few moments later. "Thanks again for the flowers. They're beautiful. I love them."

"You're welcome." Then a prickly thought came to his mind. "Hey, about the reservations. Should I make it for one room or two?"

She didn't say anything right away, and trepidation rose inside him. Shit. Had he said something wrong? Assumed something he shouldn't have? "I'm not trying to push you into anything."

"Yes, you are." Her voice sounded mildly chiding and amused. "Last night you said you would do what you could to—"

"Seduce you again." The words left his mouth in a rush. "I meant it." *Hell, go for it, Dillon. Tell her.* "If you haven't already figured it out, you're the most exciting, beautiful woman I've ever met and you're making me crazy. I want you with me in Billings. In my bed."

He thought he heard her suck in a tiny breath.

"Make it two rooms. That way if we're ... if we..."

"It's okay. I understand." Her hesitancy sent an arrow of unexpected unhappiness straight to his midsection. Fuck. He didn't like feeling like this. "I'll call Miranda Butterfield and make arrangements for the interview, then get back to you with a time and date." He sighed, unable to restrain his feelings. "Whatever you do, don't hold anything back from me. You don't have to be afraid."

"Thanks, Jack."

After they hung up, he slumped down on the bed and hung his head. He felt her pulling back, and it worried him more than he could say.

\* \* \* \*

"Great." Jack saw the television station vans sitting in the parking lot at the firehouse Tuesday, and his stress factor went up two hundred percent. "That does it."

Like a swarm of killer bees, the reporters had besieged his house Monday morning when he went out for a paper and a jog in the park. Dogging his heels, they'd peppered him with questions he didn't want to acknowledge and sometimes couldn't answer.

A reporter holding a pad and pencil jumped right into Jack's path as he left his car. "Mr. Dillon, can you tell us anything about the arson fires here in Clifton?"

Jack continued walking. "First of all, you asked me that question yesterday. Second, I'm not privy to that information."

Before the obnoxious, round man could step in front of Jack, Hank blocked the guy from entering the firehouse. "Sorry, restricted area."

Frowning, Jack continued into the firehouse. Chief Hallam slapped him on the back. "It seems like you've got a fine mess here, Dillon."

Although the tone of the Chief's voice remained calm and even, Jack saw tension in the man's eyes. He stopped at the stairs leading up to the dorm. "Sorry."

“It’s not your fault. They’re vultures looking for a place to land and feed. Ignore them and they’ll eventually go away when you don’t throw them any carrion.”

Jack grimaced. “Lovely picture.”

The Chief shrugged. “It’s worked before when we’ve had a reporter salivating around the station.”

Suddenly he wondered if the Chief counted Autumn among the hovering creatures. He hoped not. She’d been more than professional when she’d visited the station. He recalled the soft, sexy tone in her voice as she’d thanked him for the flowers. An ache started in his gut. Sure, she would go with him to Billings, but she couldn’t promise him anything else.

“Jack?”

His attention snapped back to the Chief. “Sorry, sir.”

“No sweat, Dillon. There’s a meeting in the conference room in ten minutes. The fire marshal gave me some information I think you guys should know about recent fires.”

Ten minutes later, Jack, Hank, Ray and other firefighters sequestered themselves in the small conference room. A few off-duty firefighters also attended.

“This is weird,” Hank said to Jack as he settled into a hard plastic chair next to his friend. “The fire marshal doesn’t do things this way.”

Jack frowned. “He does if he has bad news.”

Fire Marshal Harvard Jameson came to the front of the crowd. Instead of using the podium, he paced. “We have information on this string of arson fires that you all need to know now. Normally I’d keep a lid on this information, but leads are slim. At this point, it doesn’t hurt to give you particulars, but its close hold. None of what I tell you should leave this room. That means no spouses, girlfriends, or other friends and family should hear this. Got it?”

After a chorus of agreement and head nodding, Jameson continued. “The Arson Detection Team used Archie, our ignitable liquid detecting canine, to comb all the suspicious fires. In each case, Archie was used to find any indication of gasoline, kerosene, odorless lamp oil, lacquer thinner and lighter fluid. Everything indicates this arsonist is using different methods to start every fire. Obviously that’s unusual, but we think this arsonist is making a statement. Showing us he can escape detection. The number of arson-related fires in this town has risen to six in the last month and a half. The best evidence we have for arson occurred at the Top O’ the Morning Club. We know that was caused by a Molotov cocktail tossed through a bathroom window and through a storage room window nearby. In the case of the warehouse fires, we suspect the same. At this time, we don’t have fingerprints that are useable. We also don’t know if the arsonist or arsonists are local. Police have checked local hotels for suspicious activity, but nothing unusual has been reported.”

The fire marshal reached for his coffee mug and took a sip before continuing. “We have questioned suspects, but nothing conclusive has been drawn from those interviews. We do know, however, that the fires are somewhat sloppy. So we don’t think the person or persons starting the fires are of the super-intelligent variety. They do have enough brains not to leave significant evidence, so I’ll give them that. As you know, investigating arson can take months of meticulous work. We’re hoping you keep your eyes open and your ears to the ground. If another fire comes up, be sure you tell us if you see *anything* that could help the investigation. Questions?”

The room erupted in a buzz of conversation. The fire chief shushed everyone with a look and a call for quiet.

Jack had one question, motivated by his suspicions of the Mafia Boys. "It sounds like you're convinced there are two suspects?"

Jameson nodded, his eyes filled with regret. "Through reconstruction, burn patterns, and where the heat center was located, we believe these fires were not all started by the same person. The first few fires have the same pattern. Right after the fire at the nightclub, though, the pattern changes."

"You think they're working together?" Jack asked.

The fire marshal took a deep breath. "It's possible, but not one hundred percent confirmed. So, gentlemen, it looks like we have double trouble."

\* \* \* \*

Elliott walked out of his office, dark shadows under his eyes marring his usually bright and attentive appearance. Today he looked wary and fatigued. "Got a minute, Autumn?"

"Sure." She grabbed a notepad and followed him into his inner sanctum. "What's up?"

"We need more than the last story you wrote up on Dillon." Elliott closed the door and they sat down. "Besides, I thought your interview with him came across a little too soft soap."

Surprised and irritated, she leaned forward in her chair. "I wrote the story last week. If you had a problem with it then—"

"I know." He held up one hand. "I'll take the heat for that. But we need to keep new water running under the bridge."

Realizing the truth of his words, she eased back into her chair. She took a deep breath to relax her tense muscles.

"Don't you think we've squeezed as much out of this firefighter thing as we can?"

Elliott's eyes burned with new fervor. "No. We can still work this."

"Why?" She put her hands up. "Isn't this town more interesting than that? Clifton may be a very small city, but it has character and life beyond the fire department."

He let out a humorless bark of laughter. "Clifton is one boring, tame place most of the time and you know it. You left it years ago."

An ache started in her right temple, and she unclenched her jaw. "I left because my family was dead and there was nothing left for me here. I'd had about all the excitement I could take."

"So why did you come back?" His question came out soft.

"Running from a fresh pain back to an old one. I don't know. What does that have to do with the content of the Clifton Times?" Warming to her subject, she leaned on his desk. "We can do better than this, Elliott. All it takes is imagination."

"Imagination doesn't make feature stories."

"It does for some people."

"I thought you said you didn't make up stories."

Exasperated, she said, "Lies aren't required. Only a willingness to find the story where there doesn't seem to be one."

He pointed at her. "Bingo. What have I been saying?"



She looked at him a long time, trying to decipher his hooded gaze. "You want me to do the interview with Butterfield in Billings, too."

"That's right. It'll be our new story angle. You can write up a piece when you get back."

"Until we milk it dry."

"You're going with Dillon to Billings anyway." He said it as a statement rather than a question, a note of censure in his voice.

Autumn folded her hands in her lap, tension creeping up her spine and making her back ache. One deep breath, then another, didn't ease the tautness. He'd insulted her interview with Jack way after the fact, and the turn of events grated on her confidence. Then she straightened in the chair and met his stare without a flinch.

"We must keep the momentum going with these stories." He reached for a pencil and tapped against his desk blotter. "Things are starting to dry up. There hasn't been a fire in days."

"What do you want me to do? Start a fire myself?" The sarcasm in her voice surprised even her.

Elliott pinned her with a glare. "Headlines mean sales. That's the way it is."

"Not at the risk of integrity. I won't make up headlines that don't already exist."

"I didn't ask you to."

"Then what are you asking?"

Elliott shifted in his chair like a bear settling down for hibernation. "Do a story about the fire seventeen years ago."

"No." The emphatic syllable came out before she could even think.

"Autumn, you can get mileage out of this."

"You want me to include the blood-and-guts version of my parents' death?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Her palms dampened and her face went hot. "I won't make a paper selling headlines out of my parents' horrible death. The paper made plenty of money out of the story back when it happened."

Grim resolve spread over his face. He tossed his pencil on the desk and placed his palms on his desk. "You will if I order you to."

She felt the sucker punch deep in her psyche and in her gut. She wanted to leap over the desk and strangle him. She'd been wrong about Elliott in many ways, but apparently not about his willingness to do anything for a story. He would stoop to emotional blackmail to obtain what he wanted.

She stood. "I'm not giving you my parents' story because you order me."

Elliott's mouth tightened. "Autumn, you're treading a fine line."

"So fire me."

She slammed the door on the way out.

\* \* \* \*

In the afternoon, the bombarding noise of the claxon shot Jack straight upright on the cot and into action. He hadn't slept well, and the lack of rest made him feel like a snail.

Dispatch relayed information that an abandoned warehouse downtown was smoldering.

"Smoldering my ass," Hank said as he slid down the pole behind Jack. "Fully

involved by now.”

“What makes you say that?” Jack asked.

“You ever been to a fire around here lately that’s just smoldering?”

Within moments, two fire trucks peeled off into the street, sirens screaming.

Hank secured his helmet chinstrap and grinned at Jack. “Pedal to the metal!” Then he started singing an obnoxious tune.

Dan Caruso, the driver, laughed, then yelled above the siren, “If he wasn’t so ugly and didn’t sing so badly, I’d feel sorry for him.”

Hank glared at Caruso. “Let’s hear you sing.”

“Are you crazy?” Dan steered the long truck around a corner. “Do you want to hear dogs howling?”

Despite his assertion that he couldn’t sing, Dan belted out a few bars of a rock song. True to his word, it sounded horrible.

“You any relation to that opera singer Caruso?” Hank asked.

“Nope,” Caruso said. “If I could sing as well as he did, do you think I’d be a firefighter? Wanna hear another song?”

Voices rang out. “No!”

Art Leader, a Lieutenant and the chief’s aide, sat in the right front seat. “You guys are seriously ill, you know that?”

Jack glanced out the back window and caught sight of Ray riding the tiller position. As they headed around another corner, Ray steered the enormous vehicle’s backend like the pro he was.

They reached the fire location, and when the long truck came to a halt, it felt to Jack as if everything went into overdrive.

Dark smoke poured from the top floor of the abandoned three-story warehouse. While not particularly tall, the building was almost a block wide. The decrepit structure was set for demolition in a few weeks.

Men leapt from the engine, hurrying to don their self-contained breathing apparatus. A crowd formed around the perimeter, and police kept the onlookers from edging close to the action.

Chief Hallam directed the men. “Place is supposed to be empty, but someone saw a man lurking around the area earlier. Keep your eyes and ears open. The fire may or may not be contained to the top two floors; there’s already smoke on the lower floors. The building is probably unstable, so watch your back. We don’t know how long this bastard has been cooking.”

“Creepy building.” Hank gestured at the sprawling structure. “I’ve hated it since I was a kid. Looks like a damn haunted house.”

Firefighters on the aerial ladder sprayed the roof. Smoke poured from open holes in the dilapidated edifice.

Jack switched on the flashlight on his helmet and tugged on his leather gloves. He made a thumbs-up gesture to Ray as they took the lead on room-by-room inspection. They made their way through the front doors. White smoke mixed with dark, drifting down the narrow staircase leading to floors above. Hank and another firefighter brought the first hose in and started up the staircase. An additional hose line, buoyed by two firefighters, came in behind Jack and Ray.

Tendrils of smoke obscured the high ceiling of the old lobby. Ancient and hazardous,

the place looked like it would disintegrate any minute.

Jack and Ray directed their attention to sweeping the area. Eerie noises came to Jack's ears. It sounded like footsteps as firefighters worked the floors above. Odd creaking and rustling echoed as the structure groaned under the strain.

As they searched the area for victims, the building seemed to stretch forever. Scattered broken wood, garbage, and signs of human habitation peppered the floor. A half eaten hamburger, wrapped in fast food paper, caught Jack's attention. He tugged on Ray's sleeve and showed him the food. Maybe someone was here not long ago.

Weight seemed to press in from all sides. For once in his life Jack wished the flat-head axe and his breathing apparatus weighed less. Thirty pounds of air strapped to his back didn't feel like much until he mucked around in a fire. Jack cursed the blaze and considered what the arsonist used to launch this conflagration. Another Molotov cocktail, or as simple as matches and paper? A building filled with refuse would flare up nice and easy, brick or no brick. Jack cursed. Some of the oldest buildings in town were glued together with sand lime mortar. Enough water on this sucker and the walls could collapse. Jack occasionally glanced upward, paying attention-to-detail would save his life.

Realizing they'd searched for a long time, Jack glanced at Ray's shoulder harness gauge display that gave readout of air and mask pressure. Ray's readout looked fine, and when Ray looked at Jack's display, he gave a thumbs-up.

A loud crashing made Jack start, and they both swung toward a nearby door. Jack saw movement through the glass inset at the top, and they quickly made their way toward the door.

Jack crouched on one side of the door and tested it for heat. Nothing. He tried the door and found it locked. Ray rammed the glass with his Halligan tool, then stepped back as glass littered the floor. Ray reached inside and unlocked the door, and they surged inside. Jack used a wooden wedge to keep the door open.

In the small office, a young, scruffy man sprawled on the floor, covered in a wool jacket and fuzzy red ski cap. Half-conscious, the man flailed around in perhaps a drunken stupor. Jack reached down and hefted the individual into a standing position. As the man started to collapse, Ray propped up the young man on the other side.

Ray gestured toward the door. "Time to get this one out!"

Jack heard a loud cracking and looked upward. The ceiling bowed downward. Jack looked to the left as a new groaning noise filled the room. Smoke showed through the back wall, puffing and blowing in tiny rasps. The building looked like it was breathing.

Jack looked through Ray's facemask and saw dawning recognition on the other man's face. Ceiling collapse or backdraft—maybe even both.

*Shit, this is not good. Not good.*

Jack heard his breath rasping in the confines of his mask.

They headed for the door, dragging the man as fast as they could.

A roar raged above them, and everything went black.

## Chapter Eighteen

Autumn looked up from a historical novel that threatened to bore her into a coma. She wished she could keep her mind on the story and drift into another realm where nothing worried her. She'd left work that day certain she wouldn't return. Not if Elliott thought she would prostitute herself out for a story.

Bitsie watched a drama on the television and crocheted at the same time. The phone rang, and the sudden noise made Autumn jump.

Bitsie grabbed the phone and spoke into the receiver, her tone calm. Her face went glacial. "She's not interested in talking with you."

All the hairs on the back of Autumn's neck prickled. She looked outside at the darkening landscape and dropped her book on the floor in the process. She hated the creeping sensation of vulnerability, and shoved it back into the recesses of her mind with difficulty.

She snapped her attention back to Bitsie. "Who is it?"

Bitsie put her hand over the receiver and whispered back. "George."

"I'll talk to him."

Bitsie frowned but handed her the phone, then headed for the kitchen.

Autumn clenched the receiver. "What do you want, George? I could notify the police right—"

"But you won't."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because I have information you need."

"What kind of ridiculous garbage are you talking about?"

"Two things. One is for a story in the paper. I know who the arsonist is."

Curiosity overloaded her desire to hurl the phone against the wall.

*No, Autumn. The man is trying to suck you in. Back off.* "Talk to the police about it."

"No. I want you ... I want to tell you."

*I want you.* A shiver of revulsion skittered over her body.

Hang up. That's what she should do. "Why me?"

"Because you're a good reporter. I like that."

"Right. This coming from a male chauvinist pig of the first order."

"Male chauvinist pig?" He chuckled, and the sound came out jolly instead of angry.

"You gotta be kidding, baby. That phrase went out with the seventies. You know the new one?"

"No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Yeah, the new one is cock-suckin' bastard."

His word choice silenced her for a few seconds. "I imagine you get called that frequently."

Apparently, the insult went right over his head. "So are you willing to interview me or not?"

"Not."

She could almost feel the heat of his anger, rising to a slow boil. "You'll wish you had the information I've got."

“You don’t even like me, George. Why would you want to give me information about an arsonist?”

His voice turned soft. “You don’t get it, do you? I do like you. A lot. I’m trying to save you from making a big mistake with Dillon. Before you get hurt.”

“Nothing Jack could do would hurt me.”

“No, I mean you’ll be hurt when he’s gone.”

Again, her skin prickled. She leaned back against the couch and wished the conversation would disappear like a bad dream upon waking. “What are you talking about? What do you mean?”

A soft chuckle drifted across the line. “When he’s gone you’ll wish you’d been nice to me.”

She should hang up on the toad, but she wanted to know his plans for Jack. “I’ll bite. Tell me about the arsonist.”

“We gotta meet. None of this over-the-phone crap.”

Fury crept through Autumn’s system like an overdose, swamping her with a hatred she wished she knew how to control. Fueled by the fact she’d allowed him to unsettle her, she let it rip.

“If you’re insane enough to think I’ll go for that, then you are a dumb bastard, George.” She slammed the phone back into the receiver.

Bitsie had muted the television, and Autumn looked at the screen without seeing anything. A few seconds later, the newscast came on and a picture of a burning building appeared. A weird sensation, like someone had slipped a feather up her spine, trickled along her skin.

She reached for the remote and turned on the sound again. “Not another fire.”

Bitsie walked into the room. “What’s happening?”

The newsreader’s voice came loud and clear. “This was the scene at the old Doncaster building at Twelfth and Parkway a few minutes ago. Firefighters were in the building when there was a devastating roof collapse. Several firefighters are trapped and it is not known whether they are dead or alive. In the meantime, other firefighters struggle to put out the fire and keep it away from the trapped men. It is suspected this fire is the work of the serial arsonist plaguing the city for the last several weeks.”

Autumn looked up at Bitsie, growing fear burning her insides like acid. “Bitsie.”

Bitsie sagged onto the couch, her mouth open slightly. “Oh, my God. Jack.”

He might be one of the men in the rubble—

No.

Autumn reached for Bitsie’s arm and pulled her up. “We’re going down there. Now.”

\* \* \* \*

Jack gasped, struggling for air. His ribs ached; something had hit him in the head, and he wanted to swear a blue streak. If he’d cracked a rib for real this time, he was going to be pissed.

Natural instinct was to panic, to give in to the terror of the moment. Instead, his training kicked into gear.

*Partial collapse. Gotta escape. Fast.*

Weight pressed down on him. He thrashed his arms and legs, moving junk off his

body. He sucked in a breath and realized the hose on his breathing apparatus had been twisted or damaged. He lowered his breathing rate and tried to calm down. As new adrenaline surged, his heart banged in his chest. Jack heard coughing and wondered for a second if the sound belonged to him. He opened his eyes. Light filtered through the mess a few feet above him, and relief made him moan softly. Not only had he survived the collapse, it didn't appear as if tons of debris covered him. As his mind cleared, other precautions won out.

He'd survived because the entire roof hadn't come down. He didn't think they'd crashed into the basement, either, but he couldn't be sure.

The rest of the building could fall any minute.

He didn't see smoke and thought about taking off his mask altogether. Common sense nixed the idea in a heartbeat.

*Must get air.* He lifted his head and turned on his right side and a fresh supply of air entered his mask. He took a deep breath with relief. His breathing hose must be intact. A shrill, whining filled his ears and he recognized the sound as his Personal Alert Safety System (PASS) attached to the breathing apparatus. Good. Rescue would know where to find him if he couldn't make it out on his own. Then he heard another PASS wailing and realized it must be Ray's device. It didn't sound too far away.

"Ray? Hey, man, can you hear me?"

"Jack?"

Although Ray's voice sounded muffled, Jack was relieved. He almost had enough room to stand upright. He groaned as he moved, muscles protesting. A wave of nausea made him pause, and he closed his eyes as dizziness washed over him.

He fought back the sick feeling. Wooziness and nausea could be from a concussion, even though he hadn't passed out. He pushed through the rubble. They were lucky to be alive.

When the building started collapsing he'd felt bricks, boards, and other debris hit him, and he threw his body over the young homeless man. Somehow Jack had been tossed away from the homeless guy.

Ray's hand appeared from beneath a bunch of boards and some masonry wall. "Get me the hell out of here. My leg is killing me."

"Is it broken?" Jack hurried, tossing wreckage aside as fast as he could, concern propelling his actions. "Don't move."

"Nah, it isn't broken. It's twisted under me. Where's the kid?"

"I don't see him. Must be—" He touched another hand, this one without a leather working glove. "—here." He stripped off his glove and felt for the man's pulse. "He's alive. We need to free him. This place is going to go any second."

Ray struggled out from under the rubble, and his helmet sat on his head at a crooked angle. "Look at that. I can see the light."

Leave it up to Ray to crack jokes even in the face of danger.

They worked feverishly to pull the homeless man from the debris. A few moments later they heard shouts and someone calling their names.

"We're here!" Jack's air gave out on his tank and he ripped the mask off his head. The PASS continued to scream. "Here!"

Residual smoke wafted across Jack's face and he coughed. Again, dizziness made him put his hand to his stomach.

“You all right?” Ray looked at Jack with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You need air, damn it.”

Jack coughed again. “They’ll have us out in a moment.”

He knew ‘a moment’ was optimistic. It would take one hell of a lot of digging to rescue them and do it safely. As rescuers burrowed through debris, they’d have to shore up the hole. Any minute this entire place could crumble and they’d be toast.

They’d lost their axes and Halligans during the collapse, so any digging they did from this side would be with their hands.

“Which direction is rescue coming from?” Ray asked.

Jack listened for several seconds, but couldn’t tell. “I don’t know.”

Ray nodded. “I can barely tell which way is up.”

Exasperated with his own disorientation, Jack checked on the homeless man again. Although the guy remained unconscious, nothing more serious seemed to be wrong with him.

Eternity passed as Jack heard rescue coming closer. “They’re almost here. It must not be as bad as I thought.”

Ray’s tank gave its last gasp, and he took off the mask. “Shit! We gotta get out of here.”

Noises of rescue, clanking, cracking and debris shifting came to their ears. Periodically voices from the rescuers reached them, begging Jack and Ray to continue calling out. It seemed as if they’d been yelling for help for at least a half hour.

Part of the building above them groaned.

Ray looked up. “Fuck me.”

Jack tensed in preparation in case the whole place came down on them. Sadness ached like a wound inside him. If he didn’t see Autumn again—

*No. You are getting out of here alive.*

Light appeared through a growing hole several feet away. Relief renewed Jack’s strength.

A firefighter on his hands and knees peered into their subterranean cave. “Hey, you guys all right?”

Ray grinned. “Hell, are we glad to see you.”

“Send in a Stokes basket,” Jack said, his heart picking up speed. “We’ve got an injured man.”

Minutes later they strapped the homeless man into a c-collar, head supports, backboard, and litter, then hauled him through the hole. Jack and Ray edged their way into the opening behind the homeless person and crawled over the rubble on hands and knees. Jack’s turnout gear isolated him from broken glass and nails, but he knew he would have plenty of bruises and scrapes from the initial fall to make up for it.

Halfway down the shored up tunnel an ominous groaning filled the air.

“Hurry. Hurry!” someone yelled from outside.

Ray picked up speed, Jack right behind him. Jack could hear their breaths rasping in the confined space.

To Jack, time seemed to slow down for an agonizing second. Inside his head, a little voice screeched. *Get out. Get out. Get out!*

Moments after Jack slid through the hole to safety and fell into the arms of waiting

firefighters, the escape route closed up with a shifting and creaking collapse. Dust and debris flew everywhere as the firefighters holding Jack and Ray rushed them away from the collapsed area.

Jack turned toward the smoking mass that constituted half the building.

Sudden realization cold cocked Jack. "Where is Hank?"

Ray looked around. "Don't see any sign of him."

Jack's stomach lurched and he put his hand to his midsection. He coughed. "Damn it! Is he still in there?"

Jack started forward when Chief Hallam grabbed his shoulder and hauled him back. "Where do you think you're going? You need medical attention."

"I'm all right, Chief." His voice sounded raspy, roughened by smoke

"Yeah, right," the Chief said, doubt heavy in his voice. "There's blood on your face, and you're too pale."

Ray grabbed Jack's other shoulder. "Easy, Jack. I don't know about you, but I got the shit kicked out of me, and it feels like it, too."

With a sinking feeling settling deep in his stomach, Jack wavered, lightheaded. "I think I sucked in some smoke, but it's no big deal. How many guys from the house are stuck in there?"

"Four. Dupre, Montebello, Caruso and Hank," the Chief said.

While the fire appeared to be out, if the men stayed under that rubble, they ran the risk of suffocation and crush injury. Possibly death. He wouldn't leave Hank to suffer such a fate.

He stepped forward again, resolve making him forget everything but rescuing his best friend. Instead, his knees wobbled, and he stopped cold. Nausea rippled through him again. *Fuck*. He felt sick.

A paramedic came out of nowhere and clasped Jack's arm. "Hey, you're not looking too good. Come over here and sit down."

Jack started to pull away. "I'm fine. I need to help the guys."

The Chief looked at him intently, as if trying to impress something on him. "You and Ray were in that pile for twenty minutes, Jack. You sucked in smoke, and you may be more badly injured than you realize."

A wave of dizziness hit Jack, and he put his hand to his forehead to try to keep his entire head from falling off.

"Oh, hell." Jack realized he must be in shock, for now everything that hadn't hurt two minutes before started to smart like a son-of-a-bitch. He trembled.

The paramedic hadn't released him. "Exactly."

Two paramedics looped Jack's arms over their shoulders and walked him to an ambulance.

\* \* \* \*

*Please. Please. Please let Jack be all right.*

The litany ran through Autumn's head as Bitsie drove downtown. Her heart wouldn't stop thumping a painful race filled with worry.

"Jack's fine," she said to reassure them both.

"I know." Bitsie's brow creased with a frown. "Jack's a crackerjack firefighter. He'll be fine."



Autumn could see the smoke floating over the area, but it looked light. "They must have a handle on the fire."

They arrived at the site, and when they piled out of the car, Autumn looked through the crowd to the destruction. The front left side of the building had crumbled, while the rest remained intact. Steam and smoke drifted upward as firefighters trained hoses on the area near the collapse. Scents filled the air; smoke and water. Fear possessed an aroma, Autumn knew, and it clung to the area like a bad nightmare.

Autumn's gaze darted around the area as she looked for any sign of Jack. Worry sliced her. "I don't see him."

Bitsie clasped her hand and they squeezed their fingers together in mutual anxiety.

"He'll be fine." Bitsie sounded certain. "Don't worry."

"How can you be so sure?" The words sounded whining and desperate to Autumn's own ears, and she wished she hadn't said them. "I'm sorry, that sounded ... I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm thinking."

Bitsie released her hand and patted her shoulder, her gaze showing remarkable calm for the situation. "It's all right."

Was it? She hadn't expected Bitsie's strength. When Autumn returned to Clifton, she figured she still owned resolve and guts, and now she felt her foundation crumbling. She may have lost her job, and now she could lose Jack. But the woman beside her faced similar horrors in her years as the wife of a firefighter. Autumn wondered if she could ever be as tough. If a woman loved a firefighter, she would have to be that strong or lose her marriage to apprehension.

Her heart froze, a deep Arctic cold she thought would never leave her.

Not knowing bombarded her with mind-numbing worry. Autumn's distress paralyzed her breath and held her hostage.

Oh, God. She couldn't fall in love with him. She couldn't survive the pain it would cause.

Bitsie moved toward the police officers holding back the crowd. "Let's talk to Chief Hallam."

Bitsie waved at the Chief, and he headed toward her at a quick pace. His reassuring smile surprised Autumn, and she held her breath.

He stopped near them and smiled again. "It's all right, ladies. Jack's at that ambulance getting a quick check over."

Profound relief caused tears to surge to Autumn's eyes. She couldn't say a word.

Bitsie grabbed his arm. "Are you sure he's all right?"

The Chief nodded as he removed his helmet and mopped his forehead with his sleeve. "He might have a mild concussion. We're sending him to the hospital anyway to make sure he doesn't have additional injuries. Not that he wants to leave here. You know how Jack is. Stubborn as hell."

Bitsie's returning smile held a tremor. "That's what makes him so strong. I think he inherited that from his father."

"Are there others trapped?" Autumn asked.

The Chief nodded. "The collapse unit is working to reach them."

Autumn stared at the smoldering rubble with growing urgency. "I don't see Hank. He's in there, isn't he?"

The Chief looked grim. "He's one of the missing."

Bitsie chewed her bottom lip. "Jack must be frantic. If anything happens to Hank..." She didn't need to say another word.

\* \* \* \*

Jack and Ray sat side by side at the opening to an ambulance. A young female paramedic examined Ray, while another one examined Jack. Jack sucked in a deep breath, savoring the oxygen flowing into his lungs from the mask over his face.

Ray pulled the mask off his face. "We'll find them, Jack."

"Yeah." Jack still wanted to throw off medical attention and plunge into the search. The desire ate at him until he wanted to scream. "And as soon as they're done with us here, I'm going back inside."

The burly paramedic fastened a blood pressure cuff to Jack's arm. "Not so fast, Cochise." You're not going anywhere."

Jack gritted his teeth and threw a frown at Ray. Ray waggled his eyebrows and attempted a smile. Then he went entirely white as he groaned.

Jack yanked off his mask. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Ray blinked. "Think the adrenaline is wearing off. I didn't feel it until right now. Feels like I've got a broken rib."

The female paramedic gave Ray a troubled glance. "We have to transport him to the hospital ASAP."

Her partner nodded. "Let's roll."

Jack's body throbbed with a hundred bruises, and he knew he'd ache like hell tomorrow. He placated himself by remembering that in two days, he'd be with Autumn in Billings and nothing would stop him from having more serious face time with her.

Except maybe for Hank. Jack's eyes welled with tears and he couldn't tell if leftover irritation from smoke caused it, or if he wanted to bawl like a baby for Hank and the other men trapped under the rubble.

If Hank was dead—

*I won't think about it.*

Jack peered around the site of the ambulance and saw his mom and Autumn standing in the crowd.

Chief Hallam shouted more instructions to the searchers and the men hosing down the smoldering structure, then turned to Jack. "Bitsie and Autumn are around the corner. They're worried as hell."

Jack nodded and winced as his whole body protested. He wanted to rush to his mom and Autumn and hold them both close. He pulled away from the paramedic and looked around the side of the ambulance again. If they needed reassurance, he'd give it to them. When he waved at them, they smiled and waved back frantically.

"Okay, let's get you to the hospital." The big paramedic grabbed his arm again.

"Tell them I'll meet them at the hospital." Jack said. "Chief, find Hank and the other guys." He swallowed hard. "If anything's happened to them..."

Chief Hallam pressed Jack's arm. "We'll find them. Load 'em up."

The Chief headed toward the rubble.

Jack's head started to pound at the same time another wave of nausea made him wince. They'll find them. But will they be alive?

He sucked in a sharp breath at the thought of cocky, happy Hank dying under that

debris.

Jack allowed the paramedics to perform their job, knowing from his training they did their work well. Strapped into the ambulance alongside Ray, he closed his eyes and permitted oxygen to clear his lungs. Raw and aching, his emotions seemed to override his professionalism for the first time in his life. He wanted to scream against the unfairness and the fact some unholy bastard had set this fire and put them all in harm's way.

But more than anything, he wanted Autumn's arms around him, and his fellow firefighters alive.

\* \* \* \*

"You go first, darling." Bitsie strode down the hospital corridor with Autumn. "He'll want to see you."

"But he'll want to see you, too." Autumn wondered why his mother seemed reluctant to see Jack.

Bitsie's eyes watered. "I ... Jack's father died in a hospital room not long after they brought him in that night."

*How could I forget?*

Firefighters had managed to pull Jack's father from the house the night her parents died. It hadn't mattered in the end. Mr. Dillon's lungs were seared by fire and he lasted less than three hours. As memory resurrected, cold fear settled over Autumn.

"Jack's not like that. The doctors said—"

"I know. I need a little time. I'll stand out here."

She squeezed Bitsie's arm, hoping to reassure. "Of course."

Autumn's insides trembled as she entered the semi-private room where Jack lay. His eyes were closed. Pale and looking beat, he lay with his arms straight out at his sides. Much to her surprise, only a small bruise on his jaw marred his face. Unguarded emotions ripped into her like a knife, and she waited at the threshold.

Jack's eyes popped open, and as a brilliant smile lit up his face, he held his hand out to her. "Hi."

She walked farther into the room and reached for his proffered hand. She held it tightly.

"Hey," he whispered softly when she didn't speak. "What's wrong?"

She swallowed hard, then took the plunge. She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "For a man who had most of a building fall on him, you look really good."

He laughed, then winced. "Don't make me laugh."

"You're all right, though. They said you have a minor concussion and some bruises. Some strained muscles."

"Yeah." He grinned. "That's why I think they should let me out of here."

"No way. If I had to stay in the hospital after the fire at Top O' the Morning, you have to stay until they make sure you're in one piece."

He nodded, then the good humor left his eyes. He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed her fingers. "Any word on Hank?"

She'd dreaded this with everything in her heart.

*Blurt it out. Say it now before you lose your nerve.* "They found them all not too long after the ambulance took you away."

When she didn't say anything more, his expression grew hard. "Tell me."

“Caruso was unconscious and they’re not sure yet. He doesn’t appear to have anything else wrong with him, but he hasn’t regained consciousness. Montebello and Dupre were wide awake when they found them. Their shouting led the rescuers to them.” She paused. “Hank is ... he’s in bad shape, Jack.”

He closed his eyes, and if it were possible, he grew paler. She clasped his hand in both of hers and leaned over to press another kiss to his forehead.

“How—” His voice cracked. “How bad?”

“Severe concussion, broken ribs, a torn shoulder, ligament damage in his legs. No internal injuries. It’s the head injury they’re worried about. Ginger is with him right now. Jack, she looks horrible. I’ve never seen a woman look so torn up. If I didn’t know it before, I know it now. She’s in love with Hank. I think love will bring him out of it.”

Jack nodded but stayed quiet.

“Jack, the men are alive. That’s all that matters.”

His fingers pressed hers once more. “A miracle.” Anger tightened his features. “I’m going to beat the ever living shit out of the son of a bitch that did this to them. This is the final straw.”

“Easy.” She brushed her hand over his forearm, trying to calm him with her caress. “You need rest. Don’t get so worked up.”

“Don’t tell me not to be angry.” His eyes glittered. “My best friend was almost killed. All because some ass gets his rocks off starting fires. You were almost killed in that nightclub. I’ll find out who it is if it’s the last thing I do.”

His distress battered against her nerves. She eased away, and her fingers slipped from his grip. “I know you’re worried. Your mother is out there right now fighting back her fear. You know what she’s remembering? Your father lying in bed like this, dying. Barely hanging by a thread and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it.” Tears escaped and made trails down her cheek. “I’m standing here feeling pretty helpless and wondering what I can do to catch the person responsible for putting you in this bed.”

She started to turn away, but his soft voice stopped her. “Hey, wait.”

She turned toward him, reluctant to let him see her tears. “What is it, Dillon? You want to shout a little more?”

A soft, weary smile touched his lips. “Was I shouting?”

“Almost.”

He held his hand out again, and she took it. “I’m sorry. You understand better than anyone how I feel, don’t you?”

She nodded and more tears rolled down her face. This time she didn’t try to brush them away.

“Are those tears for me?” His voice held a note of awe and disbelief. “God, Autumn.”

“They’re from fear and anger. When I heard about the building collapse you can’t imagine the horrible images that ran through my head.” She closed her eyes and tried to banish the lingering fear, but it rose higher, battering her like high waves against a beach. “There’s something else. Something I must tell the police.”

His brow furrowed. “What is it?”

She told him about her phone conversation with George. She didn’t want to give Jack more to agonize about, but knew he wanted the truth. “What if he’s the one starting the fires?”

For a full minute, he stared at the ceiling in apparent deep thought. "I can see he might be the type. I'm not sure if the conversation you had with him would make much difference to the police, though. There's got to be more evidence."

"I wouldn't feel right if I didn't tell them what he said to me. Maybe he started this fire to harm you."

"There are a lot of easier ways to kill a guy than hoping he'll enter a building that you've set on fire."

Exasperation made her sigh. "Maybe if he wasn't trying to kill you specifically, he was trying to kill any firefighters he could."

"Yeah, you're right. If you think it might help, I say tell the police."

"I will. I'm not sure if they'll listen, though. Something else happened while you were unconscious."

"What?"

"I heard the Mafia Boys have been taken in for questioning. Seems they were at the scene of most of the fires."

He nodded. "So maybe they accosted you at the bowling alley because they figured your photographs were evidence against them."

"Exactly."

Jack rubbed a hand over his face. "Man. This is getting weirder by the minute." He tugged her closer to the bed and whispered, "Come here."

Her eyebrows went up in question, but then she understood when he pulled her down so short inches kept them apart. He buried his hand in her hair. Without another word or preliminaries, Jack smothered her mouth with his. Warm sparkles of pure bliss radiated from where they joined. She might have expected a tender kiss, but he took her mouth with voracious hunger. His fingers kneaded her scalp and tangled in her hair. She returned his embrace with abandon, willing for once to let her guard down. Even in the midst of her worries, his kiss made her hot with need.

When he released her, Autumn saw the passion and promise in his eyes. "I think you *are* well enough to leave the hospital, if that kiss is any indication."

He winked. "There's more where that came from. I can't wait to get out of here and show you."

Someone cleared their throat.

Bitsie stood at the doorway, her smile warm and full of happiness. "May I come in? Or am I interrupting something?"

Autumn watched with joy as Bitsie entered the room and smothered her son in hugs and kisses.

## Chapter Nineteen

“Jack?”

A warm, seductive voice woke Jack from a fitful slumber filled with smoke, fire, and anxiety. Sensations slipped through the haze in his brain, bringing him closer to the surface. He broke through, happy that Autumn had returned.

“Jack?”

He opened his eyes and looked into Cherry’s concerned expression. Disappointment filled him. “Cherry.”

She clasped his forearm, and he shifted under her grip. Pain throbbed in his head. He felt dead tired. With the nurse waking him up every hour, he thought he’d never sleep again.

“I’m so glad you’re awake.” Cherry smiled, sparkling and genuine. “I was worried.”

He glanced at his watch on the bed stand. “It’s almost the end of visiting hours.”

Again, she added a smile to her words. “I waited until Bitsie and Autumn left. I’m not sure they’d appreciate me being here.”

Awkward silence entered the room, and Jack decided he didn’t want to contribute to the uneasiness. “Why are you here?”

She patted his arm. “Because I’m worried, of course.”

He gave her a weak smile. “Thanks. I appreciate the concern.”

Her eyes looked sad. “Is that all? You just appreciate my concern? You’re not happy to see me?”

He scrubbed his hand over his stubbled jaw. What the hell could he say to her?

Before he could answer, she said, “I heard you and Autumn are going to Billings.”

He heard slight scorn in her voice, and his patience ran low. “Yes.”

Her expression stayed solemn.

“Then maybe you also heard I told George to leave Autumn alone,” he said.

“I tried that, too, but he won’t listen to me.”

“Why am I having trouble believing that?”

Her eyes turned hard with anger. “I don’t know. I’ve always been honest with you, Jack.”

“Right.” While he didn’t believe her, he had more questions. “Why are you with him?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Hanging out with him is bad news, Cherry.”

Cherry’s expressive features turned into ice. “Autumn has you by the throat. She has you believing that she’s lily white—”

“Cherry, give up the dramatics. I don’t know why or how you obtained this insane jealousy, and maybe that doesn’t matter. You can’t make me dislike Autumn, okay? She’s not perfect, but then neither am I. No one is. What I do know is that her welfare matters to me more than anyone or anything.”

Jack heard the words coming from his mouth and the statement documented the truth in his mind once and for all.

Cherry clasped her hands and looked down at them, lips compressed. “Why are you

telling me this?"

"Because anything that might harm her is my concern. If that means making sure Beckett isn't within twenty miles of her, so be it. If it means you trying to undermine her in any way, then you've made an enemy of me."

Her head snapped up as she gazed at him with round, startled eyes. "Jack, please don't say that. You know how I feel about you." She stuttered. "I've always wanted a man like you."

What more could he say to convince her? "I'm telling the truth. There will never be a romantic relationship between us, Cherry. Never."

Tears filled her eyes and poured onto her cheeks. Before he could make another comment, she left the room.

He stared at the ceiling for a long time, wondering at the abrupt change from confident woman to tearful and defeated. He didn't want to hurt her, but it seemed the direct approach may have worked.

It took long minutes, but finally he put aside his worry and fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Jack took Ginger into his arms, hugging the woman who loved Hank down to the bone. Ginger shivered and sniffed, and Jack felt her anguish. His heart squeezed in his chest as he released her.

Ginger brushed away a tear and smothered a sob, her red eyes clear indication she'd spent considerable time crying.

Autumn hugged her friend and murmured reassurances. Ray stood on the other side of Hank's bed. He shifted slightly and winced, evidence his broken rib wasn't something he'd forget soon.

Jack hated seeing Hank, a man with so much life and strength, lying silent and still. The finality of the pose sent a shiver over Jack's skin.

Autumn held Ginger at arm's length and smiled. "Hank won't give up on us."

"He hasn't opened his eyes," Ginger looked at Jack and then Autumn. "Not once."

"Hey, you tough bastard, wake up." Ray pressed Hank's shoulder. "Your woman is here and she needs you."

"That should do it." Ginger let out a soft laugh, her features lightening with the humor. "He's right, Hank. I need you, and I don't mind who knows it." She turned her gaze toward the window. "I need him to wake up so I can tell him I want to marry him."

Jack's heart clenched again. He'd never seen a woman so broken up over a man and willing to show her emotions. Would Autumn feel that way about him if he lay in this bed, clinging to life?

"He's holding his own." Autumn handed Ginger a new tissue.

Ginger wadded the tissue in her hand and sniffed. "I know. You never think ... you never know how something will affect you until it happens. I didn't realize how much I loved this man until he was almost taken from me."

Silence reigned for several moments before Ginger turned her gaze on Jack and Ray. "I'm surprised they let you two out of bed."

Jack held his hands out and looked down at the sweater and jeans his mother had brought him. "I'm outta here. One night is all they get."

"You know the old saying." Ray winked. "Can't keep a good man down."

Ginger smiled grimly. "Is that right? Well, give this big hulk some of your strength, will you?"

Jack's throat clogged with emotion he couldn't define. When the words left his lips, they sounded hoarse. "You bet."

Ginger sat on a chair near Hank's bed and clasped his hand in both of hers. "Are you two still going to Billings this weekend?"

Jack shook his head emphatically. "No way. I'm not going anywhere with Hank like this."

"I think you should." Ginger's affirmative tone and assertion took Autumn by surprise.

"Why?" Autumn asked.

"Because Hank would want you to."

Jack frowned. "It's a radio show. It's not more important than Hank's well being."

Ginger returned their serious gazes with one of her own. "I realize that. But you know if Hank was awake right now he'd say you two should go. Maybe your interviews can help catch the creep creating all this carnage and destruction."

Jack paced a little, looking out the window and then back to Hank's bed. "How?"

Ginger's face took on a grim veneer. "By forcing him into the open."

"Now that's an idea," Ray said.

Autumn didn't know if she agreed, but when Jack's face lit up with enthusiasm for the idea, she asked him, "Do you think it could help?"

Jack pushed the sleeves of his sweater up to his elbows, like a fighter preparing to rumble. "It just might."

Ginger nodded, her voice filled with certainty. "He'd want you to do it. He won't be alone. I'm not leaving him until he wakes up."

"I'll check up on him, too," Ray said.

Autumn patted Ginger on the back. "Please take care of yourself."

Ginger waved a hand in dismissal. "Don't worry about me. Hank is getting well, and you guys catching that repulsive piece of tripe that's setting these fires ... that's what is important."

Jack turned to his fallen friend and made a vow. "I will find out who is responsible for this, Hank. I swear."

\* \* \* \*

Autumn strode into the house later that day in time to grab the ringing phone. When she answered she heard a familiar voice.

"Autumn, this is Elliott." He sounded calm and not in the least angry. "How is Dillon?"

Surprised, she dumped her handbag on the couch. "He's well." She described his injuries, then gave him the lowdown on Hank and the other men.

"No change on Hank, eh? That's a damn shame. I hope he wakes up soon. I've given Ginger as much time off as she requires."

A little taken aback at his sensitivity, she acknowledged it. "That's great."

"I called for another reason, too."

She sank onto the couch and stared out the window at the fresh snow falling. "I'm not coming back, Elliott. Not if it means I have to leave my integrity behind."



"I know. I know." He sighed. "Look, I was wrong. It took me all last night thinking about it to realize I had no right to push you. Are you and Dillon still going to Billings?"

"We're making a decision later tonight. Jack is reluctant to leave Hank."

"I can understand that. I could contact Miranda Butterfield and cancel if you need help."

"I'll do it if the time comes."

An awkward pause came until he said, "If you want your job, Autumn, I want you back. You're the best reporter I've got."

Considering her options, she knew she'd been reckless dumping the job without another on hand. At the same time, could she feel good about herself if she worked for this man? Until she could return to a smoke jumper position, she couldn't afford not to work. She should go with her gut, and her intuition told her Elliott had learned his lesson.

She brushed hair away from her face, willing tension out of her muscles as she sank back onto the couch. Her body felt wired to the max after the events of the last twenty-four hours.

"All right. I'll be back on the job if and when I go to Billings."

Elliott let out an uncharacteristic whoop. "Great news. By the way, you heard about Geraldo and Roman being questioned by the police?"

"Yes. Anything new on that? I haven't heard anything additional on TV."

"The police apparently couldn't nail anything on them. I wouldn't put it past them to have started the fires, but maybe they aren't so dumb after all if they can hide the evidence."

"Maybe," she said doubtfully.

"Anyway, I'll talk to you when you come back to work."

She returned to her room and collapsed on the bed. She considered calling Jack. After she'd dropped him off at the firehouse, he said he would drive back to his condo and take a nap. She'd worried about him all day and discovered she couldn't read a book or relax, despite her fatigue. On impulse, she grabbed her phone.

He answered on the third ring. "Hey."

She wished she could slide her arms around him right now. "How are you?"

"I'm worried about Hank. I'm heading over to the hospital again later."

"Good. On another note, we need to talk about this weekend thing in Billings. I think we should go."

"I agree."

Surprised into silence for a moment, she finally said, "I'm a little amazed it was that easy to convince you."

She heard a chair squeak on the other end. "I've got several motivations. Number one, I want the break away from this flaming town."

She smiled, then laughed softly. "I'm right there with you."

"Two, these arson cases feel like one endless round of FUBAR."

"I've heard of that term before, but the meaning escapes me at the moment."

"Fucked up beyond all recognition." He grinned. "Fudged up if you want to be G rated."

She laughed. "I figured it was something like that."

"Number three, I'd like some time alone with you."

"Are you sure?"

“Of course I’m sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She shrugged even though she knew he couldn’t see her. Her right hand made an expansive gesture. “Because there’s so much happening. I don’t know if this is a good time to try and define our relationship.”

“Look, I care about you more than any woman I’ve ever known, Autumn MacAllister. If that isn’t a definition, then I don’t know what is.” She heard him dump ice into a glass. “Four, I want to help nail this fire-breathing jerk. Tracking this arsonist is the business of the fire marshal, but if I can do anything to help bring the perp to justice, I’ll do it. I just got off the phone with the fire marshal and the sheriff’s department. They’re still suspicious of the Mafia Boys, so they’re keeping an eye on them.”

She sat up straighter, apprehension mixing with her curiosity. “Oh? And how are you helping the police nail the arsonist?”

“It’s nothing dangerous.”

“Jack, tell me or I’ll come over there and strip skin off your hide.”

“Oh, man, that sounds painful.”

“It will be. Now fess up.”

“I simply asked them if they’d considered checking into George’s background. His military history in Germany. Were there any suspicious fires nearby where he was stationed, for example? They wouldn’t say if they’d looked into this possibility yet. But if they didn’t have the idea before, they’ve have it now.”

She smiled. “You’re very clever.”

He laughed softly. “It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that man is unstable. And he’s essentially threatened us both.”

She sighed. “Please watch your back. I think if George didn’t start those fires, he’s still capable of violence.”

By the time she hung up the phone she didn’t feel better, she felt worse. Apprehension eroded her security, and suddenly she couldn’t wait for the trip to Billings.

\* \* \* \*

Cherry stomped into the apartment, exhausted after a hard day at the office.

She’d slugged back a drink at a bar nearby and almost picked up a man she’d never seen before just to discover how much further she could push her luck with men. Her visit with Jack last night upset her more than she expected, and when she’d taken her time getting home last night, George twenty questioned her to death.

Disappointment stung Cherry, her eyes watering as she recalled Jack’s words. When she’d left his hospital room, she’d almost screamed at a nurse who bumped into her in the hallway.

When she opened the utility room door, the screech of music bombarded her ears and her blood pressure skyrocketed. Damn that George Beckett all to hell. Stupid prick. A heavy metal band screamed from the stereo, and she put her hands over her ears as she marched toward the noise box. She flicked off the switch and the silence brought instant relief.

George lay slumped on the couch, his hair rumpled and his shirt wrinkled. When she woke up this morning, he hadn’t returned from whatever freak fest he’d been on the night before.

She put her hands on her hips. “How the hell do you sleep through this?” When he

didn't answer, she kicked his foot. "Wake up."

He groaned and revealed bloodshot eyes. "What do you want?"

"I thought you were working today."

"Already did." He shifted and sat up. "Been working since three this morning at that construction site. Let me sleep."

She grunted, disgusted. She kicked his foot again. "You're lying. I asked the foreman and he said you haven't been there. Besides, they aren't doing any work now because it's too cold. I know what you've been doing. You've been humpin' after Autumn, haven't you? Or you were out drinking with Roman and Geraldo?"

"Thought you said you didn't care?"

"I don't. But that's why you were out all night. You're pretty stupid, aren't you? I'll bet you're out creeping around watching her. Jack told me that you've been following her and threatening her. You're going to get caught."

His mouth flattened, and his eyes took on a glitter. "I thought you said you wanted her out of the picture."

"I do."

"Then I've got something set up to get satisfaction. It'll happen real soon." He stood and sauntered toward her, that predatory gleam in his eyes. "After that I won't worry anymore about Dillon."

Cherry didn't like the hard tone or the assurance in his voice. With a man like this, you couldn't take chances. She took a step backward. "What do you mean you won't be worrying about Dillon anymore?"

"He'll be done. Finished. Out of the picture."

Dawning horror chilled her like ice water. "What are you talking about?"

A slow smile crept over his lips and gave him the smallest veneer of charm. The result lasted a few seconds, then vanished when his grin turned brutal. "I'm talking about offin' him in the best way I know how."

Cherry couldn't breathe for a moment. In fact, her heart seemed to slow, then almost stop. She took a gasping breath. "You can't. You won't."

"Hell I won't."

"Don't do anything to Jack."

"Too late, baby. He's a goner. A walking dead man."

"No." She knew saying no wouldn't obtain the result she hoped for, but it came from her mouth anyway. "No."

He laughed, one of those high-pitched, crazy noises. Hyena. That's what he had to be. A scavenging, devouring evil creature living off suffering.

"Damn you, George, he's mine to deal with." Fury climbed her throat as her volume increased. "Mine!"

She stalked toward him, her fist raised as a yell of rage erupted from her. She flailed and punched at him, a scream ripping loose as she aimed her long fingernails at his eyes.

Then he did something she didn't expect. He fought back.

\* \* \* \*

Late that evening, the Watcher found the secluded place the fat little creep wanted to meet. A breeze rustled the copse of trees near the large park area outside of Clifton's city limits. The Watcher shifted on the hard wood bench, looking down at the bird droppings,

sap, and gum that littered the surface. He reached up and pushed back strands of hair as wind ruffled through his scalp.

Hell, it had been the freak's idea to meet way out here where no one else could see them together. The Watcher could understand that. Now that a new fire had ripped a building apart downtown, it wouldn't be a smart idea to be seen anywhere near the area.

Fatso waddled up, his usual camera in hand. "Hey."

"Hey."

The Watcher liked the arrangements they'd made since meeting during the Top O' the Morning fire. The Watcher smiled. "I loved the flames from that last fire. Hot and delicious."

"Leapt high into the air." Fatso nodded. "I'm proud of it."

The Watcher's grin widened. "Real high. Highest I've seen in a long time."

"It gives a man a real taste for sex."

The Watcher laughed. "Yeah? You must be an arsonist, Fatso. Do you run home and jerk off after a fire?"

Fatso gave him a calculating, but curious gaze. "Why would I want to do that? Real men find women. Jerking off is perverted."

Leaning back on the bench, the Watcher wanted to laugh but didn't. "You should try it sometime. With a woman watching."

Fat Man's nose wrinkled up. "You're sick."

"Never said I wasn't." Tired of the verbal sparring, the Watcher pointed to the camera. "You take pictures of all the fires? You must have a room somewhere covered with the evidence. Aren't you afraid the cops are going to find it?"

The round man settled onto the bench near The Watcher. "Nah. The cops around here aren't smart enough for that. Besides, it isn't me who should be afraid."

"Sure as hell isn't me, Fatso."

From the side, the Watcher caught the movement, but moved too late. A gunshot rang out and pain splintered like fire through his side.

The round man grinned as the Watcher toppled onto the grass. "Don't call me Fatso."

## Chapter Twenty

"I hope it doesn't snow," Autumn said as Jack drove the SUV over Bozeman Pass on 90. "But I suppose that would be too much to ask."

He grinned. "Snow is the forecast."

She groaned. "Don't remind me."

Sitting here with Jack, who was strong and alive, provided her the comfort she'd longed for after he'd escaped death. She'd spent too much time ruminating on what could have happened to him.

He shifted in the seat. "It's nice to get away. No more George Beckett, no more Cherry, no more fires."

When he'd told her about Cherry's visit to his hospital room, jealousy had niggled at her before she could squelch it. "You really think Cherry will leave you alone? George and Cherry form a mutual pest society."

"She probably wanted to make him jealous."

"Yes, but why? Is she insane?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

"She is insecure and malicious, and who knows what else." She pulled her mittens off and stuffed them in her coat pocket. "I'm happy we're away for awhile. It's amazing that in a city as small as Clifton we have four enemies. Cherry and George. And the Mafia Boys if they're the ones starting the fires."

A tiny muscle in his jaw twitched. "I'm glad George hasn't tried anything else. I don't want him anywhere near you."

Hearing the strain in his voice, the hint of possessiveness, made her want to comfort him. And whether she wanted it to or not, his protectiveness stirred primal feelings within her and stirred her libido. "Jack, I'm fine."

What she needed now was to find time alone with him.

*Then what? Will I go to bed with him? Again?*

Well, whether she thought it wise or not, that's what her body wanted. Jack on top of her, fucking her into the next century, reminding her once more what it felt like for his cock to fill her so deliciously.

What would she do when she left the area for good and went back to smoke jumping?

*Don't think about it. Enjoy the now.*

"What kind of rooms did you get us?" she asked.

"A suite."

She sat up straighter, suspicious. "A suite?"

"One of those two bedroom, two bathroom jobbers. It was cheaper."

"Uh-huh."

He glanced over at her for a second. "I'm telling the truth." He winked. "But I can't say I'm sorry that we'll be in the same hotel room together." His voice deepened, went huskier. "If we don't want to be together, we can retreat to our respective bedrooms."

She leaned her head back against the seat and tried not to envision the many possibilities a suite presented. "I guess we'll have to keep the sex to a dull roar, then."

He swerved slightly. "What?"

She reveled in his surprise. His expression filled with heat and the passion of a man long deprived. Her stomach did an eleven-floor elevator drop.

She grinned. "Gotcha."

Jack swallowed hard. "You know I'll take you up on that offer." He took a deep breath. "Maybe I should say something before we get to the hotel. I don't want any misunderstandings about what I feel."

As a way of stalling, she adjusted the heat controls so they didn't pour hot air right on her. "Sounds ominous."

"Just a warning." Although he focused on the road, his words came precise. "I want you. But I'm not like George. Even though we have a suite, you can lock your bedroom door at night if that's what you want. I would never force you into anything you didn't want. I want you so damn badly it's driving me crazy. But I know we need time away from the people who know us and a town that's given us so much grief. Where we can have clear heads and know what we're doing."

A big chunk of her heart broke loose and floated straight for him. She knew he would honor her wishes in this as he had the night they'd made love on his couch. She didn't want to avoid him anymore. Autumn wanted the ecstasy she knew his touch would bring.

So she relinquished the last barrier. "I won't lock my door."

He tossed a thoroughly male smile her way. Her insides went butter soft, her loins clenched in anticipation, and she knew what the night would bring.

When Billings came into view about two hours later, they'd exhausted most mundane subjects.

He pointed to a few landmark buildings, including the twelve-story Mackey Center where the radio station was located. "Keep your eyes peeled for the Old San Francisco Hotel."

When their hotel came into view down the block from the Mackey Center, her mouth popped open in surprise. The Queen Anne Victorian, decorated into a true Painted Lady, held shades of pink and purple that could have looked hideous, but didn't. "It's beautiful."

Jack drove around the corner and into the back lot parking area for the hotel. "Renovated in the last five years. Hank told me about it a long time ago."

"Hank?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it? I think he has a romantic streak in him somewhere."

"Hank?" she questioned again, tossing him a wicked grin.

He laughed, and remembering Hank sobered her in a flash.

"I've been thinking about him this morning. I wonder if he's all right." Her throat tightened. "Ginger is so worried."

Jack nodded. "So am I. But she's right, and you were right. I'm not helping Hank by staying at his bedside. We'll call her when we get inside the hotel and see how he's doing."

"I was feeling a little guilty this morning about leaving even though I said we should go."

"But you're not anymore, I hope?"

She shook her head and glanced at him. "I'm happy to be here with you."

He flashed a quick, utterly sexy smile her direction, and her heartbeat quickened. Visions of wild, uninhibited sex like they'd experienced danced through her head.

"Jack Dillon, has anyone ever told you how sexy you are?"

His face actually reddened. He cleared his throat. "No. Never."

"I find that impossible to believe."

"Well, believe it, sweetheart."

"Amazing." Her mouth went dry. "I get so flustered sometimes when you're near me, and when you kiss me, I want to ... to ... rip your clothes off."

His expression filled with gratification. His masculine ego must have pumped up to a thousand megawatts of satisfaction. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yes."

He chuckled. "I'm flattered. Hell, I'm more than flattered." He reached for her hand and clasped it in a warm grip. "I'm all yours if you want me."

She couldn't say another word for a few moments, her throat so tight with emotions she thought she would never swallow again. "Jack, I'm afraid."

"Of what?" he asked, his voice laced with gentle worry.

She squeezed his hand, then released him. "Afraid of everything I'm feeling. Afraid of what's happening between us, the arson fires, you name it. It all seems to come to this big, ugly head."

"Then we should have time alone together."

His statement didn't alleviate her apprehension, and the confusion compelling her to take everything he wanted to give her, but not too much.

Once they'd checked in, she could no longer deny the rising need.

The large suite featured Victorian decoration in hues of rose, white with touches of blue, and green. Dark cherry Queen Anne furniture graced the room; two chairs nestled in front of a gas log fireplace. A huge window looked out over the city. Two bedrooms, a wet bar and other amenities made the place top-drawer.

Autumn dumped her suitcase on the floor with a thud. "This place is beautiful."

Jack turned in a circle and inspected the place. "Good choice, eh?"

"This will cost us a fortune."

"It's on me."

"You picked the most expensive hotel in Billings."

"No, the most expensive hotel is the Radisson, or maybe the Sheraton."

"Jack—"

"Nope. I've got it." With a wicked grin in place, he strode to his bedroom.

"Men," she said.

Jack used to call the hospital in Clifton and reached Ginger. She reported that Hank's condition hadn't changed. The other men had been moved from serious condition to stable, and this gave Jack some ease.

Autumn touched his arm with a gentle caress and smiled. "They'll be fine and so will Hank."

"The longer he stays unconscious, the more serious his condition may be."

She grasped the magnitude of Hank's situation, but they couldn't think the worst and survive being away. "All we can do is stay strong for him. Hank's a tough guy."

A short time later, she flopped backwards on the king-sized bed in her bedroom with a sigh of pleasure. A nice, long, hot bath with a glass of wine sounded irresistible.

Seconds later the bed sank a little on one corner, and her eyes popped open.

Jack sat there with a boyish look mixed with longing and deep interest. His enticing gaze slid over her. Sexual feelings she'd tried to ignore since their last encounter went ballistic and galloped, competing with each other for dominance.

As he continued to stare at her with obvious enjoyment, she decided what she would do. She sat up slowly. She touched the bedspread, tracing her fingers over the soft paisley quilted pattern. "Jack, what compelled you to pick this hotel?"

He lay back on her bed and stretched, and his sweater slipped up high on his stomach. Her gaze traveled over rippling, leashed masculinity.

"Remember, I told you I'm a romantic. This place screams romance." He waggled his eyebrows, looking as cuddly as a teddy bear.

She yawned and cracked her jaw. "Let's have dinner in the room and some wine to celebrate being away from fire."

He sat up immediately. "Amen. I'll order."

"How do you know what I want?"

He leaned in close so that his mouth almost brushed hers. "Trust me. I know what you like."

Soft and husky, his voice caressed her ears.

A little stunned by the high wattage sexuality mixing with charming tenderness, she almost couldn't speak. "I'm going to change."

He winked. "Don't be too long."

She waited until he closed the bedroom door, then took a huge breath to calm her thumping heart. Wound up with anticipation, she allowed all the possibilities to form in her imagination. Age difference, career challenges, and arsonist be damned. When she peeked into the bathroom a moment later and saw the whirlpool tub, she smiled.

Autumn knew what she had to do.

\* \* \* \*

The small dining area sparkled with candlelight as Autumn stepped out of her bedroom. Jack walked around the table arranging food platters. Culinary scents, perhaps salmon and maybe prime rib, tantalized her nose. Her stomach growled and her mouth watered.

Or maybe it wasn't the food that made her salivate, but the man in front of her. A thick cable sweater stretched over his shoulders and faded denim encased his strong legs. He looked good enough to devour in one gulp. Her glance landed without remorse on his jeans—or rather his cock bulging against his jeans. She remembered all too well how he'd felt inside her, how much she'd love the intimacy of his naked body sliding along hers, within and without. A slow throb built in her lower belly, and stirrings of arousal tightened her nipples and sent a rush of liquid to her pussy.

When his attention roamed over her attire and he gave her a knee-buckling grin that melted her heart, she asked, "What do you think?"

"Whoa," he said softly, his eyes widening.

She walked toward him, enjoying every sign of his appreciation. "Whoa?"

He swallowed and she heard the gulp. His eyes riveted on her movements.

Triumphant, she took advantage by putting a sinuous glide into her walk. If Ginger hadn't twisted her arm, she never would have bought the turquoise blue jacquard dress. One



word came to mind for the ankle-length gown with the thin shoulder straps. The body-conforming style clung to her breasts and hips, and the slit on the side went up to mid thigh. To make things more tempting, she'd included strappy, high-heeled black sandals. She'd also added one thing he probably didn't expect. Thigh-high stockings. No bra ... and ... crotchless lace panties. He was going to love it. At least she hoped he would. The entire ensemble screamed one luscious, undeniable word.

Sin.

She grinned, eating up the attention. She took a covert glance at his crotch. Oh, yeah. "What's wrong, Jack? You look like you've never seen a woman before."

He swallowed hard. "That dress."

She stopped in front of him, leaving barely a foot between them. Even wearing high-heeled fuck-me shoes, he still looked down on her. His big, muscular body made her feel safe and oh-so feminine.

She put one hand on her hip and then let it trail down to her thigh close to her pussy. "What about it?"

He finally peeled his gaze off her breasts, and she felt a wash of pure heat as his gaze went exactly where she wanted it—straight to her pussy.

As he took a heaving breath, Jack put his hand to his chest. "Are you trying to give me a fuckin' coronary?"

She allowed a teasing grin to part her lips. "Yes, actually."

He laughed. "Good." He gave her another lingering look, allowing his gaze to travel over her shoulders, breasts, and legs with a thorough assessment. "I'll need mouth-to-mouth resuscitation."

"That can be arranged."

He drew another heaving breath as he once again appraised her. His attention started an aching desire that simmered inside her blood. "Fuck me sideways."

She grinned as a laugh slipped out. "I'm sure I can accommodate that, too."

"You're so beautiful."

A blush rushed to her face. "Thank you."

Heat shimmered between them as her gaze locked with his.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Starving."

"Me, too."

He pulled out a chair for her.

As he sat down he said, "I hope you still like salmon."

She lifted the silver cover off her plate and inhaled the delicious flavor of the pink fish. Carrots and garlic mashed potatoes completed the dish. "I love it. You remembered that?"

He cut his prime rib. "I don't think I've forgotten anything about you, Autumn."

"But the last time I mentioned that I liked salmon was way back when you were a kid."

"Never underestimate the power of a child's memory."

Remembrances swamped Autumn, and she started eating. Unexpected tears touched her eyes as tenderness welled inside her. The fact that he recalled this small detail impressed her.

Jack reached for the wine and poured them each a glass. "Sorry, I forgot the wine."

As he stuffed the bottle back into the ice bucket, she watched his hands. The man possessed the most masculine, yet attractively made hands she'd ever seen. They might be callused from hard work, but his fingers had an artistic shape combining gentleness with strength.

He looked up from his plate as she took a sip of wine. "Something wrong?"

"No. Everything is right."

He held his glass up for a toast. "To us."

The clink of glass against glass rang like a true note, and her heart knew she wanted more from Jack than just another night of passion. But for now she would settle for wonderful memories made in this room, in this moment.

She made a soft moan of appreciation as the grilled salmon appeased her taste buds. "This is paradise."

"Yeah," he said huskily, gazing straight into her eyes. "It is."

As they finished their main course and nibbled on chocolate debouche torte, her curiosity expanded. "What else do you remember about me?"

He sipped his wine. "The way you looked. I was only a prepubescent kid, but I had the worst crush on you." He chuckled. "Yep. I thought everything revolved around you."

Astonished, she didn't know what to say.

"I would have done anything to please you." He pushed aside his plate and leaned on the table. "I still would."

Pleasure, like the sensation of comforting arms, slid around her. "That's ... that's..."

"Nuts?"

"No." She placed her wine glass on the table before she dropped it. Traitorous tears threatened her eyes again, and she sniffed. "It's beautiful."

"Hey, hey," he whispered softly. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

She grinned. "Happy tears."

Looking relieved, he leaned back in his chair. "Good." His gaze held hers for several seconds. "All I want from now on is the rock-bottom truth. I'll always tell you what I'm feeling, if you promise to do the same."

Swallowed by a tempest of emotion, she wiped a tear as it escaped. "Promise."

Silence grew between them for a few moments before he spoke again.

"There's something I should tell you." He stood and came around the table, his walk purposeful. "Something very important."

She turned toward him, wondering what he intended. Fear beckoned with concern close behind.

He dropped to his knees in front of her. "You saved me in so many ways, I can never repay you."

With a gentle smile, she rebuked his statement. "It wasn't me. Under all the insecurity was a strong boy who wanted to leave his unhappy world behind. I could see that. When I heard years later that you were doing well, I was comforted. After the fire when we were kids ... well, so many things could have happened."

He took one of her hands in his and brought it to his lips. He kissed her fingers with reverence, and the sensation shot hot tremors of longing racing into every corner of her being. Once more, she felt as if he'd lit a fire within her body and soul. She shifted, her body screaming for gratification. She longed, pure and simple, to take him down and make love to him until he couldn't see straight.

She wanted him on his back, lying on top of her, standing up. Any way she could get him, she must have him. Even tenderness couldn't obliterate the way her nipples tightened, her heart raced. She cupped his cheek with her other hand. He leaned into her touch, then he touched her thighs. His fingers, hot and gentle, made her yearn for more.

"Too fast?" he asked.

Autumn shook her head. If he didn't do more ... if he stopped, she would simply combust right here and right now.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Jack's fingers stole under the material of Autumn's dress, sliding along her stockings. Her pulse went over the top as he inched the silky dress material upward, baring her to his caress. Her breathing increased. She placed her hands on his and guided his motion, amazed and beyond pleased that she'd been brave and worn this dress.

"What made you decide to wear this?" he asked, eyes hot.

Jack's hands separated her thighs and he slipped between them. For a moment, she couldn't breathe and couldn't think. "I wanted to seduce you. Is it working?"

He groaned. "Damn right it is." His gaze moved to her breasts. "You're not wearing a bra."

"No. Like it?"

He laughed, the sound a little strangled. "Do I like it? Does a cat have kittens? God, yes."

She grinned, unable to control her delicious craving for this gorgeous, luscious firefighter. As she looked into his eyes, so warm for her, so filled with genuine desire, she felt on top of the world.

He returned her smile. "Back in Detroit I realized one of the reasons my girlfriend and I didn't work out was that she wasn't you. She didn't have that smile, that touch. You know what I used to think when I was alone in bed at night?" His lips quirked in a cheeky grin. "I thought about what it would be like to have screaming, uncontrollable sex with you."

Screaming, uncontrollable sex.

"Oh?" There she went again. Back to monosyllabic expressions of sheer wonder.

"Oh, yeah. Not just that ... I wanted kinky, unleashed sex."

"God, Jack."

His fingers reached the top of her stockings. "Jesus, sweetheart. Stockings." His gaze flamed with passion. "Nice."

She guided his hands higher, higher yet. His fingers rested on the tender inside of her stocking-clad thighs. Her entire womb clenched on a shiver of pure excitement.

His mouth captured hers, a sudden, ravenous explosion filled with untamed need. Taking instant possession, he wasted no time with subtleties. His tongue tangled with hers, pumping in a primal, evocative rhythm she wanted to last forever. Her hands grasped his shoulders and drew him closer. His fingers toyed with the lace top of her stockings. Each tiny brush of his fingers teased the arousal building in her pussy.

He moaned into her mouth when he found the open crotch of her panties, slipped his fingers through hot, wet folds. He drew back from her kiss, his eyes filled with undeniable ravenous need.

Gently Jack's fingers played, teased, but never quite reached her clit. "Crotchless panties?"

"Yes." She smiled.

"God." He buried his lips against her neck. "You're wet."

"Mmm." She nibbled his ear. "Very."

She writhed as he slipped two fingers slowly, gently, deep until he was buried inside.

He curled his fingers upward slightly, then started a slow movement.

She gasped loudly and wriggled as the sensation both aroused and teased. He watched her, and she found she couldn't look away, unable to deny the intimacy that sparked and danced between them. His fingers shifted, probed, caressed her tightness. Her heat rippled around him, and as he commenced a tender thrust and withdrawal, she gasped again and closed her eyes. She tipped her head back and fell into a deep bliss where only his touch mattered, only this moment mattered. Every movement of his fingers inside her channel sent waves of heat deep into her, and she rode his fingers with ever-increasing movements, her hips twitching, her breath staggering. He hadn't even touched her clit and the pleasure was enormous as it gathered inside her like a storm. His fingers thrust, retreated, thrust. She couldn't stand it—much more and she'd come unglued, go wild. Her fingers tightened on his shoulders, clutching at him in frantic anticipation.

“Jack,” she whispered in an agony of need.

“Come on, sweetheart. Take it.”

And she did.

Ecstasy slammed her with a suddenness that made her scream. She opened her eyes to see the pure male appreciation cross his face as her pussy rippled around the two fingers embedded deep.

But if she thought he'd finished...

His fingers slipped from her, then plied her clit. She gasped at the raw feeling. He smiled slowly, determination etched into his features. He wasn't through with her by a long shot. With two fingers, he gently plucked her clit. Another climax ripped through her, her hips coming up off the chair as she shivered and shook.

Her eyes closed, her head tilted back, and she muttered stunned words as joy careened through her. “Oh, shit. Oh, shit.”

She couldn't think, could barely breathe as he held her clit between thumb and forefinger for one more soft pinch. Her entire body quaked under the delight, caught in relentless waves.

When he pulled back a short time later, he said, “Wow.”

“I'll say.”

Seconds passed as she drew in deep breaths and tried to calm her racing heart. She clasped his face between her fingers and caressed his cheeks. He'd shaved, and she realized that she'd appreciate it when his skin touched hers. More than anything, she wanted their lovemaking to continue, to escalate. Then he blew her mind.

He lifted his fingers, still moist with her cream, and licked one finger at a time.

Her gut clenched, her belly coiling with excitement. “You're a naughty boy, Jack.”

He winked. “I'm about to get a lot worse.”

She lifted one eyebrow as he pushed her dress above her hips. The caress of his tender touch over her thighs caused her to quiver. He was so gentle, but his stroke tickled and tantalized at the same time. Jack moved his hands higher until he could grasp her panties and glide them down her hips. She lifted her hips until he slid them off her legs and feet. He tossed them onto a chair.

His grin spelled danger, and she smiled in return. When she reached for the buckle of her sandals, he stayed her hand. “No. Keep them on. I like them.”

So, he liked high heels on during sex. Good information to remember. She didn't ask

what he intended, allowing the anticipation to rule her thoughts and senses. She widened her thighs, allowing him closer access. He drew in a breath, and she knew he took in her musky arousal.

She closed her eyes. His warm, slick tongue soothed over her clit in a long, seductive touch. She quivered and slipped her hands into his hair to hold him in place. As directed, he kept his attention on her clit. His tongue felt silky, wet, and the sensation spiked through her in a wave of pleasure.

Her body throbbed, her pussy moist and growing wetter by the second as he tended to her clit and labia with single-minded purpose—to drive her out of her mind. Languid tastes drove her upward, took her mind out of her body and encased her in mellow, sweet satisfaction. Long tongue stroke after tongue stroke bathed her aroused tissues. He didn't taste her tentatively, but feasted, a man determined she'd know the full depth and breadth of his desire for her.

She didn't know how much more of this she could take.

She expected this orgasm to take a while building, but damn if she wasn't wrong. Jack settled in, his lips and tongue guiding her on a whirlwind vacation for the body. He drew her clit into his mouth and sucked gently. A gasp of pure pleasure left her throat.

Yes. There. And there.

When he pushed his tongue inside her, she moaned loudly, unable to control herself. His tongue felt different, so very different as it slipped deeper into her channel. Repeatedly he fucked her with his tongue, each smooth stroke causing a whimper to leave her throat.

When he took her clit between his lips and sucked hard, she came apart with one quick, hard burst of orgasm that rolled through her body in massive pulses. She cried out.

A delicious glow filled her for what seemed forever, the pleasure of what they'd done together lingering.

"Mmm." The satisfied sound came from deep inside him, and she wanted to make him sound like that again. Happy, ready for anything.

"Autumn that was wonderful. I want more."

She lifted his sweater and found hair-roughened, powerful chest. "Maybe we could have a quick dip in the whirlpool tub, our wet bodies gliding together."

"Gliding." He groaned softly and his arms went around her waist. "Sounds good. Let's do it."

Seconds later his hands traced the sides of her breasts, circling around but never touching her nipples. She ached, wanting his more intimate caress with a startling force.

His mouth captured hers again, tasting and lingering with the most exquisite tenderness. With patience, he drove her higher, until she moved in his arms with desperation. Her breasts ached and heat grew inside her.

He tore his mouth from hers and whispered into her ear, "God, I want you."

"Yes."

He cupped one breast through the thin bodice. "Oh, man." His fingers plucked, gently abrading her nipple under the material.

She pushed into his touch, and he took her signal. With small flicks and brushes of his fingers and thumbs, he concentrated on tormenting her nipples. She glanced down at her breasts and watched how his gaze looked over her breasts with reverence. He cupped and shaped them within his palms, and the dusty rose nipples went tight and hard beneath

stimulation. Over and over, he teased her senses, demanding more response. All the while, she treated him to the glide of her touch, exploring his muscles as her hands palmed his broad shoulders, swept down his arms, over his chest and stomach.

Rock hard pecs moved under her fingers, biceps bunched. He stopped long enough to pull his sweater over his head before gathering her into his arms for another soul deep kiss. She shivered with sweet anticipation as he moved aside her spaghetti straps and slipped his hands inside the bodice. He clasped both nipples between his thumbs and fingers, and she moaned as lightning-force pleasure electrified her desire. With persistent attention, he strummed and caressed until she writhed.

Autumn wanted more than a physical joining, a moment when minds melded in pursuit of divine pleasure and understanding. As he circled and pressed, she arched against him in delight. Shattered by the intimacy, a warm, happy delight took over. She shivered, awash with a craving that demanded satisfaction. He searched for the right rhythm until her moans and pants escalated. She broke from his kiss, breathless and traveling higher by the second. She'd never felt anything more exquisite.

Jack leaned down to taste her, his maddening caresses driving her arousal higher. One sampling led to another, and as he devoured her nipples, the tight, tingling yearning deep inside her rushed forward to an almost unbearable height.

\*

Heady male satisfaction built inside Jack as he saw her eyes close and her lips part.

Making love to other women had never been like this. His cock grew harder as his arousal became more intense. He couldn't get enough of touching her. His tongue rasped over her nipple as he sucked her, and she bucked against him.

Autumn gave him everything. Whether she knew it or not, he felt the tenderness in her heart with every brush of her fingers over him, and the soul-stirring pleasure spreading over her flushed face.

He could hope with each breath he took, that she might love him.

*Love.*

He almost stopped, amazed by the truth staring him in the face.

*I love her.*

At the same time pleasure entered him, he felt a new emotion threaten. Fear. Fear she didn't love him, couldn't love him, and didn't plan on loving him.

*I'm dead. I'm dead if she doesn't love me.*

As his body hummed under her insistent exploration, she did the wildest thing of all.

She slid her hand over his chest, down his stomach, and cupped his erection through his pants. The top of his head almost blew off as her fingers explored his cock with purposeful pressure.

He groaned, then grabbed her hand. "Don't, baby. Later."

She defied him with another leisurely caress that made his hips surge upward.

He gently pulled her into a standing position.

\*

"Can we make it to the tub?" she asked, wondering if anything could surpass the mind-melting orgasms, she'd experienced moments ago.

Eyes shimmering with desire, he brought her fingers to his lips. "If that's what you want."

As she slipped her hand from his, she backed away a few steps, evil on her mind.

She peeled her dress down her body, then allowed the silken fabric to fall to her feet. She stepped out of the dress and nudged it aside.

Jack's gaze took admiring inventory of her naked form. His attention stuck on her high-heeled shoes and he smiled. "You're beautiful."

Heat poured into her stomach and built to a fever pitch. She beckoned, waving him forward as she backed toward her bedroom. As he followed, a mesmerized expression covered his face.

Once inside her bathroom, she turned the water in the tub onto full blast, eager to fill it so she could share the spinning warmth with Jack. She flicked on the whirlpool action. Bubbles danced, formed by the rush of water in the big-enough-for-two tub. She relished her power as she leaned over to adjust the water flow and gave Jack a full view of her backside.

He groaned. "Autumn."

She turned in time to see him advance on her. He pulled his athletic shoes off and tossed them aside, then yanked his belt out of the loops with a slicing noise that made her jump. The belt landed on the floor. His zipper hissed open, and he shoved the jeans down.

Autumn took in his powerful body with keen appreciation and building lust. Like opponents in a match of wits, they stared, watching, waiting, and evaluating the moment. Jack's smoldering gaze went superheated. Without ever taking his eyes off her, he shoved his briefs off and tossed them away.

Instead of snatching her into his arms, he stepped into the water and sank down with a moan.

Excited, she removed her shoes and stockings and joined him. Echoing his sigh of contentment, she allowed the heat and sensuous vibrations of the water to heat her skin. "Heaven."

Jack sank back against the tub, and she stopped thinking altogether when he held out his hand. "Slide over here. Forward so you're almost sitting on me."

Pleased with the enticing idea, she settled over him and savored the maleness of his hard thighs. He kept her hands in his. Her fingers splayed so they touched palm to palm. "When I was in college I had this fantasy."

Curious, she had to know more. "What?"

He drew her even closer. "A whirlpool tub. Me inside of you. We aren't moving but I can feel how tight you are around me. How we seal together perfectly. I used to imagine you coming apart in my arms."

"Tell me more." She kissed his chin and his nose with teasing brushes of her lips. "I think I like your fantasy."

"Want to hear more, or would you rather I demonstrate?" Kisses punctuated each of his words, driving her to a new height of distraction with each caress.

"Yes." Her breathing increased, and her pleasure rose with a steady rhythm. "Oh, yes."

He nibbled her neck, his voice a gentle growl. "I want you ready."

With excruciating deliberation, he cupped her breasts and started a full-throttle seduction. Thumbing her nipples with a steady touch, he teased her.

"Faster," she whispered.

If her demanding tone surprised him, Jack didn't show it. He drew one hard nipple into his mouth, sucking while he pinched the other nipple into a tingling, aroused bead.



His lips settled in to taste, working each nipple while he slipped one, then two fingers into her pussy. His thumb flicked over her clit, a soft, steady teasing not too hard or soft. She retaliated. With a sure beat, she encased his steel-hard cock in her hand and pumped him. He groaned, the vibration teasing her nipple. With one plunge, then two, his fingers caressed her inner core. He took her to a screaming edge, and she wanted him inside her with a tremendous ache.

Autumn's breath hissed as she endured the overwhelming pleasure. "Jack, please. I'm going to—"

His mouth smothered hers, taking the kiss to new heights. When he backed off, his voice was hoarse with need. "I've got to fuck you."

Oh, yeah. Until her relationship with Jack, she'd never realized just how sexy those raw words could sound.

She grinned, her anticipation and driving desire pushing her to the limit of endurance. "Yes."

"Now," he said softly.

"Now."

He lifted her by the waist and poised her above his thick cock. She moved down, down, until their bodies came together tightly. Her head dropped back, her lips parted on the incredible sensation of Jack pressed to her womb. She felt full and stretched and dizzy with desire.

\*

Jack thought he'd never seen anything more beautiful than the woman in his arms. He tried desperately not to start the cadence that would lead to climax. He wanted her so wild she would beg him for release.

"All right?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Yes."

Her husky laugh sent a spike of heat to his loins, and his cock hardened even more. He gritted his teeth. He longed for the chance to explore her with abandon that had no rules, no time limit, and nothing but teeth-grinding bliss. As she gazed deep into his eyes, he felt total satisfaction.

This was where he belonged.

"Jack."

"Yes."

She started the rhythm, and his vow to make it last longer evaporated. He clasped her hips as her wet, hot pussy encased him and released him. Her silky inner core caressed his cock as she kept the pace slow, a torturous journey that threatened to send him into orbit any second. He couldn't take it any more and he rammed his hips upward on a growl, his animal needs exploding. She gasped, then smiled, her expression filled with a bliss that urged him onward. His hips rotated, bucked, fucked her without a thought to slow and easy.

\*

Autumn thought she would die. Not from pain. Not from waiting.

From the passion bursting out of her like wildfire, an explosion of heat and flames rising high, stretching for the limit and leaping until the entire forest detonated. Danger filled his eyes, an abandon that said he would give her no quarter. She didn't want gentle right now. She needed fast, furious, a journey through hot and wild. Every hard

movement of his hips she countered, and she let it send her into a stratosphere where nothing and no one existed but them.

She increased the tempo, and the friction made her eyes widen. With every deep plunge of his cock, the pleasure roared, threatening to send her off the edge of the earth. His cock moved inside her, gliding against sensitive tissues with pulse pounding thrusts that made her breath catch and her pussy ache for release.

“Jack, please. God, I can’t stand it.”

She threw back her head and took him like a goddess. Giving and taking, she reached for the top, recognizing from the melting in her loins that she couldn’t wait for—

Implosion.

She whimpered and gasped. Ecstasy burst, so strong the world disappeared within her, around her. Jack’s relentless strokes pounded inside her. Ripples of lingering delight surged with each of his thrusts.

One last piercing shove and he growled, his guttural satisfaction rasping in her ear. She felt his pulsing release, the tightness of his muscles. He gathered her to him, and they settled into the water with a sigh of fulfillment.

In those intimate moments, she could no longer deny the truth.

She’d fallen in love with him.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Autumn dreamed.

Horrible fire enveloped her mind and transported her back to those events seventeen years ago when her life changed forever.

Mom, Dad, and Autumn sat at the dinner table and attempted to eat leftovers from the picnic earlier in the day. Mom picked at her food, something she'd been doing for days now. Autumn almost asked her if she felt sick. She seemed to be losing weight, even though Mom didn't need to slim down. Dad's robust appetite said he could eat anything and no matter how much, he wouldn't gain an ounce. Autumn knew she'd pigged out too much at the picnic, and that's why she didn't care if she ate.

Silence made Autumn nervous. Always had. The entire room filled with heaviness, the air thick with tension and mistrust.

Dad looked pale, his gaze pinned to his plate. Like a robot, he picked up his fork and stared at the meal as if he didn't see a thing. Autumn's lips parted, words almost out of her mouth, when he caught her staring. She quickly dropped her gaze to her food and tried to ignore the nagging sensation an event of great proportion would happen any minute.

Dad put down his fork and leaned back in his chair. He crossed his arms. "We've got to tell her."

With a frown that spoke of serious business, Mom nodded. "Now is as good a time as any."

Divorce. They're going to say they have to divorce.

Autumn looked from one parent to the other. "You don't have to tell me. I already know."

Dad's face took on the hard, no-nonsense expression that said she'd screwed up yet again. "You don't know what we're going to say. Stop second-guessing everything we do."

Humiliation burned a hot path up to her face. Her breath seemed to stop.

After another few seconds of awkward silence, Mom spoke. "I'm pregnant, Autumn."

"What?" Autumn's question came out without a thought. "You can't be."

Mom's face relaxed a little, her smile almost gentle. "I certainly can be. I haven't gone through the change yet."

Embarrassed, Autumn cleared her throat. "I know. I mean ... you took me by surprise. I didn't think..."

She left the idea hanging because she couldn't say it. She didn't say what was really on her mind, that she didn't think they had sex anymore. Thinking about her parents in those terms never crossed her mind anyway.

Mom's next words, though, took every hope away. "And we're getting a divorce. Immediately."

Autumn's being filled with hurt. What did she expect? She knew it had to happen soon. She turned to Dad. "But now that Mom's having a baby ... why?"

Lips tight, he continued to frown for several moments before he spoke. "I won't lie

to you, Autumn. I've never lied to you."

"Dirk, wait—" Mom started.

Dad slapped the table with uncharacteristic violence, and Autumn jumped. "No. She's got to know the truth."

Autumn saw pain, anger, and deep regret fill his face. She thought she'd seen every expression cross his handsome features before. Now she realized she'd been wrong. "We wouldn't divorce, Autumn, if the baby was mine. This is the final straw."

Tears filled Autumn's eyes as she absorbed the shocking information. She didn't need to know any more. Pain tightened her throat. While she shouldn't have been surprised on one level, she decided if everyone planned to be truthful, she wanted to know the entire story.

"Who?" Autumn took a deep breath. "Who is the father?"

"Mitchell Dillon." Her father snapped the words like venom he couldn't wait to spit from his mouth. "Fucking Mitchell Dillon."

Autumn flinched, unused to Dad using harsh language. Yet she couldn't blame him. He stood and walked out of the kitchen.

Autumn didn't know which emotion she felt first, resignation or sadness. Both feelings filled her eyes with tears and her heart with regret. Did Jack know what was happening? Did he experience the same heart-bursting need to cry out in pain at what would never be again?

Mom shifted in the chair, her eyes dark with anger. "I can't believe this is happening."

With a sigh, Autumn reached over and touched Mom's hand. Under Autumn's touch her fingers felt cold. "Mom, what are you going to do?" She could barely get the next words passed her lips. "How far along are you?"

"Four months."

Four months. Four months ago, Mom had slept with Mitchell Dillon and now the world changed. Autumn's little family would grow to a new baby brother or sister, but she couldn't be happy about it at this time and place. Remorse for things she couldn't change, but wished she could, reared up and blasted her security into a thousand bits.

Mom stood, her expression wooden. "I can't talk now. We'll discuss this more in the morning." She ran her fingers through her hair. "Can you do the dishes, darling?"

"Sure, Mom."

When her mother left the kitchen nook, Autumn stared at the table for an eternity, trying to feel her way around the ache in her heart and failing. After she did the dishes, she headed straight for her room and collapsed on the bed. Tears choked her, her throat aching from trying to hold back sobs. Tonight's events tore at her soul, exhausting her reserves as she allowed fresh pain to swallow her whole. Her despair deepened, drawing her under like quicksand as she imagined a future without her small family together. Then she thought of Jack, and her heart contracted. God, what would he do? Would he return to eating too much? Would he get into trouble and forget everything about reading that she'd taught him?

How had all this happened? First George's molestation, and now her parents divorcing and a baby on the way?

*Face it. You've had a charmed life, up until now. How long did you expect it to last? Forever.*

Later that night, perhaps around ten o'clock, Autumn awakened and realized she'd fallen asleep in her clothes. She sat up and listened. At first she couldn't identify the bizarre sound she heard.

A strange crackling.

She sniffed. Her mind didn't want to believe it for a moment. "No way."

She breathed deeply, and this time the unmistakable scent of smoke hit her. But the smoke detectors didn't shriek. She flipped on the light and saw smoke drifting under her doorway.

Fire.

Disbelief ruled her actions for a few seconds, then she bolted from the bed. She raced to the door and touched it and the doorknob at the same time. Cool to the touch, thank you, God. Snatching open the door, she stared outside. Fire danced like a dragon, consuming the hallway toward the staircase.

*Oh, God. Oh, my God.* The entire side of the house burned, flames leaping against the walls and rippling across the floor. Terror slammed into her. Heat scorched as the temperature rose.

"Mom! Dad! Mom! Dad!"

Smoke entered her lungs and she gasped and coughed.

Not good. Not good.

She had to get to the stairway. No time to soak a towel in the hall bathroom. She ran toward the flames, aware they could reach her before she made the stairway. Tongues of flame reached for her, and she screamed as she backed toward the second-floor landing railing. Panic sent deadly fingers straight at her.

No time.

She thought she heard a siren in the distance, then someone calling her name. Through the roaring heat consuming one side of the house, she heard the voice again and looked over the railing.

Mr. Dillon stood in the doorway. It looked like he'd broken down the door. He raced toward her until he stood beneath her.

"Jump, Autumn! For God's sake, jump! I'll catch you!"

"My parents!" She held a hand out toward him, as if he could save them.

"Help is on the way! Jump!"

She knew she had no choice. The flames were almost on her. She hefted herself over the wood railing and stood on the ledge.

Mr. Dillon held up his arms. "Now!"

She jumped.

Mr. Dillon caught her in his arms and staggered back, then fell. Her breath whooshed from her, and without another word, he grabbed her arm and pulled her up. "Come on!"

As they raced outside, a fire engine roared to a stop at the curb. She grabbed at Mr. Dillon's arm, but he ran back into the house. Terror galloped over her skin in great waves. He's gone back in. *Oh, God. Oh, God.*

As firefighters raced toward the conflagration, a paramedic wrapped her in a blanket. Stunned, she didn't answer his questions about her condition. Mute with fear, she barely noticed when Jack ran up with his mother hot on his heels.

"Where's Dad?" Jack asked, his eyes wide and glassy with fear.

Autumn opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Bitsie gasped and then cried out. “He’s in there. Oh, my Lord, he went in there for her.”

A huge sucking sound, rumbling deep and ominous, issued through the air a second before the front of her house burst into a rolling, angry red and yellow wall.

“Dad!” Jack’s terrified cry pierced the night.

Bitsie knelt down and swept her son into her arms, pressing his face against her. Pale as paper and her eyes wide, Bitsie let out a small, helpless whimper.

A fine trembling rolled through Autumn’s entire body as the paramedic urged her toward the ambulance. As her entire world went up in flames, she realized Jack and Bitsie wouldn’t see Mr. Dillon again.

Her parents must be dead.

Things had changed forever.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn launched from her horrible dream with a gasp. She sat upright, quivering and cold.

“Autumn?” Jack shifted in bed and reached for the bedside lamp. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

As his strong arms went around her, she felt his comforting presence deep into her heart. She buried her head against his naked chest. “I was ... I dreamed about the night they died.”

“Oh, babe.” He touched her gently, holding her tight as he caressed her shoulders and back. The agony in his voice showed her how well he understood. “Oh, man.”

Tears refused to be contained, pouring from her eyes as she took a gasp of air. “Why now? I haven’t dreamed about that night in years.”

He pressed a kiss against her forehead, then her nose. “It’s everything that’s been happening lately. The arson fires. The accident at the old building this week. It would destroy anyone’s nerves.”

“I remembered how the smoke alarms didn’t work. We’d forgotten to change the batteries. Dad was a firefighter and he forgot to change the batteries.” She sobbed. “It was horrible, Jack. I—it was all the same. Not like a dream at all, but a memory.” She sniffed and clutched at his shoulders as she looked up at him. “I couldn’t bear to lose you like that.”

“You won’t.” His voice roughened, choked with emotion. “Now you know how I feel whenever I think of you facing a wildfire again.”

Tears glistened in his eyes and then fell, and her heart was stolen forever.

“Jack,” she whispered. “Jack.”

As his hands traced over her body in a feverish inventory, his eyes blazed with raw passion. He lay back and pulled her on top of him. As if he’d never touched her before, his hands clasped, stroked, and found tender places he’d explored hours ago.

In the dim glow from the lamplight she took in the hard planes of his face. She saw his craving, tight and unrelenting, reflected in his eyes.

“Take me again, Autumn.”

Sex might be momentary. It might be one moment in a million minutes. But she knew in this small space in time that she wanted every second she could get in Jack’s embrace.

Kissing and caressing, she showed with her touch how much she cared. Every movement of their bodies felt silken and right, as if they'd always been together and always would be. As his mouth found hers, she reveled in their frantic race toward a sexual link. She wanted him in every way she could get him.

Now and into eternity.

Staggering pleasure broke over her. Forever.

She decided to make an inventory of him she'd never forget. She slipped off the bed.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Stockings."

"What?"

"Just wait and see."

She returned to the bed a few moments later with her stockings. "Grab the bedposts."

A masculine grin parted his lips. "Yes, ma'am."

She could tell he knew what she had in mind and liked the idea. As she worked to tie his wrists to the bedposts, his cock rose high and hard. She licked her lips, already anticipating taking him within her mouth.

Once his hands were secure, she straddled his hips. She pressed her folds against the long, thick length of his cock. "Now, what should I do with you?"

"Anything you want." His voice was husky and deep.

"Mmmm. Tell me what you want, Jack."

\*

Jack drew in a deep breath, excited that she'd showed assertiveness in their encounter. Emotion rose in his throat. God, but she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. The sexiest. A woman he could see spending day and night rolling around on a bed, fucking anywhere and everywhere. With her hair tossed around her shoulders, her eyes bright with passionate intent, her lips rosy red and parted, she looked sultry, ready to fuck him into oblivion. Turned on by her pseudo-bondage approach, his cock surged, sweat formed on his upper lip, and his breathing came faster. He licked his lips, hungry to taste more of her ultra-passionate, mischievous side.

"Do you know what you do to me?" he asked.

"No. Tell me." She moved down farther until her mouth was poised above his cock.

His hips arched at the thought of her lips touching his erection. "You make me crazy. I want you so damned badly I can't see straight. I want to stay in this bed forever with you."

Softness entered her eyes. She slipped her hands upward over his thighs, and he inhaled with pleasure.

"I've already forgotten the world. Now. While I'm with you," she said softly.

She peppered kisses along his body, starting at his stomach. With tender touches, she drove him to a new madness. He sucked in a breath as the feathery feeling of her touch tightened his cock, made his heart beat faster. She traced a finger over the muscles in his stomach, teasing, then wandered indolently upward until she reached his pecs. Pressing a soft kiss to his pec, she plucked at his other nipple.

Holy shit, he didn't know how much teasing he could take. His throat worked as he swallowed hard and watched her. He wanted touch those beautiful breasts, cup them, squeeze them, but couldn't. She moaned softly as she worked one nipple and then the other with tiny licks, then deep suckling. Spirals of heat shot to his groin with every pull

of her lips and each stroke of her fingers. He allowed a groan to leave his throat. He was fuckin' out of control, his legs moving restlessly, his heart pounding.

"Put me out of my misery." He gritted the words through his teeth.

Her gentle, teasing smile returned. "Whatever you want you have to beg for. You want me to ride you?"

Longing threatened to incinerate him. "Yes."

"Well, I think there are some spots I haven't explored yet."

He moaned as she proved what she meant.

Autumn didn't concentrate all her effort in one spot; her hands fluttered here and there, palming his belly, teasing down his biceps to his forearms.

As she turned around and straddled his body again, she presented her pretty, lush backside. Holy shit. It wasn't as if he'd never seen her sweet little ass before, but it was so close and he couldn't taste or touch her.

When she grasped his erection in one hand and smoothed her fingers down, he jerked. "Oh, yeah."

"You like that?" she asked.

"Do I like it? God, yes."

She licked the head, insinuating a steady stroke over the tip while she worked him with her hand. He moaned at the mind-blowing sensation, his gaze locked on her ass and enjoying the view.

He made fists, dying to touch her, wanting to caress Autumn into a frenzy. Her mouth enveloped the tip of his cock and then slipped down, down, down until she'd encompassed most of his erection. He hissed in a breath. She flicked her tongue, sucking, pumping, giving him the blowjob of his life. His stomach muscles tightened, his breathing out of control as he headed toward explosion.

"Untie me," he said on a gasp.

She stopped licking him long enough to look over her shoulder and wink. "I don't think so."

"Come on, babe."

"No."

He growled. "I want to fuck you. I want to get so deep inside you that you can't remember making love to any other man."

She grinned, the wickedness in her eyes maddening. "Jack, you've already accomplished that. I can't think of any man but you. Come in my mouth."

Those words did it. Feeling downright possessive and wanting to stand on the nearest hill and bellow that she belonged to him, he felt the last barriers break.

He couldn't help but smile as he whispered again, "You are so going to pay, babe. Suck it. Suck it hard."

Her face turned pink, but before he could gauge if he'd totally embarrassed her, she smiled.

His hips surged. He planted his feet and pushed up into her strokes, fucking her mouth as gasps left his throat. He couldn't hold back the groans of staggering pleasure that burst from his throat. As he sailed toward heaven, his hips writhed and he exploded. She took him, laving and sucking him as he climaxed in mind-melting ecstasy. When he finished, she climbed off him and released his wrists from their prison. He couldn't believe he was still hard, and he still wanted her.



Autumn gasped as he flipped her over on her back. He slipped between her hips and thrust home. She arched against him in startled pleasure.

Jack groaned, his eyes closing as his lips parted. His hips plunged. "I can't hold back."

"Then don't." She smiled and arched up against him again. "Erase the dream, Jack." His hips moved, an inexorable, driving motion as he pounded deep.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Few things made him happier than working in disguise.

Except, maybe, a good blazing fire.

As he pushed the cleaning supply cart along the almost empty corridors of the Mackey Building, he reveled in how he'd scoped out the building in the early morning hours. Sure, he'd been here before, but preparation meant everything. George hadn't understood the concept. He'd discovered not long after meeting the imbecile that the man's elevator didn't go all the way to the top. No, a good firestarter possessed special confidence and knew his true goal in life. George owned about as many brain cells as a watermelon seed. Maybe not even that.

Autumn MacAllister and Jack Dillon escaped George's fires because George was too stupid to know how to do it right. This time, though, things would be different. He wanted to create a spectacle. Give people the thrill of their lives and show them how much they needed him to acquire that special ecstasy. If MacAllister and Dillon were caught in the mess, all the better. Taking down two pseudo-celebrities would make the taste all the sweeter.

He smiled. He wouldn't be sloppy like George Beckett. This operation would flow like a high precision insurgence.

Insurgence.

Lust grew inside him with every step he took and he gloried in his power. His intelligence far surpassed the idiots who pushed cleaning carts, but anonymity worked to his advantage. He wanted to blend, and with this jumpsuit and baseball cap, no one would take a second look. Then again, he wanted people to know him. After today, they would.

He took a quick glance at the wording on the pocket of the jumpsuit. Bufford's Cleaning Company.

Bufford. What an awful name. No one in their right mind would call a company Bufford anything.

Snorting a laugh, he recalled the poor bastard he'd killed in order to pinch this uniform last night. He looked down at the nametag. They'd find J.P. Margolies when the dumpster outside the Mackey Center started to stink with a particular and distinctive odor.

He chuckled again. Smothering his wish to roar with laughter and tell everyone what he planned to do, he quickened his steps. Plans rushed through his head. He would time the closet fires and the office fire to start near the middle of the interviews with Jack Dillon and Autumn MacAllister. When he reached the seventh floor and lit a closet or two, they'd almost be finished with the interview. A slow build of flame should make it worse. The fires would cook before anyone guessed what was happening.

*Yeah, that's what I need. A lazy fire. Who knew what could happen then?*

Anticipation sent a rush through his system as he pushed the rattling cart toward a lawyer's office. He unlocked the door and entered, stopping to inspect his instruments of destruction nestled in the cart. Yes, these tools would accomplish the job. He closed the lawyer's office and made sure no one lurked inside.

Satisfied he could work without interruption, he soaked a big supply closet with

generous sweeps of wood polishing oil. Then he tossed oil into a trashcan near a partition for good measure.

He smiled as he struck the first match.

*This will be fuckin' hot.*

\* \* \* \*

Jack opened his eyes and realized two important factors. Autumn no longer lay beside him, and today Miranda Butterfield would interview him. Both ideas sent him bolt upright in bed.

Weak light filtered under the bottom of the closed curtains. Dawn came and interrupted the perfect dream of holding Autumn long into the night. For a few seconds, as he sat unmoving, he imagined it never happened. Maybe the mind-blowing sexual experiences were a cruel illusion. Then he heard the shower and knew he hadn't dreamed the night in her arms. He closed his eyes and replayed the amazing pleasure he'd felt snug inside her body.

Life altering didn't begin to describe it.

With a groan of reluctance, he left the comfortable bed and went to the bathroom door. He heard her singing and wondered if she knew how her voice wobbled. A smile tugged at his lips. It didn't matter. He loved her more than anything or anyone on this planet. Without hesitation, he opened the bathroom door and flicked back the shower curtain.

She squeaked in surprise and flung soap bubbles at him. "Brat!"

He ducked and the bubbles missed him. Water splattered on his chest. "Hey, sweetheart." Without giving her a chance to protest, he stepped into the shower and gathered her into his arms. She then demonstrated what she knew about making love in the shower. As she went down on her knees in front of him and smiled as if she knew something he didn't, Jack recognized paradise.

By the time they left the steamy bathroom, dressed, and made it to the parking lot, they realized they didn't have long before they needed to make it to the radio station.

Autumn buckled her seatbelt. "We missed breakfast."

Jack grinned. "Someone I know wouldn't let me get with the program."

Her teasing grin made him want her all over again, but he decided his libido would have to take a backseat to business.

Once they reached the building housing the radio station, they found a spot in the large parking lot and headed for the front. Close up, Jack saw scaffolding on the front of the building that reached the third floor.

Inside the guarded lobby, Jack instinctively paid attention to the layout of the building and noticed fire exits. The lobby area housed a wedding shop, a coffee house, a full-service restaurant, and other miscellaneous businesses.

Autumn looked up at the high ceiling and frowned. "Where's the sprinkler system?"

Jack chuckled. "Once a firefighter, always a firefighter." He scanned the ceiling. "That's odd. Maybe they're replacing the system."

After they stepped into an elevator, immediate nerves made his stomach tighten and a fine sweat break out on his forehead. The reaction surprised him, and the suggestion that a simple interview could do this to him added embarrassment to his predicament. *You're here now, so get over it.*

She clasped his hand. "Something wrong?"

He winked. "I'm thinking about what we could do in this elevator if we had time."

She expelled a mock gasp of indignation. "Jack Dillon, you are a very naughty man."

Unable to help it, Jack slipped his arm around her and brought his mouth down on hers. Her muffled whimper of surprise and pleasure tasted sweet. He indulged, taking her mouth with deep exploration. Muscle-dissolving lust made him hard in seconds, and he wished he could take her right here and now. Happiness made him want to shout to the heavens that he loved her.

*Marry me.*

The words screamed in his brain.

He would say it now.

"Ahem."

He released her with a jerk.

A petite woman stood in the open elevator doorway, a tolerant grin on her lips. Autumn's face turned brilliant red, and Jack swallowed hard. They'd reached their eighth floor destination without even noticing.

As the door started to close, the woman stuck her tiny foot and hand inside and stopped the movement. "Jack Dillon and Autumn MacAllister?"

"That's us," Jack said.

The woman grinned, her smile huge. "I'm Miranda Butterfield. Welcome to the station."

Jack cleared his throat as they stepped out of the elevator. "Pleased to meet you."

Despite Miranda's Butterfield's seductive voice, she didn't look as he'd expected. He'd made a huge assumption, and couldn't say he was proud of himself.

He shook her proffered hand, and grinned down at her less than five-foot tall frame. With short-cropped graying hair and thin body, the small woman with the sin city voice looked more like someone's grandmother than a siren. About sixty, she had the gritty, lined appearance of a woman ridden hard and put up wet. Despite her weathered appearance, she wore a professional navy blue suit with a collared white shirt.

After introductions, Miranda led the way to the radio station offices.

"How old is this building?" Jack asked. "We noticed there's scaffolding on the front and there are no sprinklers in the lobby."

"It was built in seventy-two," Miranda said without slackening her pace. "As far as sprinklers, they've been doing a lot of work on the building the last few months. Many of the tenants are angry it's taking them so long to fix problems."

Autumn frowned. "But they are retrofitting it for a sprinkler system, I hope?"

Miranda smiled and nodded. "It already had a sprinkler system, but it seems to have—pardon the expression—gone tits up."

Autumn laughed. "They are working on it, then?"

"Absolutely. Problem is, it's taking more time than they thought." Miranda shrugged and picked up her pace. "Paperwork, red tape. You know how it is."

They reached the station offices and passed through the small lobby and reception area into a long hallway. She took them to the station manager, who shook hands and smiled like a politician. Miranda introduced them to several other people in the station, but Jack found the faces starting to blur. His eagerness to start and finish this interview jumped up and slapped him in the face at the last minute. The engineer and producer

seated themselves behind the glass in the control room.

Miranda led them inside the studio where they would conduct the interview.

"I can't tell you how glad I am you decided to visit us," Miranda said after she offered them coffee and a place to sit near the microphone. "I thought for sure you'd continue to say no."

"We almost did," Autumn said.

Miranda paused, her coffee cup halfway to her mouth. She allowed the ceramic to clatter back into the saucer. "You know, this whole set up was a bit strange." She sighed. "I have a confession to make. When this arson situation started in Clifton, I wasn't sure it would make a good story. A nasty bit of news, to be sure, but that was it." She nodded toward Jack. "When I heard about your work at Ground Zero, and the way you rescued Autumn from that nightclub fire..." She shrugged. "Well, that was that. People are clamoring to know what happened to you in New York. They want to know about your feelings and experiences."

"I'm not sure I have as much to say as everyone thinks," Jack said.

"You'd be surprised." Miranda brushed short strands of hair off her forehead, and her expensive watch glittered in the office light. "I was sorry to hear about your co-workers that were hurt the other day, and glad to learn you weren't seriously hurt."

In a way, Jack wished she hadn't mentioned his co-workers. Thinking about them right now caused pain he didn't want to acknowledge. "Hank is still unconscious. Everyone else is recovering nicely."

Miranda gave him a warm, generous smile. "Do you mind if we mention them during the interview?"

"No, of course not," he said.

Miranda threw a glance at Autumn. "Have you decided if you want to talk about your experiences all those years ago? Or is that still off limits?"

He held his breath, worried that this woman's direct approach could offend Autumn again.

Instead, Autumn cracked a smile. "This isn't going to be easy."

He caught the sadness hovering in her voice, and for a moment his heart squeezed and his throat tightened. Her beauty, inside and out, sent his heart pounding. Even in the midst of conversation, she could turn him on with a smile and a look.

He touched her arm, hoping she'd find it reassuring. "You don't have to do this."

Autumn's glance was knowing and tender. "It'll be therapeutic. Yes. I'll do it."

Miranda smiled. "We're on in thirty minutes."

Within a few moments, they started the official interview and Miranda introduced them to Billings.

As he answered Miranda's initial questions dealing with New York City, he noted it didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. To his surprise, she didn't ask him anything tougher than the inquiries Autumn had presented to him during their mock interview at his condo. She did quiz him a little about the extensive fires in Clifton, and he told her only what the arson investigators had told him was not off limits.

While the interview seemed to last forever, Jack relaxed and almost enjoyed the opportunity to discuss his profession and the wonderful people within it.

"Let's go back to the phones," Miranda said.

The producer nodded at Miranda, and she picked up one of the blinking lines.

“Welcome to our show. What’s your name?”

“J.P. Margolies.” The deep male voice sounded far away, the phone line unclear. “This question is for firefighter Jack.”

Jack’s eyebrows went up as he looked at Autumn and Miranda. Firefighter Jack? Why did he get the impression from one sentence this guy was a weirdo of the first order?

“Ask away,” Jack said, trying to keep the hesitation from showing in his voice.

The voice on the other end evolved to a deep, disturbing rumble. “Do you think because you’re a firefighter that you’re braver or better than the average guy on the street?”

Autumn’s disgusted expression said, oh, great, one of these guys. Miranda leaned forward in her chair, her eyes widening as if excited by the question and perhaps eager for a small tumult.

Jack straightened. “Not at all, Mr. Margolies. Good firefighting isn’t about ego, it’s about saving lives and property. A person with a monumental ego doesn’t get far in firefighting. Eventually it’ll catch up with them. It’s about skills and commitment to the job.”

Autumn piped up. “It’s the same with smoke jumpers and hot shot crews. Individuals with the wrong motivations for becoming a firefighter often wash out quickly.”

“But I suppose a few slip through the cracks?” Miranda asked.

Jack rubbed the tight muscles at the back of his neck. “Of course.”

“Don’t you think a healthy ego is important?” Miranda asked.

Jack managed to keep his annoyance under wraps. Miranda had left invasive questions out of the interview up to this point. “Overblown self-importance and a need for recognition and power aren’t tolerated by other firefighters. That type of behavior makes people careless and can firefighters killed.”

“Mr. Margolies, we have time for one more question,” Miranda said.

“Good,” the man said. “Miss MacAllister and Mr. Dillon, do you think big egos killed your firefighter parents?”

Silence filled the room, and Jack’s muscles tensed. Resentment spilled into his blood like acid. He held his breath and glanced over at Autumn. Her stone cold expression said she wouldn’t answer the creep’s question.

Miranda frowned, and shook her head. “Mr. Margolies, I’m not sure—”

“Arrogance will get you killed, Mr. Dillon. Today, in fact,” the man said.

The phone line went dead.

They stared at each other as silence filled the room.

Miranda cleared her throat. “Well, folks, we can see that differences of opinion about firefighting do happen. We’re pausing for a station break.”

The engineer switched to a commercial on toothpaste.

Autumn couldn’t stifle a yawn, and she placed her hand over her mouth. “Sorry.”

Miranda looked concerned. “Why don’t you take a break, too? In fact, if you don’t want to be in on this last part of the interview, it won’t hurt a thing.” She shook her head. “That last guy was a bit creepy.”

Jack crossed his arms. “Don’t let it get to you. He was probably harmless. A nut, but harmless.”

Autumn rose from her chair. “Nuts notwithstanding, I’m talking a walk to the pop

machines. Do either of you want anything?"

"I could use a sugar infusion," Jack said. "Get me a decaf drink, please?"

Autumn headed for the door. "Decaf coming up."

She left the room and headed to the end of the hallway. Someone mentioned earlier that the pop machines were in a room near the stairwells. At least she wouldn't need to traipse to the first floor restaurants.

A short, chubby man wearing a cleaning company jumpsuit pushed a cart down the hall to her left and toward her. Something familiar about him almost made her pause. Instead, she continued until she reached the end of the hall in front of her. Autumn grabbed the doorknob on the door labeled vending machines. Nothing happened. She tried again, but the door wouldn't budge. She heard the cleaning guy's cart rattling her way, but she ignored it.

*Okay. New game plan. Try another floor.*

She heard a sound behind her and turned. The short guy stood there, a silly, self-satisfied grin on his lips. Recognition shot through her; he was the reporter from outside Jack's apartment. Reporter? No, he couldn't be.

He reached out with lightning speed, hands clamping around her throat like a vise. Her air supply instantly ceased. Before she could make more than a strangled sound, the guy manhandled her through the stairwell door. Autumn couldn't draw a single breath as she raked at his flesh with her nails. Dark clouds hovered at the edge of her vision.

No time to breathe.

No time to think.

She kicked out and struck his right knee. He howled and let her go, stumbling backwards on the landing. She sucked in a life-saving breath as her throat burned and stung. She raced for the stairs but he grabbed her arm. Yanking her back to face him, he swung out with his fist and it caught her in the jaw. Incredible pain stabbed into her skull, followed by a wave of dizziness. She fought to stay conscious.

Instead, she fell like a stone. An explosion of red took her down where she didn't want to go.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

"I've learned a great deal from my experience in New York City," Jack said to Miranda's last question.

"So even with this horrible tragedy, you've learned something valuable." Miranda's voice turned serious and compelling. "Of all your experiences in New York, what do you believe will stick with you for the rest of your life?"

Jack knew Miranda probed for a dramatic answer, but he wouldn't take the bait. "Everything about it stays with me, every day of my life. I don't let it consume me. That wouldn't be healthy."

Miranda started to ask another question, when a burst of high-pitched noise raced through the area. Miranda's eyes widened. "Please tell me that isn't what I think it is."

Jack leapt to his feet at the same time his heart jumped into his throat. "Fire alarm."

Miranda spoke into the microphone. "We have a situation here, stay tuned."

"No time for interactive radio, Miranda. We're out of here."

"But—"

The producer's voice came over the system as he gestured at them. "We've got a problem."

The station manager rushed into the room. His panic-stricken eyes told all. "We're on fire."

*No shit.* Jack jammed back fear and relied on his job-honed instincts. Thoughts of Autumn made his throat tighten. "Have you called 9-1-1?"

"Yes."

"Where is the fire located?"

The older man shook his balding head. "Security on the bottom floor says the alarm comes from the sixth, seventh and eighth floors. Evacuation's started."

As Miranda and Jack rushed into the main office area, a woman grabbed Jack's sleeve. "You're a firefighter. What do we do?"

Jack turned to the woman and spoke with volume so everyone could hear him. "Evacuate immediately down the stairwells."

"We can't go down the stairwells," the engineer said, her brown eyes wide with growing tension. "We'll be trapped there."

"Don't be crazy." Miranda glared at the middle-aged woman. "That's the only way out."

Jack gave Miranda a hard stare. "We'll check the exit first to make sure there's no smoke."

"I can't do this," another woman squeaked, her young face wide-eyed with growing panic.

Jack knew he must act promptly or these people would freak and he'd lose control. He held his hands up. "We'll take the stairs down quickly."

"What about the elevator?" Cameron asked.

"No!" Jack knew he'd spoken loudly, but he wanted to make sure they all heard him. "Elevators will stop on floors that are on fire."

"Oh, God. Then we're bacon," another man said, his upper lip dotted with sweat.



Jack saw a collective shudder run through the small grouping. "There is no reason to panic. We'll be fine as long as you all do what I say. Follow me."

In the hallway, the air appeared clear. When they reached the stairwell nearest the suite, people from other floors already poured down the staircase at a steady flow.

"Maybe it's a false alarm," one man said.

"Not much chance of that," the station manager said. "Security says there are definitely fires on two floors below."

"How can we go down there if there's fire?" the engineer asked, her voice tilted toward anxiety.

Jack looked at Miranda and the station manager. "Do you know if this building has interior fire-separated stairwell shafts?" Jack asked succinctly. He knew it was a long shot they'd know the answer.

"Yes," the station manager said as he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "I heard someone talking about it and they've been finishing it up over the last few months."

Jack sighed. "Good."

With that, Jack sent them down the stairwell.

Miranda held back until the last person stepped through the door. Jack turned to her. "I'll follow you down until the crowd reaches the sixth floor. Then I'm coming back up. After I leave you, keep everyone orderly and don't let them stop until they're out of the building."

Miranda grabbed his arm. "What about Autumn? She must have heard the alarm."

A sick feeling filled his stomach. "She should be back by now, but maybe she's trying to help others." Jack urged Miranda toward the stairs. "I'll find her."

Miranda's eyes held worry. "I've got a weird feeling about this."

"So do I." He took his badge identification out of his pants pocket and clipped it to his belt. "There's no time to lose."

\* \* \* \*

A shrill noise filled Autumn's hearing and increased the pain in her head. After the asshole had punched her she'd passed out. How long she'd been out, she didn't know. Confused, she took assessment of each twinge invading her body. A wrenching pain in her knee said she'd damaged the area she destroyed during the last horrible fire in her smoke jumping career. Sharp pain stabbed her ribs as she tried to move. A groan escaped her throat.

*Okay. You might have broken a rib. Your knee is shot to hell. Again.*

*Damn, damn, damn.*

*Wait. She sniffed.*

*That better not be what I think it is.* She took another deep breath and confirmed her fears. *Smoke.*

If she was lucky, this high rise was designed with stairwells that kept out fire and smoke. Either they hadn't retrofitted the building to those specifications or something else was terribly wrong.

Her memory snapped into sharp focus. The reporter. The cleaning man. Where the hell had he gone?

Dread curled in her stomach, creating a nausea that could be as much from a head

wound as fear. She forced herself to sit up as pain lacerated her side. She couldn't hold back a gasp. "Shit."

She should be dead. He wanted her dead. Why?

*Wonder later. Get out now. If he is anywhere nearby, he may want to finish the job.*

The unforgiving concrete felt like a cold slab in a coroner's workspace.

What kind of lunatic had she run into? What shitty luck to find her ass stuck in two fires so close together—

Hell, no.

It didn't seem realistic that the arsonist who set so many fires in Clifton had trailed her and Jack to Billings. Whatever the case might be, she didn't have the luxury of wondering.

As she glanced at the number on the door on this landing, she realized she'd fallen down a short flight of steps. No wonder she felt awful.

She remembered the fire plan of the building. Windows didn't open in this building, and even if they did, firefighting equipment couldn't reach past the seventh floor. She knew a rescue attempt by helicopter from the roof couldn't be guaranteed.

Time to stand up and face the music. With effort, she pulled herself up. A dull ache shot through her ribs, and she clapped her hand against her side in reaction.

Gingerly she tried putting weight on her knee. Agony ripped through the abused limb, and she cried out. She sank back until she sat on a step.

She heard shouting from above, then some gunshots. Her breathing accelerated. Oh, damn.

"Don't move, little girl."

Stiffening, she did as commanded. The chunky man who'd placed her in this precarious position walked down the stairs toward her. A handgun nestled in his pasty white hand. She fixated on the red hairs that peppered his wrist. Then her gaze darted to his face. If his features hadn't reminded her of a pug, she wouldn't have recognized him as the reporter who participated in the paparazzi-like hounding she'd encountered in Clifton. Dozens of freckles sprinkled his nose. Unlike the clean suit she'd seen him wearing in Clifton, today he wore a dirty jumpsuit from a cleaning company. As a reporter, he'd looked spit-shined.

Dressed to kill, she guessed.

Yeah, he was a pug all right. Just as ugly, but not as cute.

*Not me, you slimy creep. You aren't going to kill me.*

Then she saw the name on his jumpsuit. J.P. Margolies.

The man who'd called into the radio station.

\* \* \* \*

As the crowd in front of Jack flowed down the stairs past the sixth floor, he urged Miranda to take everyone the rest of the way down, then started back upstairs.

The door to the seventh floor burst opened next to him. A wild-eyed young brunette, panic etched into her face, grabbed at his arm. "Please help! My friend is still here and he's not listening to me. I told him we have to leave and he thinks he's super man. He thought he heard someone in one of the offices. Please help me!"

Jack rushed into the hallway, afraid someone would be killed or hurt if cool heads and common sense didn't prevail. "Where is he?"

She tugged on his forearm, her nails actually biting into his skin. "This way." Her long hair whipped around as she turned her head. "He heard voices near the other stairwell. Someone said a crazy man is on that side of the building and shooting up everything. No one is going that way, and I told him not to go there either. There's smoke on that side of the hallway."

Grinding apprehension ate a hole through Jack as he followed the woman. He had to help her, and yet his heart screamed for him to find Autumn now.

Fear for Autumn threatened to erode his normally calm approach to firefighting. He knew the beast and understood its many vagaries. That didn't mean the people remaining in the building understood. Some of them would do stupid things out of ignorance or arrogance.

That could mean death.

Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. His heart raced.

He couldn't say why or how he knew, but deep in his gut a menacing disquiet started. Even though Autumn knew how to survive a conflagration, fear clawed him with razor-sharp nails. He couldn't shake the dreadful feeling eroding his cool.

*Dear God, something bad has happened to Autumn.*

*Hurry. Hurry.*

A thousand agonizing images burst into his head without mercy. Guilt often lacerated those who survived when others did not. His father running back into Autumn's burning home and sacrificing himself for someone else, yet not saving them. Firefighters staying inside the World Trade Center, and sacrificing themselves in the attempt to rescue others.

He would do the same, just as he knew Autumn wouldn't hesitate to save another life.

With every conviction in his heart, he vowed when he saw her again, she'd hear the words from his heart.

*I love you, Autumn. I love you.*

Suddenly a man darted from one of the offices, almost running into Jack. Jack grabbed his arm.

"He's not my boyfriend." She nabbed Jack's arm and started pulling. "This way."

The thin man shook his head, clear terror building in his eyes. "I was working in there when I heard the alarm." He held up his briefcase. "Then I remembered I'd left my briefcase and went back."

*Stupid.* Jack tightened his grip on the man's shoulder. "Did you see any sign of a man near the stairwell down there?"

"No."

"Come on!" The woman yanked on Jack's arm.

Jack glared at her, then gave his attention back to the man. "Is there anyone else left on this floor?"

The man started away from Jack. "How the hell should I know?"

The man dashed down the hallway to freedom.

Jack picked up the pace, and as he advanced, a chemical smell assaulted his nose. Walking the hallways breathing toxic gases would get them killed.

Then he saw one door ajar and a hint of smoke coming from that direction.

The woman pointed. "There! In there!"

His skin crawled. He didn't like the look of this.

As he reached the doorway, he saw a man looking at an inner office door. Split seconds passed before Jack realized what the man intended. Jack saw the telltale puff of smoke under the door.

"Peter!" The woman started forward, but it was too late.

Everything went into slow motion for Jack, his hand springing out as if he could prevent the man from sealing his own fate.

Jack knew he didn't have time, but the words came. "Don't open—"

The man reached for the doorknob and turned it as he glanced back at Jack and the woman.

Jack's mind whispered to him. *Son-of-a-bitch.*

Jack grabbed the woman's arm. "Run!"

\* \* \* \*

"Well, girlie, how did you like the ride downstairs?" Pug Face smiled at Autumn like he'd won a check for a million dollars. "Did you hurt yourself?"

She tried straightening her sitting position, but pain knifed through her leg and ribs. She held back a gasp. Her throat hurt.

She nodded toward the smoke curling up the stairwell like fine tendrils of long hair. "We can't stay here."

"We can, and we will. The cleaning cart is on fire one floor down. Propped the door open with it."

Sickness curled inside Autumn. She coughed. "You were the reporter in Clifton."

He grinned. "That's my real job." He pointed at the cleaning jumper. "This is my sideline for today."

Not one hundred percent sure of his intentions, she asked, "But what are you doing in Billings?"

"Come on, you must know."

"Fireworks?"

"That's the ticket, sweetheart," the man said in a poor imitation of Humphrey Bogart. "You and I are going to see major fireworks real soon."

She wouldn't ask him if he'd planted a bomb. She didn't even want to add that possibility to the scenario. "What kind of fireworks?"

"The serious kind. Little wood polishing oil here and there."

Autumn winced. She knew that wood polishing oil and the ingredients used to make it spelled danger. The stuff would combust if the right temperature was present, or someone paired it with a substance like chlorine. Mix it again with other toxic chemicals from furniture and the hazard escalated.

She swallowed, alarm nipping at her heart and making her forget her physical pain for the moment. "How many fires?"

He shrugged. "One fire on six." He pondered a moment. "Half dozen on seven. At least three up here on eight. Woe be it for any poor soul who gets in the way of this one. I made sure I put the burning cleaning cart in the doorway down one flight."

"That's why there's smoke in the stairwell."

"Exactly."

"I heard shooting. Was that you?"

“Yeah. Few stupid people wanted to use this stairwell. Now they understand.”

“Did you kill anyone?”

“No. I shot above their heads. It was tempting to take a few out, though.” Soft and deadly, his laugh told her his madness lie near the surface, as hot as the flaming beast. He snorted. “Poor Jack. He’s probably looking for you right now.”

*Jack. Oh, Jack, please leave the building.*

But if she knew Jack at all, he’d help evacuate others and damn his own life. She knew deep in her heart he would come for her. She clung to hope and feared it at the same time.

If she couldn’t appeal to Pug Face’s fear, she might influence whatever was left of his pea brain. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because that stupid jackass, George Beckett, couldn’t finish the job. I watched him work, you know. He didn’t know what he was doing, and I hate incompetence on the job. No one ever gets it right. I always have to do it for them. He was a bumbling, fumbling, A-number one dumb shit.”

“What was he trying to do that you had to fix?”

“The fires, girl. Beckett was a walking, talking torch. Always looking for a new place to set on fire. You didn’t know that about him, I guess?”

George an arsonist? Somehow, it didn’t surprise her. “Tell me more.”

“He created most of the fires in Clifton. In fact, he told me a sweet little secret. He did your parents house all those years ago.”

Outrage screamed in her brain. A deep, black hole yawned inside her. Her throat tightened with an ache deeper than any horror she’d imagined before. “What?”

“He turned your house to a nice pile of ash.” Pug Face’s eyes went excited and eager. “He said he never had more satisfaction than when he torched your house. He hurt you because you hurt him. You know the bullshit. What a pathetic pissar.” He wiped sweat off his forehead. “He wanted revenge because you wouldn’t let him screw you.”

Autumn struggled to keep her eyes open as a curious dizziness filled her head. “Why would he tell you about the fires he set?”

“He didn’t tell me right away. Only after I’d shown him that he could trust me.” He laughed. “We met after the Top ‘O The Morning Club fire. I thought maybe I could learn something from him. I’d come to Clifton after I heard about the fires. It seemed like a great place to blend in.” He shrugged. “Hell, if another idiot was starting fires, I could cash in on the distraction. I could do my masterpieces and no one would know it was two different people.”

“He trusted you after one meeting?”

“Yeah. Probably because we had something in common. Fire.”

*Keep him talking, Autumn.* “So you set fires before you came to Clifton?”

The man snorted. “No kidding, girl.”

“And no one ever caught you?”

He laughed, then coughed, and she prayed that if smoke inhalation would get to them both, it would take him down first and she’d have a chance to escape. His eyes turned glassy, and she wondered if he’d taken drugs before attempting this fire. “Shit, girl, they couldn’t even catch stupid dumb-ass George Beckett. What makes you think they could catch me?”

The pride in his voice made fury rise inside, the worst rage she’d experienced in a

lifetime. "So you set the fires after the pub blaze?"

"That's right." His next laugh came out hoarse. "But this is my best one. George was a fool."

"You say 'was' when you talk about George. What do you mean?"

"You won't have to worry about him anymore. The police in Clifton have found him by now. He met me in the park. Creep didn't know it really was one last deal. I think he thought I'd be his partner until the end."

Sweat broke out on the back of her neck. "Are you saying you killed him?"

"You bet your sweet ass." His voice filled with sarcasm. "He deserved it. He was a petty arsonist not worth the space he took up. He started some fires in Germany when he was in the military. He was a sick pest who didn't know how to keep his dick in his pants. And believe me, he liked to show it to everybody who would look. He showed it to me the first night I met him. Amazing package."

More nausea crawled up into her stomach. *Let's not go there, you disgusting piece of meat.* She swallowed hard and decided to plunge through the revulsion.

A gasping breath, then a cough seized her. "If we stay here we'll die."

He shrugged.

Renewed fury stomped over her anxiety. "You're not doing this to finish up George's insanity. You get a sexual charge from the carnage."

Pug Face's eyes narrowed as he went still. "My Daddy did it, too. Might say it's all in the family, you know." He switched to a southern drawl. "Daddy always said a good hellfire was cleansing for the soul."

"The air is getting bad." She coughed. "You don't want to die this way."

Pug Face aimed his weapon at Autumn, and she thought her heart would stop. "You don't know what I want, girl."

A shiver coasted over her skin as foreboding filled her. Her eyes stung, and she knew it wouldn't be much longer before they both keeled over. She rebelled against the idea. She would fight to survive, even if it meant finding a way to kill this man.

She shifted, then held back a groan at the pain in her ribs. "What do you want?"

"Notoriety. Beating someone's ass."

"How can you enjoy notoriety if you're dead?"

"I don't need an audience. I left evidence on my computer. A full confession."

Autumn's nausea increased, but she didn't know if the smoke or growing fear caused the problem.

"George Beckett will go down in history as a jerk off who set fires for a sick sexual release," he said. "I'll go down in history as the arsonist who did it because he wanted to. Not because he had to."

She didn't believe him, and knew he felt the same compulsion to set fires as George did or he wouldn't do it at all. What could she say to a man this convinced of his invincibility? "You're proud of what you do."

A fit of coughing made him double over, and she thought about rushing him to grab the gun.

*I'll be dead in a heartbeat.*

He straightened up, his face flushed with effort. "Of course I'm proud. I do things and create things far more interesting than report news. And if I can't create news better than what little petty criminals do ... well, screw 'em. Hell, I am better than them."

*Terrific. A megalomaniac fire starter who thinks he knows everything.*

“You were the voice on the radio today. What’s your real name?”

“Belton Arro.”

New trepidation cut her like a sharp glacier edge running over unprotected skin.

“What did you mean when you said on the radio that it was our time to die? Why did you want to hurt us?”

“You’re a sideline. I’m a reporter, but sometimes the thrills in Montana aren’t enough. Hell, I was in New York and saw all the destruction on September 11, it gave me ideas. Sinfully good ideas. It just took me a few months to set them in motion. George decided to set more fires the same day of the terrorist attacks. He told me he was in a bar when it all happened. He watched it on TV. It turned him on to see the massive destruction.”

“So you were cleverer than George?” Her breathing was becoming short and labored. “You convinced him you could throw off the cops and fire investigators by setting the second set of fires? Why would he hand over the reins to you?”

“He knew a superior mind when he saw it. And he wanted help destroying Dillon.” He coughed. “Beckett hated Dillon’s success and everything he had. His girly friend wanted Dillon, too.”

She swallowed, her mouth dry, her eyes watering and itching. “And you’re not jealous?”

His smile, stretched thin, made shivers ascend her spine. “Course not. You don’t have anything I want. Other than killing off Clifton celebrities as a sideline, I guess. That’s a perk.”

She noted the thick smoke drifting up the stairwell. “Look, why don’t we leave here and you can tell me more?”

When he laughed, her thoughts bounced to Jack. Would she ever see him again? She loved him with a deep and unshakable conviction.

*No. I’m going to make it. I’m going to pull through. Oh, Jack, I love you.*

With that cleansing thought, she jettisoned the idea of snatching the weapon from Pug Face. All that would do is get her shot. Of course, if she waited much longer, she could kiss her ass goodbye.

Astonished at her cool, level feeling, she wondered where her fear had departed to. She felt stone still inside, as if an angel or some other force assured her all would be well. Feeling this chilled couldn’t be normal, but for the moment she decided to be grateful. Panicking would mean certain death.

“Look, the smoke is—” As if to make a point, she coughed. Not that she could help it. “—getting heavy. You can’t tell me what your grand plan is if we’re dead, can you? You have the gun, so you can take us upstairs to another room, right? No one will know.”

Pug Face switched his weapon to his left hand and kept her in his sights. “No, girl, I don’t think so. This is the end of the line for us both.”

Autumn swallowed hard, her soul plunging into depths of despair as she gazed into the barrel of the weapon. She coughed almost non-stop now, and he choked and tried to pretend the smoke didn’t affect him.

“Get up,” he hissed.

She edged her way to a standing position, pain radiating into her side and her knee.

Autumn thought she heard her father’s voice and assumed that she was hallucinating.

*Go. Go now. Escape.*

*How, Dad? How?*

Then she saw the gleam in the man's eyes and knew.

He planned to pull the trigger.

Pug Face's skin grew redder by the moment, then to Autumn's surprise, he coughed ferociously. His eyes closed and his body shuddered.

*Move now. Move or forever hold your peace.*

Pug Face looked almost purple now.

With an effort she didn't know she possessed, she straightened and prepared to make a final stand. Razor sharp pain stabbed her leg and she cried out.

The lights went off in the stairwell.

\* \* \* \*

Jack and the screaming, struggling woman almost made it to the corner when the explosion flattened them.

Death had found him. All he could hope was that the fire didn't crisp them both.

As heat threatened his back, he scrambled to his feet, gasping as lack of oxygen ate at his lungs. Fire licked the ceiling down the hall, moving toward their position, consuming fuel.

The woman jumped to her feet and started toward the fire again, screaming all the while. "Oh, God! Peter! Peter!"

Jack grabbed her arm and jerked her back. "Come on, get out of here!"

"We can't leave him!"

"You can't help him!" As she struggled, tears streaming down her face, he shook her slightly so she would listen. "You can't help him now. Take the stairs down immediately."

"No!"

He didn't want to be cruel, but to survive she must listen to reason. "He's dead!"

A sob burst from her throat as reality struck. She coughed violently around her horrified gasps. "Oh, God! God!"

A firefighting crew burst through the stairwell doors. One firefighter carried a two-inch hose bundle with a gated Wye to split the original hose into two lines of attack. Other firefighters carried donuts of inch-and-a-half line.

"Hey what are you doing up here?" the first firefighter that spotted him asked, his words muffled through his breathing apparatus. Then he saw Jack's badge clipped to his belt. "You a firefighter?"

"Yeah. There was a backdraft a moment ago."

He explained about the man opening the door and the consequences. Another firefighter took the whimpering, shivering woman toward the stairs, and she went without further argument. As Jack helped the crew connecting the hoses to the building's standpipe system and setting up attack lines, he started to cough.

A firefighter grabbed him by the arm. "You all right?"

Jack shook his head. "There's a woman missing. She's a firefighter, too. I have a bad feeling she needs help. Someone also said there's a crazy man shooting up the building by the other stairwell."

Understanding filled the other man's eyes. "We'll help you find her."



Jack gave the man the fast skinny on Autumn. The firefighter nodded and gave instructions for two of his men to follow Jack. "If there's fire up there, call down for a line." The firefighter communicated through his radio, "Charge the lines!"

As Jack started back to the stairwell and the eighth floor, he heard the water surge through the hose and shouts as men moved forward to attack the beast.

\* \* \* \*

Jack led the pack as two firefighters followed him upstairs. Urgency rushed in his blood. Autumn must be all right. She had to be.

He wouldn't accept any other alternative.

When they reached the eighth floor, they assessed the possibility of fire on the other side and found the door cool. They went through and Jack hurried toward the first sound he heard as they rounded a corner.

Coughing. Gagging.

Seconds later one of the firefighters pointed down the hall. "There!"

A man crawled along the floor on his belly, his balding head shiny, his gasps for breath audible. They ran forward to help him. The man saw them and his hand went out in a plea for help. Just before they reached him, the rotund man pushed up to his knees and that's when Jack saw the nametag

J.P. Margolies.

Then he took a better look at the man's face. Recognition flared in the man's eyes as he reached for his pocket. Jack saw the cold gray of shiny metal, and before the weakened man could take aim, Jack lunged forward.

"Look out!" Jack reached for the man's wrist and twisted viciously, pointing the weapon at the ceiling.

A shot rang out.

With a gurgling gasp for air, the man grappled with Jack for the weapon. Jack knelt the struggling man in the chin. As the man's head snapped back, his eyes rolled up. He fell back, the weapon dropping harmlessly for the floor. Jack grabbed the weapon, put the safety on, and jammed the gun in the back of his waistband.

A firefighter dropped to one knee next to the unconscious man. "What the hell is going on?"

Jack rushed passed the fallen man. "I think that's the man who started the fire."

The other firefighters followed him as he continued down the corridor.

"How do you know?" one man asked.

Jack didn't have time to explain. "Autumn's here somewhere."

\* \* \* \*

Autumn refused to die.

She struggled as black, muffling smoke smothered her. Grayness surrounded her, threatening to cloak her in permanent night.

She crawled up the stairs one painful step at time, forcing her knee to work despite the hard stairs and stabbing pain. The door creaked open above her and she realized Pug Face didn't want to die after all. He'd escaped upstairs.

*One chance is all I have.*

*I want to see Jack.*

*I will see Jack.*

*Please, please, please.*

Autumn found the door and pushed on the bar as her strength powered up for one more try. A shove and the door started to open.

She heard shouts as she pushed harder and managed to manhandle the door open all the way. Smoke floated into the hallway. She collapsed on the floor outside the door and it slammed shut.

Coughing, she crawled forward. Inching, inching, inching.

The air seemed fresher here, the smoke not as dense.

Then she heard more voices and looked up through her streaming, stinging eyes.

Jack.

“Autumn!” He ran toward her.

His face held grim determination and incredible relief mixed with fear. Jack knelt near her. She clutched at his shirt and savored the blessed warmth of his touch.

As she coughed this time, her lungs really didn’t like it. She could barely find breath.

She saw Pug Face lying on the floor and his eyes flickered open and caught hers.

Pure rage boiled up, and she glared at him. “I’m alive, you filthy bastard,” she croaked.

She started coughing again. Jack picked her up in his arms.

“We’ve got to get her out of here,” Jack said.

More firefighters came down the hall, and she faded in and out of consciousness. The next several minutes went by in a blur for Autumn as Jack carried her down the hall and into the smoke-free stairwell. Shouts of firefighters, footsteps rattling up the stairs as more men charged upstairs.

She opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn’t stop coughing.

Autumn thought she heard Jack’s voice, worried and strained. “Easy, sweetheart. Breathe. Come on, breathe.”

Once they reached the fresh outdoors, disjointed impressions mixed with her pain until she couldn’t tell what was real. She felt the solidness of something under her back, then realized someone was touching her wrist. A voice asked her to open her eyes. Not Jack.

“Jack,” she said, her throat raw. “Where—” Another cough put her into silence.

She felt Jack’s hand clutching hers. “I’m right here. You’re all right.”

Each breath became painful as her ribs protested. Her knee felt like it might be the size of a watermelon.

She heard Jack tell the other paramedics that he was a paramedic, too.

“Open your eyes, honey.” Jack sounded desperate, his own voice rough from smoke. His voice came again, close to her ear. “I love you. Autumn, I love you.”

“Sir, we need to help you, too. Come on. She’ll be all right,” a male voice said.

Jack let go of her hand, and for a second a terrible panic made her tremble. Then tears of happiness burned her eyes.

Jack loved her, too.

A mask went over her nose and mouth, and as blessed oxygen flowed into her, she inhaled greedily.

“Easy, easy,” a female voice murmured nearby. “Take it slow.”

With supreme effort, Autumn opened her eyes and drank in the most blessed thing she'd seen in the long day.

Jack sat on the other side of the ambulance, his soot-smudged, sweat-covered face decorated with his own oxygen mask. As he saw her awake, his gaze lightened with pure happiness, and he grinned.

Joy removed every thought of pain. She smiled back.

Everything was all right.

## Epilogue

**September 11, 2002**

“Whooooohooooo!” Hank hollered as he spiked the volleyball over the net for what seemed to Autumn like the eight hundredth time.

Cheers and clapping erupted from the bystanders watching the game in Hank and Ginger’s big back yard.

Hank and Jack were members of the Blue team, and they’d spent the afternoon doing some serious butt kicking of the Yellow team.

She watched the two firefighter teams sparring and felt instantly jealous.

Her knee wouldn’t allow that type of action. At least not yet. Perhaps not ever.

As she rose from her chair, she resolved she wouldn’t be bummed about the two surgeries she’d suffered in the last several months. Knew she’d never be a smoke jumper again. She’d stopped running once and for all, and was amazed the concept wasn’t as crushing as she’d imagined it might be.

She’d tried to distance herself. All she wanted from Jack was friendship and no-strings sex. From emotions, from loving a man again. But Jack had shown her the meaning of the deepest, most sincere love, and now she could no longer shield herself from living to the fullest.

As she glanced at Jack, he slapped Hank on the back and the two men laughed.

A warm, tender feeling blossomed inside her. Nope, she couldn’t complain one damned bit.

Time and reflection kept many bad dreams at bay, and partying with good friends like these banished dark, painful memories. She didn’t think much about Pug Face, who would be in jail for the rest of his life.

Besides, her heart was engaged far more with showing her love to Jack. She’d moved in with him a week after the events in Billings.

Today could have been a somber affair as they recalled the events of last year. At Hank and Jack’s encouragement, the Clifton FD decided they would honor the fallen, but they would also celebrate life. Considering what they’d endured, she could appreciate enjoying life every minute, every second of the day.

When they’d returned from Billings after the high-rise fire, police confirmed that Cherry Guillett had been found beaten and strangled to death. Evidence proved George had killed her. In turn, police located George in a park near the outskirts of Clifton with a fatal gunshot wound. Ballistics confirmed the same gun that Belton Arro had terrorized Autumn with had killed George. She shook her head and decided today she wouldn’t think about the craziness surrounding the two arsonists and Cherry’s fate.

A breeze cooled the sunny day, and she flipped up the brim on her big straw hat and glanced at the brilliance of clear Montana sky. She inhaled fresh mountain air and enjoyed the tantalizing scents of flowers, fresh mown grass, and mouthwatering food.

Laughter echoed around the area. Hank’s Newfoundland, aptly named Mammoth, chased kids around the tables. More hilarity rang through the crowd as the firefighters clowned around, and Autumn’s heart glowed with contentment. Guttural male shouts

went up in the crowd as they watched the volleyball game. The game finished and the Yellow team received a thorough ass kicking.

"Jeez," Ginger said as she walked toward Autumn. "You'd think they were on the bravest team or something."

They strolled toward the grills where hot dogs and hamburgers sizzled.

Autumn grinned. "Men." She knew Ginger referred to the football game held back East between the FDNY and the NYPD every year. "I don't think they're quite ready for a football team, do you?"

Ginger laughed and put her arm around Autumn. "Probably not. So, I hear rumors someone is making a big announcement today."

"Who?"

Ginger wagged her eyebrows. "I'm not telling. It's a secret."

"Are you trying to tell me that you and Hank are finally engaged?"

"I'm not tellin'."

Sighing, Autumn stopped in her tracks. "Ginger, if you don't—"

Hank let out another war whoop, startled them both as he rushed to Ginger, and picked her up in his arms. He twirled her around and kissed her thoroughly.

As Autumn laughed, she looked around for the one person suddenly missing from this contented crowd. Jack.

*Where is the man of my dreams, anyway?*

As if conjured from a wish, he appeared from a cluster of cheering firefighters. She waved at him and then added a wink for good measure. His wicked answering grin made her heartbeat quicken.

He sauntered toward her, and she felt a thick, hot desire settle in her stomach. The handsomest man on the planet walked toward her shirtless, and his rippling, muscled physique held her enthralled. His denim cut-offs displayed powerful legs. Well, life didn't get better than this.

He stopped in front of her and took her hand. As always, he kissed her fingers and gave her a huge smile. "What's a beautiful woman like you doing in a place like this?"

She favored him with her most seductive smile. "Waiting for pie."

"No way. Were you planning on eating dessert first?"

She allowed her fingers to brush over his thigh for a second, then remembered where they were. "No." One eyebrow quirked up. "Unless, of course, you are the dessert."

Jack leaned forward and gave her a tender kiss with a soft brush of lips against lips. Tenderness deepened his eyes and made her say the words they'd repeated often in the last few months.

"I love you," she whispered.

She cupped his face in both hands and brushed her thumbs over his skin with a fond reverence. "And I love you." His voice, husky and deep, made her craving for him rise higher. "When this event is over, I say we should have our own party."

She allowed her hand to drift over the muscles in his chest. "A very intimate, personal party?"

His gaze went thermal as he trapped her hand against his chest. "God, yes."

After sharing another sweet kiss Jack said, "They're getting ready to do the ceremony."

The ceremony. He didn't have to explain.

A few moments later, they started a solemn tribute. On a small stage set up in the back yard, a firefighter's wife sang a song of love, peace and hope for the future. Soon after she finished singing, Chief Hallam called for a moment of silence. Shortly later, Chief began his speech.

"This could have been a difficult day for all of us as we honor those men, women, and children who lost their lives one year ago today." He cleared his throat. "But I know they want us to be happy and keep light in our lives. We're here to save lives and property, ladies and gentlemen, and that's what we'll continue to do." He held up his glass of beer. "To those who lost their lives during the past year. And a special toast to the Clifton Fire Department."

After everyone toasted and the Chief left the stage, Jack's brow creased in a frown. He gazed at Autumn. "It seems like yesterday. Then again, I try not to think about it much." His fingers traced hers with a gentle, repetitive movement. "I have everything I need right here."

Someone tapped a utensil against a glass, and the noise attracted everyone's attention. Cries for quiet rang out in the yard.

Hank slid his arm around Ginger and as he looked at the crowd, he raised a glass of wine.

"Friends, I'd like to propose several toasts." As individuals raised their glasses, Hank continued. "We have lots of things to be thankful for these days. One, my buddies and I survived the building collapse, and we're all back to work." People cheered and clapped, and Hank waited for the jubilation to subside before speaking again. "Two, the arson menace is gone from this city." More cries of affirmation and a sharp whistle of approval rang out. "Three, Ginger and I are happy to announce our engagement."

Celebration kept Hank from speaking again right away. Autumn's eyes stung with happy tears.

Jack slid his arm around her and whispered into her ear. "What's wrong?"

She smiled. "I'm just so happy."

Hank gestured for Jack and Autumn to join him and Ginger at the front.

When they stood at the front, Jack took her hands and looked down on the woman he loved more than life itself. Since he'd held her in his arms in Billings and felt the power of his love for her, he knew he wanted to be in her life forever. He glanced at his mother. Her smile and nod showed her happiness.

Autumn waited patiently as Jack cleared his throat. "Autumn, I love you more than my own life. There can be no other woman for me as long as I live, and I want to share this wonderful life with you as husband and wife. Will you marry me?"

A hush settled over the crowd.

Autumn's heart felt like it might stop, then it thundered in her ears as happiness overwhelmed her. She slipped into his arms and gave her answer. "Yes, Jack. I'll marry you."

Hank let out a yahoo, and Ginger squealed. A round of hugs, applause, and handshaking took over.

Jack whispered into Autumn's ear. "Let's take this party home, Autumn."

And they did.

**The End**

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