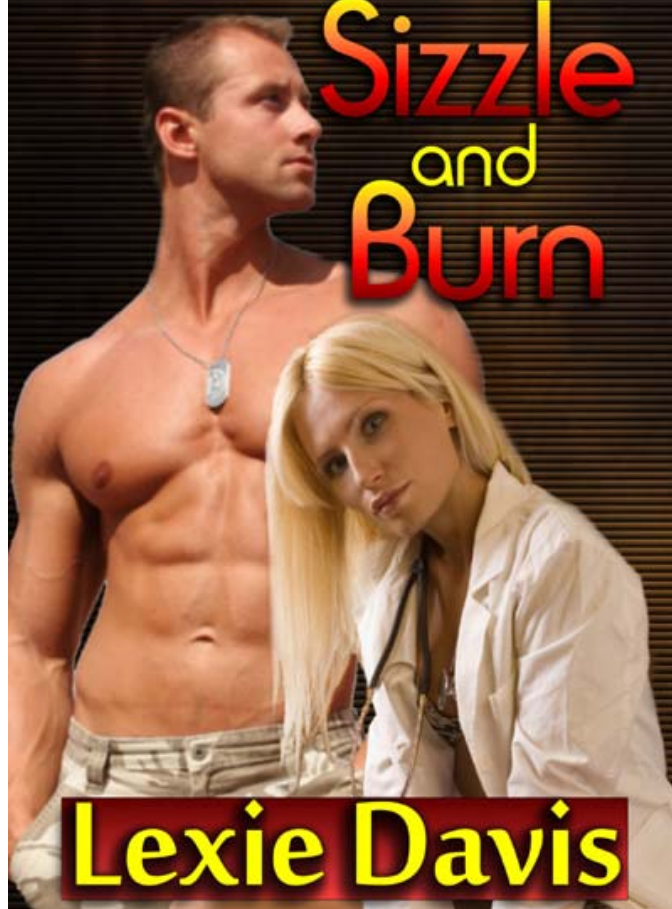


Amira Press

Sizzle and Burn



Lexie Davis

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Dedication

To Billy and Diane

Prologue

She had left home to be with him. Ran away, in fact. Mustering up courage from deep in her soul she came here to his place. He was the one. He had to be. No one else on earth made her feel this way. Nobody else made her body burn with desire—not the way he did. She managed to gain control over her nerves and looked one last time in the mirror before she forced the car door open. *What will he say? Will he be shocked? Will he be pleased I came for him? That I gave everything up for him.*

The little house he called his own sat right outside of the city. Situated on a cozy little cul-de-sac, the small house held promise. She hadn't seen him since he worked with her father a few months ago.

Taking a deep breath, she surveyed her surroundings. The place hadn't changed much. Still the same white siding, the same pink roses—the only color in all the shrubbery of his landscaping, she mused. She smiled at that. Pink. Of all colors for a man to choose.

She took a step toward the walkway and smoothed her filmy white shirt down. Perspiration slicked her palms, and her stomach fluttered as she neared the door. The staccato beat of her heels clicking along the concrete was the only sound in the night air. It hadn't turned full dark yet, and a lamp in front of a window revealed someone was home. She hoped Jax would answer. She hoped all would go well.

Taking a deep breath she raised her hand and rapped twice on the wooden door. Her heart beat frantically, her mind reeling with all the possibilities. This past summer had been the best three months of her life. Every moment she spent with Jax the more she grew fond of him. At first, she thought he didn't like her, that he didn't want her because she was too young. But he soon proved her wrong and showed her just how fond of her he was. Autumn's cheeks heated at the mere thought of what they did. Half the stuff he taught her didn't even grace the pages of her sex ed book. Half the stuff he made her feel didn't begin to describe her want, her need, maybe even her love.

When no one came to the door she knocked again, this time harder in three consecutive raps.

"Coming," came a voice from the other side. When the door opened, a blonde dressed in a man's white button-down shirt and disorderly hair greeted her. Scrunching her nose, she looked down at Autumn. "What do you want?"

Maybe it's his sister. "I'm here to see Jackson Cooper. I'm, ah . . . friend."

She pursed her lips. Then, she yelled over her shoulder, "Baby, you've got a visitor."

Autumn scratched "sibling" off her list of who the lady was and waited patiently for Jackson. Her heart hammered in her chest, her stomach knotted into a little ball. *Maybe this was stupid. What the hell was I thinking?*

Jackson came around the corner wearing nothing but a pair of black boxers. Autumn gulped,

reminding herself to breathe. His tousled dark hair was in desperate need of a trim. Bronze skin covered hard muscles and a very thin piece of cotton fabric hid a nicely large package that was branded in Autumn's memory forever. She allowed herself a few seconds to admire the view, knowing that if all else failed she deserved at least that much. He had a tattoo from the Marines on his upper arm, something that resembled the same one her father and brothers had. Her gaze roamed back to his face, the dark stubble hiding his strong chin and only adding to his handsome features. But his eyes . . . oh, his eyes made her weak at the knees and wet between her thighs. Deep chocolate eyes that simply said, "I want to fuck you" with tiny swirls of gold in the mix. Their first night together, he had promised her without words all the carnal deeds he'd deliver. His eyes alone reminded her of each and every one.

"Do I know you?" He wrapped an arm around the busty blonde, both of them waiting for her response.

"You, uh—stayed with my family this past summer. I'm Autumn Callaghan." Heat rose to her cheeks. *How could he not remember me?* It'd only been five months since she'd seen him last, and she would have been here sooner if her father hadn't put two bodyguards on her who acted like leeches. Finally she escaped their iron grasp and headed for the hills, and yet the one she came for—escaped for—didn't even remember her? "My father, Major Callaghan was on assignment with you. In the Amazon."

Realization struck him and he nodded his head. "Oh, yeah. You're his daughter. The one he tried to keep away from the neighborhood boys."

Her cheeks grew hotter. Three months shy of her eighteenth birthday, she didn't appreciate being treated like a child. She was more adult at thirteen than most twenty-five-years-olds. She was anything but naïve.

"What brings you here?" he finally asked.

Autumn looked to the girl standing in his arms. Her hair was styled in the fresh out of bed look, her clothes—or rather his shirt—was wrinkled and barely buttoned enough to keep her decent. Her lipstick was smeared, her face holding the 'I've just been fucked' look Autumn knew Jackson perfected over the years. Hell, she'd had that look herself and he was the one who gave it to her.

"Um, can we talk in private somewhere?"

The blonde rolled her eyes. "I'll be in the hot tub. You better return naked or I'm going to be mad."

She gave him a small pout that turned into a devious grin before she leaned in to bite at his lower lip. Her hand traveled down his chest to his abs and then to his crotch where she squeezed him with a giggle.

Oh, my god.

Jackson watched her leave with a smile before returning his attention to Autumn. He stood in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, waiting.

On the way over here, Autumn had it all planned out. Her speech was foolproof, perfected and rehearsed, guaranteed to get him to come back to her. When she left, though, she hadn't dreamed a woman being here. A pretty woman who obviously slept with him.

"I came to ask you what this past summer meant to you." *When, what a way to start this conversation, Autumn. Just pack up your pride and go home now.* "When you left, you sort of gave me the inclination you wanted more with me. That after all those nights we spent together that you sort of . . . cared."

He chuckled, unexpectedly shaking his head. "Did someone put you up to this? Who was it? I know I deserve some payback from the guys at the base but this is classic. Who put you up to this?"

He thinks I'm joking?

Autumn frowned. "No one. I'm serious. You told me when you left that I was special to you. But then I never received a phone call or letter. I-I just wanted to know if what you said was true. If you really care about me and want to be with me."

He smirked, almost mocking her. "Sweetheart, I say that to every girl I fuck. They're all special when I sink balls deep into a warm, wet pussy. But I was talking about your sweet pussy. It wasn't special, but extra special. So tight and ripe, perfect for fucking. Damn, I could come right now from the memory."

Autumn's stomach crashed to her toes. She fought back the hurt his words caused, the anger she had for herself in coming this far and being so foolish. She pushed aside the words her brother Jeffery said when he told her what boys like Jackson wanted. They didn't care and she was foolish to assume they would.

What the hell was I thinking? The sting of tears gathered in her eyes and she forbid them to fall. She refused to humiliate herself anymore than she already had. It was a stupid move coming here. A stupid move to assume some kind of connection was made. She wouldn't give him ammunition to mock her and laugh at her stupid naïve ways. As much as she hated to admit it, her brother was right.

"I'm sorry I misunderstood. Please forgive me for barging in on you and your"—she waved her hand indicating the blonde—"companion."

Jackson blew out a harsh breath. "You're just a girl, sweetheart. A little high school girl who lets her emotions overrule her clear judgment. Why the hell would you think a man like me would be interested in anything but your sweet untouched pussy? I don't want marriage. I hate kids, and I sure as hell can't picture myself with one pussy for the rest of my life. Even as great as yours was, I can't see myself making that kind of commitment. Sorry."

A sob caught in her throat. After several years of living with a family full of soldiers, she

considered herself tough. Emotionally, physically, mentally—everything in between. There was nothing she hadn't won in her brother's stupid competitions at least once, and some of them had been pretty damn hard. Yet, this man crumbled all her defenses with a simple speech.

"You're a bastard."

"You're not the only one who thinks so." He shrugged. "Nothing new to me, sweetheart. Go back home and play with your Barbies. Get your head out of clouds and back down to reality. You don't belong here."

Autumn turned away as the first drop of wetness hit her cheek. She didn't look back. Her dignity wouldn't allow it. Jackson Cooper was an ass, and now she saw the neon sign proclaiming it shining before her bright and florescent. What had she been thinking coming here to him after so long? She left her life, the only life she knew, willing to risk everything on him and the ludicrous idea of a possible relationship. Or, God forbid, love.

Fuck love.

She climbed into the driver's seat and finally stole a glance toward the door. The blonde was back, in his arms and obviously checking his tonsils with her tongue. Rage coursed through her veins hotter than the pits of hell. She turned the key in the ignition, put the car in gear and took off down the street. She had no choice but to go back home. Even with the humiliation of them knowing why she left, and returning with a broken heart. She'd get her damn veterinarian degree. She'd open her small clinic. Anything and everything she could do to get as far away from Jackson Cooper as she possibly could.

Turning the radio on, Tina Turner belted out the lyrics, "What's love got to do with it?" And Autumn couldn't agree more. She had sex for the first time with an asshole who simply used her for that and only that. She was foolish to think love resorted from the dick she had inside her. Jackson was right. Love had nothing to do with them fucking. Or better yet, why the hell did she think love had to do with anything?

Chapter One

Fourteen years later . . .

“Dr. Callaghan, I’m worried about my dog, Scruffy.” Leslie Marcum stood before her dressed in her usual attire of fancy clothes and the best designer jeans money could buy. Autumn couldn’t understand why five-hundred-dollar denim jeans made a person feel better about him- or herself, but for Leslie, it did. Same with her dog, she supposed. “He just doesn’t initiate—you know—with the neighbor’s dog anymore.”

Autumn’s head pounded. The need to wrap her hands around Leslie’s neck and choke the woman grew stronger as the seconds went by. This was the fifth time the woman came in her office in four days to talk about her dog’s nonexistent sex life. If she recalled correctly, only three months ago, the woman wanted the dog neutered because he humped everything.

“Maybe he’s just not in the mood,” Autumn mumbled trying to fill out the day’s worth of paperwork piled on her desk.

“But he always initiates. It’s not like him. Do you think his—you *know*—is broken?”

Autumn was five seconds away from telling her she didn’t *know* so she’d blush and shut up. *She’s your client. Her business puts food on the table and a roof over your head.* “Has anything else changed? Diet, sleep, exercise?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Nothing I can recall.”

“Well, Leslie, I can’t help you. Dogs are much like humans in that department. If they want to have sex, they do. If they don’t, they don’t.”

Leslie pursed her chic colored lips. “If you’d stop writing and actually pay attention and care about my baby, maybe you’ll find the answer to my problem. After all, it is what I pay you for.”

Autumn threw her pen down. “I don’t have time for this. I delivered four packs of puppies, a litter of cats, and two calves today—and that was by sticking my hand up a cow’s ass, not once, but twice. I’m tired, cranky, hungry, and just a little bit sexually frustrated myself. I don’t have time to deal with a stupid matter such as this, especially when you didn’t even bring the dog to see me. I’m sorry, Leslie. I can’t help you.”

Immediately, Autumn wanted to retract her statement. She couldn’t believe her control had snapped and from the stunned look on the other woman’s face, neither could she.

“Well, sorry to have bothered you.”

Autumn watched Leslie walk away and didn’t even try to stop her. Five years of this and still it didn’t get any better. Living in the city had sucked. Her small apartment felt like a jail cell on a good day. She had no money for anything since she still owed plenty for her student loans. So she moved here—a small suburb where she ruled her own clinic with her own

standards. She left behind the big city business with her ex and couldn't afford to lose another customer to him, Dr. Gallagher.

Moaning at the aches and pains within her body, Autumn rubbed her temples. It'd been a long time since she had a decent night's sleep, and even longer than that since she had a warm body by her side. She needed to get laid. Pure and simple to relieve some tension and a whole lot of stress. She needed to have some fun for once in her life instead of working twenty-four, seven. *All work and no play, made Autumn a dull girl.*

"Dr. Callaghan, there's a package for you on the front desk," Summer, the vet technician, announced, peeping in Autumn's office.

"Thanks. I'll check in out in just a minute."

"Something wrong?" Summer inquired.

"Nope. Everything's peachy keen." She pushed away from her small desk and strolled out into the waiting area.

With Leslie gone, the last client of the day was taken care of, and she only had a few overnight patients to care for before she went home for the evening.

The package was wrapped in plain white paper with her name on the top. Curious, she carefully cut the tape and opened it. Inside there was a note and a small ticking clock.

'Time is running out. Soon, what's yours will be mine.'

Confused, she looked around the room and then back at the note, reading it a second time. "Summer, who delivered this?"

"I dunno." She leaned on the counter next to Autumn. "Why? What does it say?"

She handed her assistant the note before examining the clock. The smiley face mocked her as she stared at it. She noticed the time was wrong. Her fingers grew warm against the backside. Autumn flipped it over to find a small pack of explosives attached to the clock mechanism.

"Shit. Summer, it's a bomb!" Autumn screamed at her assistant just as the second hand ticked to number twelve and exploded.

* * * *

There are some things in life Jackson didn't do. He didn't steal his buddies' girl no matter how much she begged. He didn't use flowery terms when referring to what he thought or felt. And he sure didn't answer the fucking phone when he was balls deep in a woman screaming his name repeatedly in ecstasy.

It rang once and the girl squealed and contracted around him. During the second ring, he bit

back his own urge to scream. By the fourth, he cursed loudly, came, and then answered his damn cell. It was business. He couldn't ignore business, no matter what the situation was.

His cock slipped from within the girl beneath him as he reached across the bed and answered with a harsh, "Cooper."

"Cooper, this is Major Callaghan. I have an important job for you with excellent wages if you are interested."

Callaghan. Jackson shuddered hearing the name. The meanest bastard ever to walk the face of the earth called him with a job offer. How the hell could he resist? Everyone wanted Callaghan's attention. What power the man held over them all, he didn't know, but everyone wanted to be in his good graces. The ones who weren't, well, he never heard of anyone that dared to get on his bad side and Jackson didn't dare want to be the first. Everyone he knew wanted to prove they were worthy soldiers. Callaghan, for whatever reason, finally noticed Jackson and actually seemed to like him.

"Yes, sir, Major. Tell me when and where." Jackson grabbed a pen and paper and wrote the information he gave.

"Ah, Cooper, this case is very close to me. I trust you to take care of the one prize I have left in this world. Promise me you will do that."

"I promise. I'll guard it with my life." What it was, however he didn't know, but if it meant something to the Major, it'd mean something to him.

After hanging up, the blonde straddled his thighs again and impaled herself on his condom-covered shaft. "You never finished me, big-boy. How about I do all the work this time?" With a sly grin, she started rocking her hips and Jackson lay back, enjoying the ride. Too bad he couldn't remember her name.

Chapter Two

The hospital stay put a damper in Autumn's work. The fact she had no office to work out of also put a damper in her plans and possibly threatened to close her down for good. She didn't know what to do. Someone had tried to kill her. Her father was worried, which is probably why each of her three brothers took turns babysitting her as if she couldn't take care of herself. Hell, she survived, didn't she? That should count for something.

"Why are you still here?" she asked her brother. Davis, the eldest of the Callaghan clan, sat on her couch drinking her beer and eating her food as if he belonged there. "I don't need protection. I don't want you here."

Taking his off the TV for a brief second, he met her eyes. "I'm offended."

Autumn scoffed and took a seat next to him. "Go home where you belong."

"Now, see, that's rude." He grabbed his beer. "I know for sure our mother raised you better than that. I'd expect that rudeness from Jeff or Nick, but not my sweet sister. It hurts."

She laid her head back against the cushion and sighed. "I'm not a child, Davis. I can take care of myself."

"Sure. And when some psycho killer comes after you to do God knows what to you, what are you going to do then, hot shot?"

"Call my brothers and have them come save the day."

He chuckled. "See? You *do* want me here."

Autumn knew just about as much as Special Ops as her brothers. Growing up, they had played games— still played games when they all got together—and she nearly always came out on top. Why were they making such a big deal about this?

"Oh, just so you know, Dad's hired a bodyguard for you," Davis went on to say.

"I don't need a bodyguard," she said through clenched teeth.

The doorbell rang, and Davis smiled. "Tell him that."

Hopping up from the couch he raced her to the front door, fighting her for the chance to open it. Only because of his brute strength did he win their battle and pushed her aside. If her life turned to the pits when the bomb went off, she was in flaming hell right now.

"Well, isn't this a surprise." Davis grinned ear to ear at the man standing on the other side of the door. "Jackson Cooper. I haven't seen you in ages."

When Jackson met her eyes, she glared at him. Fourteen years she'd gone without thinking about him. Without thinking about the humiliation of literally throwing herself at him and

begging him to love her. Only Davis knew what truly happened between her and Jackson, having caught them in the act in the barn. He was also the one who came after her when she ran away and all but filleted her skin from her bones to get her to spill what was on her mind. She cried like a baby and confessed it all to her brother, who in her defense threatened to boil Jackson's balls. Up until this very moment.

And Jackson hadn't changed one bit.

Although his hair was shorter, his eyes still hinted to the same sinful deeds. The connection wasn't as strong as it had been all that time ago, but Autumn still saw the look of interest. He was bigger, body wise, with more muscle than that of his twenties. His thin green cotton shirt stretched across his defined muscles to the point she knew it would rip easily if tugged. She could imagine what his cargo pants covered and gulped a breath at that thought.

"You can't be serious," she said.

"Nice to see you too, hot stuff." Jackson invited himself inside her home. He stood in her small foyer taking up most of the space.

Autumn leaned against the wall, refusing to breathe in his scent and let it go to her head. *Those days are over, and you've moved on.* But it was impossible. Just like Jackson the person, his scent filled the air around him and she held in a groan at the delicious spicy aroma.

"Oh, fuck it. You're going to do what you want anyway." She waved him off and walked away, heading for her bedroom.

Damn, her father for bringing *him* into this. Of all people to turn to, he chose her worst enemy. Jackson Cooper wasn't a man she'd trust with her life because that too would probably end up like her heart—shattered to pieces when something new and something better came along.

Instead of coming in to talk to Davis, Autumn found Jackson barging in her house and following her right to her bedroom as if he had every right to. She turned on him, standing before her poster bed, feeling defeated before the battle even begun.

"Get out of my room," she said in the calmest voice she could muster. In the end though, it came out hoarse.

"Not until we get a few things straight." He stood perfectly still at the door, pinning her with his eyes. "I'm here on business. Your father hired me to protect you, and I fully plan on doing my job. So get it out of your pretty little mind you'll somehow get rid of me or avoid me the entire time, I'm here. It's not going to happen. I see all my battles through to the end. This one is no different."

She refused to cry in front of him. He had lowered her from a human being to a job in five seconds flat. The look in his eyes said that he didn't care. He didn't give a shit about her or her life. He was in it for the money.

"I don't care. Just leave me alone."

"Not until someone tells me what the hell is going on." Jackson stepped inside her bedroom. "Why do you need someone to protect your stubborn ass?"

"Look here, buddy. You do not get to come into my home and insult me. I don't give a shit what my father told you or is paying you, but this is my house and ultimately my decision."

A spark of interest flashed through his eyes and his lips curved slightly at her remark. "I fully intend on the Major briefing me, but I haven't the slightest idea what the hell is going on. I need you to tell me what happened so I can plan the best course of action."

Course of action. Yeah. Right.

"Someone planted a small bomb in a package and sent it to me. It blew up at my office. My father's overactive imagination thinks the person who sent it is out for blood and planned on killing me in the process. I know enough about bombs from studying with Nick that a little hand-held isn't going to threaten a life. Take an arm off, maybe. But not take a life."

"And you saying that shows your naïve stupidity."

"Stop it," she screamed, tears forming in her eyes. "You do not get to waltz into my home and call me names. Especially when you're uninvited."

"No? You'd rather me sugarcoat it for you?" Jackson stepped inside her bedroom, taking up her space. "Tell your father, 'Yeah, sure she's tough shit. She can handle herself.' Then stand to the side and watch your body turn into pink mist when a bigger bomb explodes—all on my watch? When hell freezes over, sweetheart. If you think I'm backing down on this mission because I hurt your feelings fourteen years ago, you're not only stupid but an ignorant fool."

"I hate you."

"Yeah, well, that's something I can live with." He reached into the side pocket of his pants and pulled out shiny metal cuffs.

"What are you doing with those?" Autumn arched a brow.

"Until I can trust you, you'll be handcuffed to the bed." A sly grin crept across his face.

"You aren't putting those things on me." She walked around the bed, positioning it between them.

"No? Is the tough girl going to stop me?"

Autumn sized him up and immediately decided it was a battle she'd lose. Although she roughhoused with her brother Nick, Jackson was twice his size. She would lose before the battle even began. *Where the hell is Davis?* "I'll scream."

“And no one will hear you.” He grabbed her arm and clicked the first cuff in place before she could pull out of his reach. “Or better yet, no one will care.”

The cool metal wrapped around her wrist like a snake twining around a limb. Autumn struggled and Jackson’s grip tightened. She hated the tingle he sent up her arm when his fingers held her wrist immobile. Nothing was more humiliating than the fact she still had that kind of reaction toward him after all he subjected her to.

“Now that’s a good girl,” he cooed. “If you’re really nice to me, I promise to give you more freedom.”

“Davis!”

Autumn jerked her hand away only to lose her balance and fall against the bed. Jackson climbed on top of her, pressing his body against hers to hold her still. She bit her lip to keep from saying something stupid like “Kiss me.” This was war, not foreplay, and she should have used her legs to kick him off her. Instead, her mind played their past relationship like a silent film. Each kiss, each touch flooding her memory faster than the speed of light. She groaned when he pressed his hips to her, remembering the feel of his body as he moved inside her. She’d been with men since her time with Jackson, but he was the only one who made her scream. Oh, how he made her scream.

He clicked the other cuff in place around the posts a smug smile on his face saying he knew her thoughts. She didn’t exactly hide them, with her legs spread apart and her crotch all but rubbing against his. *So much for not embarrassing myself.*

“You try to play tough, sweetheart, but in the end, you’re just a girl, and I’ll win.” Jackson brushed a strand of hair from her face. “I always win.”

She screamed her frustration, and he did nothing but smile. She kicked her legs in an effort to fight him, but he moved quickly out of the way. All logical reasoning said she was doomed. She couldn’t comprehend who he thought he was coming into her house and holding her prisoner, but he sure as hell would pay for it. They’d all pay for it, starting with her overbearing father and his gallant status quo.

Jackson held out his hands. “Now don’t move.” He snickered. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Fuck you, Jackson!”

He smiled. “As memory serves, you already have.”

* * * *

Jackson paused outside Autumn’s bedroom and took a deep breath. *It was her.* The forbidden temptation. Fourteen years ago, Autumn was pretty, but now . . . now she was hot.

Jackson leaned against the closed door and tried to erase the image of her body from his

mind. Although she was still small, her body had filled out to perfection. Her plain black Metallica T-shirt did nothing to hide her perky breasts that he knew for a fact felt good in his hands and tasted even better on his tongue. And the tight denim jeans molded along every curve of her lower body, leaving nothing to the imagination. His libido came to life, dancing with excitement at the forbidden temptation she offered. A lot had changed since he saw the love-struck teenager last, and from what he could tell, it was all for the better.

He tried to clear his mind and erase the way she essentially tried to hump him on her bed just a few seconds ago. He never fucked the job, no matter how tempting it was. And that's all Autumn Callahan was. The job.

He pushed away from the door and made his way into the living room to find Davis smiling at him, a boy with a secret. For whatever reason, he had been chosen to protect Autumn, and the Major expected him to follow through on his commitment. As hard as he knew it would be, he *would* follow through.

"Stop smirking." Jackson plopped down in the nearest chair. "Brief me."

"Dad's just being protective. We all can't be here to protect her, and Dad called you, assuming you could." Davis sighed. "She's possibly the most stubborn woman I know, but you're partially to blame for that."

Jackson rubbed the back of his neck. "I can't help it."

Davis stiffened. "Maybe not, but you could have handled it differently. She was just a child. You were her first love. Seeing you fucking another woman after you told her you wanted nothing but her body isn't the best way to get rid of someone."

Jackson glanced over to the side, focusing his attention on the kids playing basketball across the street. "I know that. But we were both young and stupid."

"Really? From what I hear, your ways haven't changed that much. What are you now, old and stupid?"

Jackson stood. "The last thing I expected was to get a lecture from you. Give me the information to do my job."

"Two weeks ago, Autumn received a bomb attached to a clock. Though it was an amateur design, according to Nick, she was scared out of her mind. Dad wanted her to come to the ranch, but she refused. She said she had work to do, and the stubborn girl went to work the same day she got out of the hospital. She won't quit doing what she loves most, and that's treating sick animals. You'll find that out soon enough so be prepared to spend your time at her clinic."

"So the guy sends a bomb, something he obviously knows nothing about, with the intention of what? Killing her? Or was he just trying to scare her?" The stuff wasn't adding up in Jackson's mind.

“Autumn doesn’t have many enemies,” Davis said. “But in all honesty, she doesn’t have that many friends either. I don’t think it was a threat on her life, but someone definitely wants her to live in fear. She only tells us parts of her life, and most of that we have to drag out of her. She’s closed off and likes to keep her business to herself.”

Jackson could understand that. He was the king of keeping his shit private and had mastered his inability to care about others personal lives. Although, he couldn’t imagine the Major’s sweet little Autumn keeping secrets from her daddy.

“That’s it. If you need me, I’ll be at the ranch. I have a couple days off before I go back to the base.” Davis made his way to the door, stopping when he reached it. “One thing though, Jack, you hurt her again, and we’ll come after you personally. I should have done it years ago when she told me what happened at your house, but I overlooked it, knowing it was what it was. It’s not a threat, but a promise.”

Jackson stared at the closed door long after Davis left. What the hell was he doing here? The case was too personal, no matter how much compensation came from it. He glanced back at Autumn’s bedroom door and sighed. Too much was left unsaid between them. He knew he hurt her feelings, but he stood by his reasons. She was his job now. He crossed his *l*’s and dotted his *i*’s. No turning back.

He rolled his eyes and stood. He never went back on a commitment, and whether he liked it or not, he made the commitment to see this job through. If only he could remember Autumn Callahan was the job and not just a hot woman who hated his guts.

He twisted the doorknob and pushed her bedroom door wide. “Davis just left so it looks like I’m bunking with you tonight.”

He glanced toward the bed where Autumn should be and saw a pile of rumpled sheets. Shifting his eyes upward he saw the wooden post in the headboard missing.

“Fuck.”

He entered the room and turned to face a very pissed-off Autumn. Before he could react, she swung the wooden post at him, nailing his solar plexus with the blunt attack.

“I’m sick and tired of men like you trying to dominate my life.” She pulled back and swung again, hitting him with a blow for each of her statements. “My father. My brothers. And you.”

She tried to swing again, but Jackson grabbed the piece of wood from her and pinned her body against the door. Her breath whooshed from her lungs as he manhandled her. He twisted caught her arms and pressed them on each side of her body, forcing her to face him without reprieve.

“You hit me again, and I’ll reciprocate,” he murmured.

“Let me go.” She struggled but he pressed his hips harder against her, effectively pinning her

against the solid wood.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I wouldn’t be here if your father hadn’t called. You wouldn’t be here if someone hadn’t sent you a bomb. So for us to part ways again and go back to our normal routines, I need to figure out who or what the threat is and dispose of it immediately. The more you cooperate, the faster I’ll leave.”

Tears gathered in her eyes, and Jackson nearly groaned out loud. He hated it when a woman cried and hated it even more Autumn Callahan was the one crying. The same look on her face fourteen years ago reappeared. He may not know about feelings and emotions, but he did learn over the years that women usually only cried when their feelings were hurt or they wanted their way. In this instance, the possibility of both reasons rang true.

“Why’d he have to pick you?” She sniffled. “Of all the possible men out there, why did it have to be you?”

Jackson couldn’t answer that question honestly. No one ever question the Major’s intentions or reasons, and he wasn’t about to be the first. Jackson would like to think it was because he was the best at his job, having served in several hostile environments and come away with a victory, but he knew the Major only trusted certain people with certain things. Autumn Callahan was his most prized asset. Even though he had three boys, Autumn, Jackson knew, reminded the Major of her deceased mother. The fact that he trusted Jackson with his daughter’s life spoke volumes.

He stepped away from her and turned toward the bed. “I don’t know. I’ve done shit for him in the past and succeeded in everything I’ve done. I don’t know why he picked me other than the fact I do my job well and I always see it through until the end. I never back down no matter how tough shit gets.”

“He doesn’t know about our past,” she said.

Jackson turned to see her beautiful brown eyes shimmering with moisture.

“My brothers are the only ones who know, and it was impossible to keep it from them, otherwise I would have. He sent them to find me when I ran away, and Jeffery all but tortured me to tell him everything.”

Jackson figured as much. He and Jeffery weren’t exactly the best of friends, and he could only imagine what Autumn told them about the day she came by his house. Jackson did know the Major protected his only daughter. There was no way he knew their past because if he did, Jackson had no doubt he’d be six feet under. He silently thanked Autumn for keeping their dirty deeds a secret from her father.

“Well, we’re not dealing with the past right now.” Jackson grabbed a tissue from her dresser and handed it to her. “Will you tell me why you think someone would send you a bomb? Did you piss someone off recently? Is this more of a scare tactic or a death threat? I need to know as much as I can about you and your life if we’re going to catch this creep.”

He watched her hesitate, knowing she didn't trust him. *If she didn't trust her family with the details of her life, why would he assume she'd trust you?* Jackson waited patiently while she had her silent debate.

"Fine. I don't know why someone would send me a bomb. It wasn't a professional bomber because I studied with Nick. This person used cheap equipment that was seriously unstable. I haven't pissed off anyone out of the ordinary that I can think of. And I believe it's more of a scare tactic than anything." She ran her hands through her hair and then moved to toss the used Kleenex. "Any more questions?"

Jackson held back the smile that accompanied the question he had in mind. "What about past boyfriends or lovers? Anyone in that category this person could be?"

Autumn snorted. "Well, I can count on one hand all the men in that category with you included. I suppose it's a possibility, though. Did you send me a bomb?"

The old Autumn reappeared again, and Jackson couldn't have been happier. At least the tears were gone and the some of the awkwardness left with them.

"If I was ever stupid enough to try and harm you, I wouldn't use a bomb." Jackson met her stare. "But I'd like to think I'm not stupid enough to even consider it."

"You really have a thing with intelligence, don't you?"

"Knowledge is power." He glanced around the room. The place was clean and feminine. Her room was decorated with dark woods, her bed covered with deep red sheets. The king-size poster bed took up a great deal of the master bedroom, somehow making the room feel lived in. Why a single woman needed such a big bed, he didn't know.

"So no boyfriend or spastic lover after you. No enemies. Who do you think this person could be? An animal hater or something?"

She shrugged. "Funny. I don't know. I live in a small town outside the big city. We pretty much get along here."

He walked over to her dresser and picked up the bottle of lotion that sat there. She still wore the same strawberries-and-cream-sherbet scent that smelled good enough to eat. Jackson couldn't believe he remembered that after so long. He never proclaimed to be a monk, but the finer details of Autumn slipped into his thoughts, little bits that he had no reason to recall.

All at once, they flooded his mind. Her favorite food was a grilled cheese sandwich with not one slice but four, toasted light brown. He couldn't even begin to count how many she ate that summer. She liked the color red, and it looked great on her. She went barefoot nearly every day while sipping on a popsicle with a book in hand. She liked romance novels with half-naked men on the front holding the woman in a seductive pose. She was just seventeen. A sweet seventeen-year-old who had allowed herself to fall in love with him. Or so she thought.

“Can you take me to the clinic and show me the scene of the crime?” Jackson put the lotion back and turned toward her. “I need to know as much about everything as I can. I figure what better place than to start there?”

He saw her hesitation. Her teeth scraped against her lower lip, chewing on the plump flesh while she debated. He may not be the man of her dreams, but he was here to help. Honest to goodness in the very least that’s what he wanted to do. All the other stuff didn’t matter right now.

“I’ll get my purse.” She motioned for him to exit the room before her. “There really isn’t anything there, but we can go I guess. You drive.”

Chapter Three

Autumn glanced around at the mess the small explosion made. Thank goodness no one had been hurt too badly and all the animals remained safe. The person who made the bomb really didn't know what he was doing. The strength was nothing more than a firecracker going off inside, and in all honesty, a firecracker was probably what the bomber used. The fire damage was minimal, and the explosion only damaged the counter and part of the wall. The office needed a little remodeling and a fresh coat of paint. It should be ready in a week or two. She planned on making her newfound bodyguard help her in getting the place opened for business. The very least he could do was earn his paycheck. The rest of the world had to.

"Did you throw the bomb when you realized what it was?" Jackson glanced at the hole in the counter.

"Yes. I told my assistant what it was, and I threw it as it exploded."

"Did it hurt you?"

She shook her head.

Jackson frowned. "You're lucky."

This she knew. "I'm hoping to open next Monday. I can't afford to lose any more business than I already have."

"I'm sure a week wouldn't harm your business that much. I mean it's not like you're an MD or something."

She was pretty sure that was a cutdown but chose to ignore it. *Stick with the basics and he'll be gone in no time.* "Yeah, well, I have to put food on the table just like everyone else. The way I figure it, you can help me replace the counter and paint the walls. The rest I can do myself."

Jackson turned around with a slight tilt to his lips. "And I would do this because . . ."

"You're Jackson Cooper, stud extraordinaire. Hell, you're rooming with me, and using my house for all your personal needs. The least you could do is help me."

"I thought you didn't need help from anyone." He came around the counter and glanced up toward the ceiling. "Autumn Faye Callahan doesn't depend on anyone—especially men to help her do anything. Am I right?"

"How do you know my middle name?"

"Your father used all three names when talking about you. Or just Autumn Faye. It's your mother's name." He shrugged.

"Are you going to help me or not?"

“It’ll cost you.” He smiled and leaned closer to her. “Much more than you’re willing to pay.”

“Damn right. I’m not paying you anything.”

His smile widened. “Your stubbornness toward men must keep Duracell’s business from plummeting.”

“If you’re suggesting what I think you are, you might as well end this conversation now.” She turned toward the counter and began shuffling the scattered papers into a neat pile.

How one man could heat her blood both in anger and desire at the same time was one of the world’s modern wonders. Autumn fought to maintain control over her emotions and the reactions she had toward Jackson. She wasn’t supposed to even like him.

“Why because I’m right?” He shifted behind her close enough so she felt his body heat but far enough away he didn’t touch any part of her. “You put on a tough exterior but inside your soft. And creamy. And hot. And delicious—”

“Okay.” Autumn whirled around to face him. “Let’s set some rules. We will not talk about sex in any way or form. We will not discuss past encounters or the nonexistent possibility of future encounters. And we most certainly will not actually have any type of sex whatsoever.”

She licked her lips and wondered if he bought her speech. If she really didn’t want him, then why was her body heating at the mere thought of his lips crushing against hers. She didn’t buy her speech and that possibly scared her the most.

“Fine.” His eyes focused on her lips. “You say you don’t want sex yet your body speaks a different language.”

Jackson’s lips crashed down on hers, coaxing her own apart as he plunged his tongue inside her mouth. He backed her against the counter and pressed his pelvis into hers. Clutching the sides of the counter, Autumn moaned into his mouth. She couldn’t deny the reaction her body had when his cock pressed into her. Unfortunately. Wetness gathered between her thighs, and she opened them a bit wider, accommodating him. Inviting him.

The same feelings from fourteen years ago surfaced, the realization like a bucket of ice water to the face. He had come back into her life a little over two hours ago, and she was like a dog in heat ready to jump his bones. Autumn jerked away from him immediately and stared into his eyes. *He was the same man. The man who used you and made you fall in love with him in the process.* Specks of gold highlighted his brown eyes, tiny swirls she could easily get lost in. *It would be a lot easier if he were ugly.* Anger was her only hope of keeping him away from her and her bed. She pushed him away.

“Don’t do that.” She touched her fingers to her lips. “Don’t you ever try touching me again.”

Autumn turned, scolding herself for her own stupidity. He still kissed the same toe-curling

kiss girls only experience from a guy who knows what he's doing. And Jackson Cooper did know what he was doing. Some might consider him a pro.

"I didn't do anything you didn't want, Autumn."

"No, you didn't." She started shuffling the papers again. "I don't want to get hurt again, Jackson. It sucks."

His hand ran the length of her arm. "I promise to give you pleasure first."

Autumn whirled around, narrowing her eyes. "You don't get it, do you? I truly thought I loved you. I believed it with all my heart and soul. It wasn't the kind of love that fades but a true love I believe lasts a lifetime. But when I told you, you mocked me. You laughed in my face and told me you used me. That hurt, Jackson. You played with my emotions and verbally slapped me across the face."

"I never told you it was more than sex. You can't hold me responsible for your naivety."

"You said I was special. One automatically assumes it's more than sex, Jackson." She shook her head. "Have you ever been in a real relationship? You know, the kind where you put someone else before yourself because their needs matter more than your own? You should try it sometime. It gets lonely going through the physical act each day without some kind of emotion behind it."

Jackson didn't have to answer for Autumn to know his response. Her brothers told her the kind of person he was, the reputation he had. When he wasn't making his country proud, he was between a woman's thighs erasing the world of hurt his life bestowed upon him. He was too cocky and selfish to possibly have a real relationship with anyone. His interactions with her said that much. He wanted sex. He probably didn't even experience any emotion along with it. Autumn found herself almost feeling sorry for him.

"I don't do relationships," he said.

"No. You have meaningless sex with a willing skirt who spreads her legs for you." She grabbed her keys. "I'm done here. We need to stop by Home Depot for some paint and a new counter."

Jackson left without another word and Autumn trailed behind. His visit was only going to be torture. *Welcome to hell.*

* * * *

Jackson lay in Autumn's spare bed, contemplating their earlier discussion. He didn't understand what her deal was, yet he knew something she had said was right. He turned on his side and punched the pillow beneath his head. The bed wasn't comfortable and the room was hotter than Hades. But that was the least of his problems. She got under his skin.

He didn't need a relationship. People like him, with his career and his lifestyle, couldn't

delve into relationships because they'd never last. It didn't matter. Even if he did love someone there was no guarantee of a happy ending. His parents proved that.

Jackson turned on his back and stared at the ceiling. *Why'd I have to think about that?* His mother, Beverly, was truly, madly, deeply in love with his father. A relationship that ended with two tragic deaths. One his father's fault. The other . . . He sighed and threw the covers back. Sleeping wasn't a possibility.

Jackson opened his bedroom door, quietly, careful not to wake Autumn. He didn't really want to deal with her when his mind was a muddled mess. He trudged to the kitchen, running a hand through his hair as he went.

"Couldn't sleep, either?" Autumn leaned against the bar, shaking a packet of sugar. Before her sat a steaming mug of tea, her favorite nighttime drink if he remembered correctly.

"Not really." He took a seat at the bar across from her.

She wore a loose-fitting black pajama set with "P!nk" splayed across the front in the color pink. Her hair was pulled high on her head in a ponytail with a few tendrils of blonde hair falling into her face. She wore no makeup and looked beautiful without it.

"What's keeping you awake?" he ventured, watching as she took the first sip of her tea.

"Well, I was pissed at you to start out, and when I'm pissed, I clean. My poor room suffered the brunt of my attack, and well, I stumbled across the note that came with the bomb. It sort of creeped me out."

"There was a note?" Jackson's attention piqued. "What did it say?"

She took another sip. "Time is running out. What's yours will soon be mine."

He saw her hand tremble. Autumn didn't crack easily. Her brothers roughhoused and teased her relentlessly to the point she was forced to hold her own against them. If an anonymous note had the ability to make her tremble, something serious was going on.

"Where's the note?"

"I left it in my room on the bed."

Jackson left long enough to retrieve the note and returned to his spot at the bar with it in his hand. The writing was in normal black ink, scribbled as if the perp was in a hurry. From the look on Autumn's face and her reaction, he had the feeling she possibly knew who had written the note.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

She stared at the note and visibly shivered. "I don't know, Jackson."

“If you want me to help you, you have to trust me.”

She sipped from her tea. “Trust is a relative word, don’t you think?”

Jackson knew he deserved that. He deserved everything she threw his way. He was ignorant to assume she’d be a little robot and do as he commanded. He’d dealt with difficult hostage negotiations and hostile warfare, yet stubborn Autumn Faye and her damn mysterious bomber topped the list.

How am I going to get her to trust me?

“Can you forget about the damn past. Yes, I fucked up. You’re a great person both then and now, and I totally fucked my chance up. I get it. Now we can move on.” *Okay, that wasn’t exactly the best route to winning her trust.* “Look, I’m here to help. Yes, your father is paying me, but I honestly like you. I know you hate my guts, but I want to help you figure out who this bastard is. I can’t do that if you don’t help me. We’re partners in this, Autumn. It’s up to you and me. Help me figure out who this is so we can go back to living our lives.”

Autumn sat her mug down in front of her and stared at the dark liquid inside. “I can’t remember everything. I honestly forgot about the note.”

His heart raced while he struggled to control his annoyance. “Autumn, this is serious. It’s a threat. You can’t afford to forget anything.”

Her expression changed, like she was about to cry again. “You don’t think I know that? I know this isn’t a stupid game, Jackson. “

“Yet, you don’t need any help dealing with it?” He ran his fingers through his hair staring at the note. “Do you have any clue as to who it is?”

Autumn leaned forward, momentarily distracting him. “I don’t know. I made a lot of enemies when Dr. Gallagher opened up his doggy ambulance service and my clients wanted me to do the same. I simply didn’t have the money or the resources to provide that kind of service to my clients, and several people got mad about it. Maybe it’s one of them.”

Jackson chuckled. “A doggy ambulance service?”

“Yes. It’s more or less a rolling vet clinic. I came up with the idea a few years ago and he stole it from me.” She picked up the mug and completely avoided his eyes.

“Why would he steal an idea like that? I mean, is there a high demand for doggy ambulances or something? I know you like animals and everything but dogs aren’t humans.”

“Stop making fun of me!” She slammed the mug against the counter, liquid sloshing everywhere. “I help animals. I love my job, and you will not belittle it for your own twisted pleasure.”

He watched her shake as if she were trying to control a million emotions she bottled inside.

"I wasn't belittling it. Most people just take their pets to the vet. I don't understand why this is that big of a deal."

She glared at him. "You wouldn't understand. Even if I told you my reasons, his reasons, you'd laugh in my face. Mocking people seems to be the only thing you're good at."

"That was below the belt. And I wasn't mocking you." He stood and rounded the counter. "Autumn, you're shaking."

He couldn't tell if it was from the need to punch something—mainly him—or if it was the need to cry. Either way, he knew he had caused it. Jackson stood next to her, hesitant about touching her. Comfort was the last thing he knew about and probably the last thing she wanted from him.

"Yeah, well, you have a knack for pissing me off." She took a deep breath. "I just want this to be over with."

Don't we all. Jackson stepped toward her and wrapped her in his arms. He tried his best to keep the hug platonic, stroking her back gently like a brother would comfort a sister. He didn't force her to accept his comfort and to his surprise, she didn't pull away.

"I wasn't making fun of you or your job." She still shook in his arms, and he tightened them around her. Autumn pressed her cheek against his bare chest and wrapped her arms around him. "A doggy ambulance service sounds great. And I promised you earlier that I'd find this creep."

"It's not that," she mumbled.

He rubbed her shoulders. "I'll leave as soon as the case is solved."

She chuckled. "Not what I meant either. He stole all my ideas. I talked about the ambulance service with him over lunch, even including the fact I didn't have money to support it, but I never suspected Gallagher to run with it. He stole my business and now with the threats and God only knows what else that could happen, I can't afford to stay out of the office for long."

Whoever this guy was sure planned on making Autumn's life a living hell. Jackson gently pushed her away from him so he could see her eyes.

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart. We've got the stuff to put everything back to normal and we'll start on it tomorrow." He kissed her forehead. "Go get some sleep."

He watched her leave, noting for the first time in his life what it was like to put another person's needs before his own. He actually cared about her and didn't know what to make of it.

Chapter Four

“Oh, my.” Summer grinned from ear to ear when Autumn’s new bodyguard walked into the clinic shirtless and carrying several paint cans.

Jackson basically took over the remodeling project and what a godsend he was. Smiling to herself, Autumn joined Summer in admiring his backside. It was nearly ninety degrees outside, and all he wore was baggy denim pants patched with fabric near the back pockets. It was more of a fashion look instead of actual rips in the denim and left little to Autumn’s imagination.

“Where on earth did you pick up that beefcake?” Summer licked her lips and a twinge of jealousy shot through Autumn’s body. “Is he the guy your father hired? Can he hire *me* a guy like that?”

Autumn’s cheeks heated. “He’s an old friend.”

Not really true since their relationship had gone from platonic to sexual within seconds. He spent that whole summer nearly ignoring her, and then suddenly he was inside her making her scream his name.

Autumn sighed remembering each and every time. He made her scream all right, and happened to be the only lover she’d taken who could. “And an ex-lover.”

Summer’s jaw dropped. “You had sex with him?”

Autumn chewed on her lip. “Years ago. We were just kids, and he left. Not too much to that story, and it’s best left in the past. Jackson’s a friend of my family’s and my father’s most trusted . . . whatever. Anyway, he’s here now to help.”

“Help give you a screaming orgasm,” Summer mumbled under her breath.

Jackson’s voice halted their conversation. “Ladies, if you don’t mind, I need you to move everything on this counter so I can take it out and put the new one in.”

Summer giggled like a schoolgirl. “Sure thing,” she replied. “Come on, Doc. He *needs* us.”

Autumn continued to stare at Jackson while he waited for them to clear the desk off. The last guy she dated turned out to be a jerk. And there’d only been three lovers since Jackson, one being a one-night stand. The other two relationships ended in deceit and dishonesty. But none of them remotely held a candle to the “beefcake” standing in her clinic with his shirt off and sweat glistening his body. *None*.

“Who’s your friend, Autumn?” Jackson pointed to Summer.

“Oh, sorry. Jackson, this is my assistant Summer.” Autumn joined them in the effort to clean the counter while remaining organized as well. “We’re planning on opening a bigger clinic together once Summer completes vet school.”

“Yeah. I’d love nothing more than to kick Dr. Gallagher’s butt from here to the moon.” Summer stuffed files in a crate. “The little twerp doesn’t deserve the good name of being a veterinarian, and I’d love to put his stinky ass out of business. Especially after what he did to you.”

“Summer,” Autumn warned.

“What? The pompous little twit needs a good ass kicking. Though I’d rather do it with dollars instead of fists.” She smiled at her friend. “You took care of the fists part for me.”

Jackson turned completely around with a smile on his face, and Autumn did her best not to meet his eyes. “You punched the pompous little twit?”

Autumn struggled to stand still and focus on gathering her scattered files. The less said about that incident, the better off everyone would be. The last thing Jackson needed to know in detail was her relationship with Frank Gallagher.

“Punch? Hell no. She gave him a bloody nose and two black eyes. I told her to let him bleed out on the street, but Autumn wouldn’t. She’s too caring, even in battle. She gave him some damn Kleenexes to stop the bleeding before he went to the hospital. Even as he was cussing her out for breaking his nose.”

Autumn remembered that and smiled to herself. “Both of you know damn good and well I can take care of myself.”

And she could. Living with three brothers who serviced in the Marines and picked on her relentlessly, she had to know how to fight her own battles. And she won many wars because of it.

“Sure you can.” Jackson lifted a pile of folders and dumped them into her arms. “Take these to the back, Rocky, so they don’t get lost.”

Summer came close to dishing out more information than Autumn liked. It had been three years since the jerk separated from her and their past best remained concealed and locked away from the general public. She didn’t care how much she was supposed to trust Jackson, he didn’t need to know about every gritty detail of her life.

The puppies in the back barked for attention and Autumn couldn’t help smiling at the furry critters. Many times throughout her career, she wondered why she chose this field of work when it’d be so much easier to quit. One look at the puppies faces and she knew why. She was meant to, and no one, Gallagher included, would stop her from doing her job and doing it right.

She returned to the front to find Summer and Jackson chatting. Her best friend reached out to Jackson, touching his arm lightly as they both shared a laugh. *My best friend and my worst enemy flirting!* Autumn took a deep breath and cleared her throat.

Autumn knew she could deny it all she wanted. She didn't want another woman, a prettier woman touching him. Out of nowhere, a pang of jealousy speared her as she watched the two turn quickly as if they'd been caught doing dirty deeds.

"Isn't there work to be done?"

Summer made her way to the far corner of the room, cleaning up the front office and shifting all the paperwork to the back. Jackson stood before her reading her perfectly like a book.

She turned her back to him. "I need you to help me with some of the dogs if you don't mind. They've been locked up all day and probably need to stretch their legs and relieve themselves."

"You look upset." He moved in behind her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She wanted to lean back a little and feel his body pressed against hers. She wanted him to laugh with her, the way he laughed with Summer. She wanted all the things she knew he couldn't give her and her heart ached because of it. As much as she hated to admit it to herself, she was still in love with him. Those same heartbreaking feelings surfaced two days after his arrival and she was hooked. Fourteen years of bitterness and separation didn't stop her from falling victim again. She still loved the one man who would never love her back.

"Remember that trust thing we talked about?" Jackson leaned forward, his breath fanning against her ear. "We were just having a nice conversation about her boyfriend."

"Dr. Callahan! Dr. Callahan!" Autumn met Jackson's eyes, then turned in his arms to see a young boy running toward the front door. "Dr. Callahan, come quick. Dodo got loose and is going crazy!"

Autumn pulled out of Jackson's arms and ran out the door, following the boy. Jackson and Summer were close behind. Just outside the clinic, the pit bull named Dodo snarled and growled at two little girls, Mary and Sasha, backing them against a brick wall. Attached to the dog's neck was a metal chain and from where Autumn stood, it was embedded in the dog's neck.

"Dr. Callahan," Sasha cried. "Dodo's scaring me."

"Summer, please get a bag of doggy doodles and a syringe." Autumn licked her lips and pushed two kids, Malcolm and Marty, to the side, out of the way.

"Doc, you're not going to go out there are you?"

"Somebody's got to."

She waited until Summer returned with the item, grabbed a syringe and walked calmly

toward the dog. "Dodo, what's wrong, girl?"

Malcolm, the boy who owned the dog, stood to the side with Marty, the informer, simply staring at the dog.

"Mary threw a rock, and it accidentally hit Dodo in the back. Now she's gone crazy," Marty said.

From memory alone, Autumn knew Dodo was a ten-year-old pit bull that was slowly losing her eyesight and hearing. She'd been coming to her office since Autumn opened the place up five years ago, and while a once soft-mannered dog, Dodo simply didn't understand her surroundings anymore. Now, each and every unexpected movement threatened her whether it be sound or touch. She recommended the dog be put down if occurrences like this came about, but Malcolm's parents refused. *Where are the parents now?*

"Whatever you kids do, do not scream, cry, or run," Autumn warned. "Dodo feels threatened, and we have to remind her none of us will hurt her."

She inched toward the dog, drawing its attention toward her instead of the kids. "Dodo, come here, girl." She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers at the beast. "Would you like a treat?"

Dodo gave Autumn her full attention and continued to growl. Her white fur was now coated red around her neck where the chain had broken the skin. Autumn's heart raced. It'd been too long since she had to deal with deranged pets, and she didn't like it then. Jackson stood to the side, looking like a cat ready to pounce. *Does he really have a need to protect me?* Autumn banished the thought almost as soon as it came. *Nah. I'm just the job.*

She soothed the dog with nonsense chatter. The main goal was to get Dodo away from the children. So far, the dog's attention stayed on Autumn and didn't return to the kids. After a few minutes, the dog let her close enough to feed it a biscuit. "That's a good girl, Dodo. See? We don't want to hurt you."

She petted the dog's head while it chomped on the biscuit. Dodo really was a sweet pet. As one of her first clients, Autumn had developed a special bond with the animal and her owners. She hated the fact that her temperament took a downturn along with her senses. It put everyone in danger just as much as the family. But the dog didn't need to be around kids unsupervised.

"Dr. Callahan, Dodo's bleeding," Malcolm said.

The gash in her neck still contained part of the chain that the family tied her to. The blood around the wound started to dry leaving the dog's coat looking more brown than red now, with tender pink flesh beneath.

"I know, Malcolm. I'm going to take care of her as soon as I gain her trust. Where are your parents?" Autumn fed her another biscuit and then another, slowing working her hand along Dodo's back.

Autumn noticed the way the kids glanced at the other.

“Uh, Momma’s at work,” Malcolm said. “We’re not supposed to be here. You’re not going to tell her, are you?”

They left the dog tied outside for the entire day? Autumn continued to stroke the dog’s head pushing her own thoughts and opinions aside.

“Who’s supposed to be watching you?”

Malcolm glanced at his friends. “Ms. Beetlebutt.”

The kids snickered and Autumn glanced back to Summer and Jackson. If Autumn had to guess the true identity of “Ms. Beetlebutt,” she would pin the title to Ms. Lancaster, the little old churchgoing lady who babysat for everyone’s kids. The woman could seriously open a daycare with the amount of children she took in, but obviously she’d taken on more than she could handle.

“Summer, bring me the dog biscuits, please. Jackson, would you call Ms. Marjorie Lancaster? She’s in the phone book. Tell her Malcolm, Mary, Sasha, and Marty are at my clinic and need to be picked up immediately.”

“Oh, please, Dr. Callahan. Please don’t call her!” Marty whined. “She’s mean and makes us eat brussel sprouts.”

Dodo nudged Autumn’s hand seeking more doggie doodles. “Just a minute, girl.” She glanced over at the children. “Guys, we’ll talk about this in a minute. I need to get Dodo inside and take this chain out of her neck.”

Summer handed her the bag of treats and syringe. “Can we do this without a muzzle?”

Autumn nodded. “With a wound in her neck, I’m going to give her the shot in her hip. Talk to her. Get her attention on the food.”

Summer mimicked Autumn, talking to Dodo to focus her attention on the biscuits. Autumn knew she had one shot and a few seconds before the drug took effect. She took a breath and timed it just right. When Dodo filled her mouth with two dog biscuits, she stuck her. Summer and Autumn both jumped back while the dog snarled, bits of food flying from its mouth. Dodo hunched down, ready to attack Autumn.

“Doc,” Summer slowly moved back. “Why isn’t the drug working?”

Autumn silently counted in her head. Dodo’s demeanor changed, though her shiny canines gleamed in the sunlight. She stumbled to the side like a drunk before falling to the ground.

“Thirty seconds!” Autumn exclaimed going to the dog to check its pulse. Dodo wasn’t completely knocked out, but the growling stopped and her eyes closed.

“You didn’t kill her, did you?” Malcolm asked coming up behind Autumn.

“No. I’m taking her inside. Please tell your dad to come pick her up.” Autumn stood and brushed a stray hair from her face. “I’ll go get the portable bed. Stay with her.”

Autumn entered the clinic with one thing on her mind. Although the place was a mess, she was still a doctor and her patient would be treated with utmost standards.

“I just got off the phone with the babysitter. She didn’t even know the kids were missing.” Jackson came around the corner of the counter. “She said she couldn’t come get the kids.”

Autumn jumped. “Don’t do that to me.”

“Sorry.” He grinned. “I take it you got the dog settled?”

“Just doing my job.” She grabbed a portable bed from the back room and pushed it toward the door. “I’m probably going to have to stitch her neck. The chain agitated the skin when Dodo tried to get loose. Can you run the kids to the babysitter?”

Jackson scratched his head. “Uh, is that really our responsibility?”

Autumn shrugged and started to push the gurney toward the front. “Depends. Do you want to babysit while I’m in surgery?”

“Point taken.” Jackson reached out and grabbed her arm. “It’s not just a job to you. You really calmed that dog down when it could have potentially hurt you or those children. That’s pretty brave and admirable.”

“I grew up being brave. Admirable is a matter of opinion.”

Jackson brushed a strand of hair from her face. “I suppose so. Either way, it was pretty impressive.”

After Autumn loaded Dodo on the bed and got her situated in her operating room, she glanced back at Jackson. He had gathered the kids inside his truck, strapping all four of them in two seatbelts. Something stirred inside Autumn she couldn’t quite place. Her hopes were climbing higher. The callous man of fourteen years ago wouldn’t have come within ten feet of four rowdy children, and here he was strapping them in seatbelts. She even saw a small smile on his face when one of the kids talked to him. No matter how many times she reminded herself nothing would come of them being together, the hope still remained.

“Doc, I have everything ready for you.”

“Right.” Turning toward her assistant, she smiled. “Let’s get this over with.”

Chapter Five

A day from hell is what Jackson would label the day he had. After the Dodo incident, several farmers called in with sick cattle—something Autumn didn't normally attend to. She didn't pass up the opportunity to keep her clients happy and allowed Summer to man the office while they headed to the farms.

And when they got there, it wasn't only the cattle that was sick. Pigs. Goats. Sheep. Everything in sight had gotten into some tainted feed, and it was her responsibility to treat them all. Luckily, Jackson was there willing to help. He wasn't sure she would have made it without him.

"Okay, I'm taking a long bath, then curling up in front of the TV with a hot movie and nice steaming box of take-out pizza." Autumn threw her purse down in the foyer and kicked off her shoes. "What are you doing?"

Jackson smiled. "Shower."

Not only had today had been hell in the sense of him working his ass off, his libido rocketed sky high every time he came near Autumn. Even in her pink scrubs all covered with mud. He couldn't help chuckling at the irony of it.

"Please don't use all the hot water." She pulled her shirt up exposing the flat expanse of her belly and knotted the garment at the small of her back.

Jackson's gaze roamed her bare midriff. "Hadn't planned on taking a hot shower."

Autumn turned, meeting his eyes.

"What? I'm not hiding it, sweetheart. I've been hot for you all day."

"Jackson, don't."

"Don't what? I'm not doing anything." He stood with his hands on his hips. His cock pressed against the fly of his pants and he didn't bother adjusting himself. Nothing but Autumn would make the ache go away, and he wasn't even sure after he had her it would go away completely.

"Yes you are, Jackson." She brushed a blond strand from her face. "We work well together. Why do you have to make things complicated with statements like that?"

He kicked off his shoes all but moaning as his sock feet hit the soft carpet. "Statements like what? I want you? I'm horny, you're hot. Enough said."

"Don't tempt me." She glanced away.

"Why?"

"I can't handle being used again." She met his eyes, a hint of moisture shining in the fading light.

Please don't cry. His stomach tightened.

"It's all anyone has done to me in my life. First by you, and then . . . then . . ."

"Who?"

"No one."

Jackson stepped forward and pulled her toward him. "Tell me. Who else made you feel like shit?"

Maybe if she opened up about her past, they'd find the stupid idiot who was threatening her and be done with the case. Truth be told, he couldn't stand seeing her scared any longer. She put on a brave face for her audience, but he saw behind her mask. She was scared of something, and he wanted to know who or what.

"Frank . . . Gallagher."

"The pompous nitwit?"

She nodded, staring at her toes.

Jackson rubbed her arms debating whether to ask her the question that crossed his mind or leave sleeping dogs lie. In the end, he decided to ask her. "What's the history there? Did you fuck him?"

"We went to school together, and I stupidly thought he'd help me open my clinic and we'd be partners. Anyway, we partied, got drunk, and spent the night together."

Jackson didn't understand his sudden rage of jealousy. It hit him like a ton of bricks as he pictured some pompous nitwit putting his hands all over Autumn.

His grip tightened on her wrist. "Do you think he's doing this to you?"

"I don't know. He's not going to scare me, though."

"You don't have to play tough with me." He pulled her into his arms. "I know you, Autumn. And I know trust is an issue between us, but I'm here for you."

"Jackson, you don't get to say stuff like that to me." She pulled back, though she stayed looped in his arms. "You're not someone I'm allowed to trust, and you're only here for me because my father is paying you a big fat check."

He opened his mouth to protest.

She held up a hand. "Don't say he's not. I know my father, and he'll do anything to protect his family, at any cost. He only hires the best and pays them damn good money."

Jackson wasn't about to go into the details with her. It was true. The Major offered him a large amount of money, but that wasn't the reason he took the job.

"You must trust me a little bit. I live in your home. I'm with you twenty-four-seven." He locked his fingers at the small of her back. "You're in my arms."

"Jackson, it's not fair," she groaned. "You know my terms and conditions."

"Is that so?" He leaned down and pressed his lips against her neck. "For some reason, I don't think you truly mean half the stuff you say to me."

He darted out his tongue to taste her pulse point. She gripped his shoulders to keep her balance while he explored her. His hands cupped her behind and held her against his hardening cock while he kissed her neck.

"You never allow yourself to indulge in what you want, Autumn." He kissed his way up her neck to her cheek. "What do you truly want?"

She sucked in a breath and met his eyes. "I want you, Jax." The pet name came out as if no time had passed between them. "It's never been in question, but I can't handle it without strings. I can't sleep with you knowing you'll walk out that door and never look back."

"I think your chatter is just your way of trying to convince yourself you're better off alone and miserable than worthy of sharing your life with someone." Jackson didn't know where that statement came from and almost regretted it the moment it left his tongue. People like him didn't "share" their life with anyone.

"Are you that guy, Jax? The one someone like me could share her life with? I still have feelings for you. I can't stand here and listen to your empty promises when in the end I know you'll only hurt me deeply like the last time. I may have been young and stupid, and totally came off the wrong way about everything, but I hated to tell you good-bye."

Jackson stared at her. "You have feelings for me?"

"Yes, Jax. I don't want to, but I do." Her hands slid down his chest. "It sucks, you know. I thought I got over you, that I moved on, yet here I am repeating history as if I'm still that same eighteen-year-old girl. How pathetic of me."

She pulled away from him and turned toward the hallway. "I'm going to take my bath."

He wanted to give her what she needed but knew that kind of commitment wasn't within his ability. How the Major married Faye and made it last was something Jackson didn't understand. Everyone else in their department was single. Marriage not only made it difficult for the families to see their loved ones leave in the special ops, but it took away from the job.

He huffed a breath and rubbed the back of his neck listening to the soft sound of water filling the bathtub.

Autumn's image popped into his mind, her sleek body sinking into the warm scented water, with the intention of letting the bubbles relax her. He took a few deep breaths to clear his thoughts and continued down the hall to the shower.

He wanted to be the kind of guy that Autumn wanted because she deserved no less from the man she chose to be with. Although he was stupid as a kid and denied her once, he saw today the beautiful woman she had become. Smart, independent, and confident—qualities she undoubtedly developed due to the hardships in her life. She was also damn good at her job. He would have been scared shitless—was scared shitless—if he'd had to confront a sadistic dog that could potentially harm children. But she handled it like the pro she was, getting Dodo to settle down so the kids would be safe and she could take care of the gash on the dog's neck. For that alone, he admired her.

Jackson turned the shower on full blast and stripped off his muddy clothes. He had to admit, though, that the day was rough and tiring, he did have fun. He'd never wrangled a pig before, and got messy doing it, but Autumn had laughed, and that it worthwhile. He couldn't stop picturing her beautiful smile because it hadn't come often since he'd been here. In all honesty, he guessed she really didn't have much to smile about.

After taking his shower, Jackson pulled on a fresh pair of boxers and settled on the sofa with the remote in his hand. Autumn wanted a commitment. Strings. While all that was nice, it was impossible for him. She wanted and deserved to have someone to come home to. Someone who would be there for her and support her no matter what. He couldn't possibly give her that.

For as long as he recalled, he dropped everything for the job and stayed until it was completed—which could be months at a time. He rescued women from the Amazon. He helped rescue royalty. He was a part of killing a group of terrorists threatening to harm him, his team, and, ultimately, his country. The Major was there the entire time and knew what all he took on over the years. How could one possibly be a husband, father, and soldier all at the same time? Just thinking about it, Jackson knew it was beyond him to understand.

He flipped through the channels uninterested in the current programs. TV just didn't have the same appeal to him like it did in his twenties. He'd been working for so long, most of which he'd gone days without basic necessities, much less luxuries like television.

His stomach growled loudly. Food sounded great since both he and Autumn missed lunch today. He clicked the TV off and tossed the remote to the side.

"I'm starving. What kind of pizza do you want?" Autumn came in the living room in a terry wrap with her hair pulled high on her head. "I like plain cheese, but if you're anything like my brothers, you'll want a pizza with everything on it."

"Plain cheese is fine." He watched her grab the phone and punch in numbers. After placing the order, she smiled and sat the phone on the coffee table. "Now that's taken care of, what

movie do you want to watch?”

She moved to the DVD rack and sorted through her movies. “You probably won’t want to watch something romantic, and honestly, I’m not in the mood for love right now. So we’ve got thrillers or comedies.”

“Comedy.” Jackson watched her while she named off movies in that genre. Did she really think he cared what movie they watched? He was ready to crash as it was so anything short of gut-busting laughter would only put him to sleep.

She called out a title, and he agreed. After she popped in *Bulletproof*, set everything up and handed him the remote.

“Can I ask you something?” Jackson asked.

“Shoot.”

“Do you really see me as a callous, heartless bastard that used you for sex and left you high and dry on your own?”

She stared at him, hands on her hips. “Well, you did use me for sex. You callously told me I was special to you and then informed me you said that to all the girls you fuck. And then you practically fucked a girl on your front porch before I even started my car and left the driveway.”

“I was a bastard. Still am, I guess.” Jackson huffed a breath. “I know an apology probably won’t account for much, but I am sorry.”

“It actually means more than you know.” She patted his thigh with her hand. “You’re a good guy, Jackson. My father wouldn’t put his trust in you if you weren’t.”

“What about you? Do you trust me?”

“With my life, yes. With my heart, no.”

He decided to leave it at that. He didn’t want to make things anymore awkward than they already were.

The pizza came, and Jackson paid for it. He and Autumn gathered around the coffee table in their pajamas and finished watching the comedy enjoying their food and ultimately each other’s company.

“So, you know what I’ve done over the years. What have you been up to?” Autumn licked her finger and glanced over at Jackson.

Jackson smiled. “I’m pretty sure it’s nothing you want to know about.”

Autumn’s face went blank as she stared at him.

Jackson quickly caught on and added, "I wasn't talking about sex. I meant my life is boring."

Autumn gave a nervous chuckle. "I hardly doubt your life is boring."

In many ways, Jackson and Autumn were alike. Brought up in two vastly opposite worlds, they both strived to make something of themselves and resulted in fighting a one man battle against the world. Neither really planned it that way, he supposed, but it was one of life's curveballs that came blasting by. It was either hit or miss, and both chose to keep swinging.

"Well, when I'm not on assignment, I'm at the base with your brother. Davis tends to make things interesting, to say the least, but training a group of cadets while our commanding officers are away isn't exactly my dream job."

"Have you always wanted to be in the military? I mean, I think my dad said you entered when you turned eighteen." Autumn threw her napkin on the coffee table next to her plate. "I know with my brothers it wasn't really an option. I think my dad would have let them do whatever they wanted to, but it was sort of mandatory they take basic training and serve at least a couple years. We're your parent's that strict with you?"

Jackson fidgeted. "Nope. The military was my only option of a semidecent life. My parents really didn't care what I did."

It was around nine when they decided to turn in. Autumn cleaned up the mess they made while Jackson secured all the doors and turned off all the lights. As a precaution, he checked the windows, satisfied that they, too, were bolted and tightly locked.

"Have you talked to my dad?" Autumn flicked the lights off in the kitchen.

"Nope. He's in Africa and satellite phones don't always work."

The look on her face was almost disappointment. He didn't know much about the Major's personal life, yet everyone and their brother knew his love for his only daughter, a daughter who supposedly resembled her mother down to the very stubbornness that had started to grow on him.

"Good night, Jax."

Without waiting for a reply, Autumn slipped inside her room and closed the door. She wanted love first and foremost. Aside from commitment, he'd never understood the concept of what love truly meant. Sex and pleasure, he could write a book on, but love was a whole other playing field, one he wasn't sure he belonged on. Jackson sighed and walked to his room. *There has to be some way around it.* If only he knew what that was.

Chapter Six

Autumn tossed and turned in her sleep, picturing Jackson's body above her while he thrust deep inside her. She'd been so long without a lover, and well, Gallagher wasn't anything to brag about. But Jackson . . . Oh, Jackson was special. He knew all the right places to touch, all the right moves to make. He kissed her, never took his mouth from hers while his pelvis rocked against her, thrusting his cock deeper and deeper inside.

She wanted to feel loved. And though she knew in her heart it wasn't there, that it would never be there, she allowed her brain to be fooled into thinking it was.

She pictured their union as more than sex. Jackson had trouble loving, perhaps because he had never been taught. He was her first lover, and she wanted to be the first woman he said those three little words to.

Just as he climaxed in her dream, he spoke those words, whispering her name with them. She chose to believe him, no questions asked. What happened in the past remained just that. The past. She couldn't change it but with him coming around, he could.

The dream ended abruptly when Jackson dissipated into thin air. Autumn gasped and sat up in bed, her heart threatening to beat out of her chest. It was so real in her mind, a fantasy she wanted to be true. It hurt worse now, than it did back then, she realized, tears forming in her eyes. Back then reality didn't matter and she could afford to base her future on dreams. Today, though, reality was the way of her life, and her future didn't support Jackson in any way.

Autumn tossed the covers back and wiped her eyes before crawling out of bed. She didn't expect Jackson to be up for another two hours and planned on spending some time by herself outside her room.

She settled on the couch and wrapped herself in an afghan. After finding a good cartoon show—one of the old Bugs Bunny cartoons—she settled back and forced herself to relax. Each muscle in her body ached from the events of the prior day, and her sexy wet dream only made matters worse.

She watched two episodes of Bugs before she heard his footsteps coming down the hall.

"Up so soon?" He settled on the other side of the couch, pulling her feet into his lap as he leaned back against the soft cushions.

"Had a dream and woke up. Couldn't go back to sleep afterward." Autumn turned toward him. He wore nothing but his pajama bottoms "What are you doing up early? Yesterday I had to drag you out of bed to make it to the clinic on time."

"I had to pee." He gave her a boyish grin and against her will Autumn's heart melted. "I saw Bugs Bunny and, well, decided to join you."

For a brief second, Autumn pictured Jackson crawling behind her and wrapping her in his

arms. She wanted him to cuddle with her while they watched the cartoons with no cares in the world. She really had it bad, she decided and pulled her feet from his lap.

"Pépé Le Pew is coming up next," she commented. "He was always one of my favorites."

"The skunk?" Jackson frowned and propped his feet on the coffee table. "Why?"

"Because he's romantic. He adorable and giving and relentless in chasing his woman. Guys could learn a thing or two from him." Autumn focused her attention on the television.

"He's a skunk," Jackson proclaimed. "A French one at that who chases after a cat with a painted stripe down its back."

"He's still cute. He gives women hope that men like him exist in the world."

"What? Stinky, obsessed men who try to bed a girl with flowers and come-ons?" Jackson shook his head. "Women can hope no longer because that is the reality of men."

"Pépé can't help he stinks." She smiled, avoiding his eyes. "And I was talking about the romantic part. It's nice when a guy gives a woman flowers just because, or simply compliments her about her outfit. And when she plays hard to get, it's nice to know he'll chase after her until he catches her." Autumn reverted her gaze back to Jackson. "That's what I meant."

Jackson considered her comments for a moment. Autumn didn't know what went through his mind because like the other men she knew, he hid his emotions well.

He turned with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I kees me a preety girl," he began, in his best Pépé Le Pew impression. "Do not run from my stench, *mon bonbon*, and hurl."

Autumn giggled as he addressed her in singsong fashion. Jackson smiled and pulled her legs down while he arched his body above her. "That's all I've got, *belle fille*, but you know I can give you more. All-night-long orgasms to make your toes curl."

Jackson kissed her after his finale. "Take that Pépé Le Pew!" He smiled above her, his lips inches from her own.

"Competing with a skunk." Autumn shook her head, lips burning from the heat of his kiss. "I didn't know you spoke French."

"One of my many talents, *chérie*." He winked at her.

Autumn knew it was now or never. Jackson looked adorable above her. His hair was sleep tousled, his average style these days. He smoothed a hand from his shoulder to his chest. Hard muscle lay beneath smooth bronze skin, chiseled to perfection.

With highlights of their time spent together playing through her head, Autumn licked her lips. His sweaty body from working hours at the ranch for her father. His cocky, self-assured

attitude. Seeing him naked for the first time. They didn't share just mediocre sex which merely gave her a decent orgasm and was over and done with in seven minutes. Jackson didn't know the meaning of mediocre. Their first time together was really good—no, great—sex that definitely had her toes curling.

“Jax,” she hesitantly licked her lips again. “Will you . . .”

What? Make love? No. Too attached and demanding. Jackson Cooper didn't ‘make love’ with anyone. *Have sex?* Too clinical for her taste. *Sleep?* They weren't exactly sleeping . . .

“Will I what?” He propped himself up beside her and brushed a finger along her cheek.

“I want you to . . . I want to . . .” She was stumbling over her words and nothing seemed to come out right. Finally, frustrated she asked, “Will you fuck me?”

His eyes widened. He opened his mouth to speak then closed it again. Autumn wasn't sure whether she should be embarrassed and run or find it amusing that she had rendered him speechless.

“Of course I will,” he finally said. “Is that what you want?”

Autumn nodded and slid her hand along his side. “I want an orgasm that curls my toes and you're the only one who can do that.”

Jackson kissed her again, this time plunging his tongue inside her mouth. Autumn's mind drifted again, only this time to the events of her dream. He told her, “I love you,” followed by her name. *Is that what I'm seeking with his ridiculous idea for us to have sex, or is it purely physical need?* Before she could answer her question, he cupped her head with one hand, each movement of his tongue heating her body to scorching temperatures.

Too much thinking never got you anywhere. Just go with the flow for once. He's here, you're here. That's all it needs to be right now.

His mouth coasted to her neck, leaving a hot trail of kisses as he went. Autumn tilted her head to the side to give him room, while she roamed the expanse of his back with her hands. His body was damn near perfection, something that only exists in fantasies. While her other lovers had had just the pretty face, Jackson had the body to go along with it. He was her dream, and now, he was becoming her reality.

His hand went to her side and slipped underneath the cotton nightshirt she wore. She belatedly wished she wore something a bit more flattering than a simple grey, knee-length shirt with white cotton panties underneath. It wasn't the most desirable piece of lingerie she owned, if you could even call it lingerie.

Trying to give herself a better position, she moved clumsily on the couch. Jackson moved freely, but her hands felt tied to her sides. It didn't take long before she was finally able to maneuver enough to touch him. His pants hung low on his hips, and the taut muscles of his abdomen contracted when her fingers brushed over them. He mumbled something against

her neck as his mouth coasted down. He cupped her breast and she arched toward him with a groan, lost her balance and fell back.

With a hard thud, Autumn found herself on the floor beside the couch. “Shit.”

“What the . . .” Jackson glanced over the edge of the cushions, humor in his eyes.

With all the menace she could muster, she narrowed her eyes and replied, “Don’t say a word. It’s not funny.”

He grinned and lowered himself to the floor on top of her. “Are you okay?”

Autumn groaned. “My butt hurts.”

Jackson cupped the part in question and, putting his mouth to her ear, said, “You want me to kiss it and make it better?”

Liquid heat flooded between Autumn’s thighs, and her eyelids drifted closed. She assumed his question was rhetorical and let him take the lead again, worshipping her body.

His hands slid up each of her sides pushing her shirt as he went. Jackson had a way about him that built anticipation to almost unbearable degrees. She wasn’t one to take things slow, usually, not even when they’d been together before. The fact that he took his time to rid her of her shirt made a huge statement.

“Why are you nervous, Autumn?” Jackson sat back on his heels looking down to where his hands lay, beneath her breasts. “We don’t have to do anything. I swear I never believed I could say that to a woman, but I mean it. I shouldn’t have come on to you last night.”

She pursed her lips. “That’s not it. I’m nervous because I haven’t had a man inside me in three years. Hell, the only time I get to talk about sex recently is when Leslie brings her dog in to the clinic because he can’t get it up.”

She left off the part about him being Jackson—wonder stud and orgasmic king. His eyes were a beautiful deep green that had the ability to hypnotize her. There was no denying she wanted this man, whether it be for the right or wrong reasons.

Jackson trailed a hand down her body, splaying his fingers along her stomach. “I honestly can’t believe you’re not married.”

“Why?” Autumn squirmed beneath him.

He smirked. “Because you’re hot. You’re sweet and caring. Stubborn as hell, but who isn’t? I figured you’d find your man, settle down and have two-point-five kids.”

He ran a finger along the side of her panty-covered crotch. “I’m not going to say I had feelings for you, because I didn’t. I didn’t love you back then, but I did care. I shouldn’t have touched you. I know it now, but back then, I shouldn’t have let things go that far. I’m kind

of wondering if I'm making the same mistake now?"

She sucked in a breath when he finally slipped beneath the cotton barrier and touched her wetness. He pulled the crotch of her bikinis aside and explored her pussy with his fingers. Autumn reeled at the sensations flowing through her body. Each stroke was light barely a butterfly's touch against her yet it held the power of a lightening bolt striking the ground. She closed her eyes and spread her legs wider, silently giving Jackson permission to explore forgotten territory. And then his mouth replaced where his fingers had been.

Autumn whimpered. Just like the puppies she treated, she whimpered begging Jackson to fill her, to suffice her need. Three years was way too long to go without sex. And fourteen years was definitely too long to go with out great sex.

He pushed her legs apart. moved between them, and licked her pussy like a starved man. She propped one foot on the couch and the other on the coffee table. A low groan came from him, and the look on his face said it all. A little thrill shot down her spine at his approval.

His fingers brushed the length of her thighs until he reached her hips. He lifted her, an ass cheek in each hand; pulled her panties to the side, and held her completely open for his mouth. Fireworks exploded behind her eyes when she came, her back arching as a soft moan of pleasure escaped from her parted lips. Jackson kissed his way up her body and wrapped his arms around her.

"Autumn"—his face pressed into her neck—"God, Autumn."

He spoke her name exactly the way she dreamt. The soft breathless sigh of his desire, something she knew she gave him. She couldn't help smiling to herself.

The phone rang, pulling them from their cocoon of security. Autumn groaned, and Jackson gave her a smile and one last kiss before she left his embrace to answer it.

"Hello?" She grabbed the cordless phone and sat on the coffee table in front of Jackson.

He grabbed the remote and muted the cartoons on the screen before wrapping his arms around her waist. He pressed light kisses against her thigh, something that made her want to end the conversation before it even began.

"Autumn, you need to get to the clinic." The voice of a frantic Summer rushed through the lines. "Someone broke in last night and the place is a mess."

"Broke in?" Jackson's head popped up. "Did they do anything? Are the animals okay?"

"The animals are fine. There's damage though. The police need to talk to you." Summer's calmed somewhat. "Marc called me to let me know. I'm on my way there now."

Autumn silently thanked her lucky stars that Summer's boyfriend Marc worked on the local police force. "Okay. We'll be right there."

She clicked the phone off and replaced it on the charger. “The clinic was broken into last night.”

“Do you think it was him?” Jackson stood and followed her down the hall.

“I hope not.”

They dressed in a hurry and were on their way to the clinic within twenty minutes. Upon arriving, Autumn first noticed the windows were shattered and police swarming everywhere. Summer’s car was parked in the back of the parking lot, and Jackson pulled in beside her. Someone even took the time to paint “Bitch” on the brick side of the building.

“Jesus.” Jackson turned the key, killing the engine. He turned his head and Autumn looked away. “You okay?”

“Let’s just see what the police found out.”

He held her hand as they confronted the police about the damage. Summer stood to the side talking with Marc, her boyfriend.

“What happened?” Jackson asked.

“Vandals,” the officer said. “We did a fingerprint check and nothing came up. I need to know if anything is missing for my report.”

Autumn walked inside with the officer, Jackson and Summer following close behind. From the outside, the damage looked worse than it did on the inside. Everywhere was red paint with the word “whore” written across one wall. The paint dripped, like fresh blood from an open wound. She took a deep breath and felt Jackson’s hand on her shoulder.

Her files were emptied all over the floor, crumbled and ripped. The documentation was something her patients depended on. She glanced around the room taking in everything. The faux leather seats were sliced open, stuffing spread about. The pictures that hung on the wall now lay on the ground, smashed to pieces. Magazines were ripped and spread about. Whoever broke in even took the time to clip the TV wires.

Jackson massaged her shoulders lightly. “This is more than just vandals.”

The officer looked around. “Maybe. Dr. Callahan, I need you sign off on any property missing.”

Autumn shook her head and moved toward the hall that led to the back. Five cats, a litter of puppies and their mother, a dog named Bear, and Dodo stood in their cages waiting for her attention. She checked all the animals, trying to sooth them.

“Hey, babies,” she greeted them, grabbing a handful of biscuits. “You guys must have been so scared.”

Dodo was anxious to see her, she knew, and she gave her a pat on the head along with a couple biscuits. After giving the animals that could have one a treat, she petted the ones who couldn't and took note of their conditions.

"Autumn?" Jackson came to the back and stepped inside the cage room. Immediately, Dodo started to growl. "Uh, is everything okay back here?"

"Shh, Dodo. It's okay." She scratched behind the dog's ear. "Yeah. The dogs are fine. A little scared, but they're okay and accounted for."

Jackson leaned against the door, afraid of the beast Autumn kept at her side. "Do you see anything noticeably missing that the officer can write in the report?"

Autumn grabbed another biscuit and gave it to the dog before stepping out of the cage and locking it behind her. "No. It wouldn't matter though even if I did."

She walked past him to tell the officer and hopefully get him out of her hair. If it wasn't one thing, it was another.

Chapter Seven

After the police cleared out, Jackson tackled scrubbing the walls and the brick while Summer started sweeping the messy floors. Autumn made arrangements with the insurance company and called the window repair company to replace the front windows.

“Hey, Summer, I’m going to run some errands and pick up some lunch. Do you want me to get something for you?” Jackson set the paint roller down after he cleaned the last of the paint from it and glanced over at the silent Summer.

“I suppose, if you don’t mind.” She paused to pull her long brown hair into a ponytail. “Anything’s fine.”

He nodded and pulled his keys from his pocket. “Since Autumn is busy, will you tell her where I am?” Then, he added, “Not that she’d worry or anything.”

Summer chuckled. “You two make a cute couple. Why’d you break it off?”

“Stupidity.” Jackson pushed the door open and stepped outside before she could question him anymore.

On his way to the truck, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Davis’s number. On the third ring, his friend picked up the phone with a groggy “Callahan.”

“Late night with a beautiful blonde?”

“I wish. More like late night with a bunch of ugly army motherfuckers.” Davis groaned. “What do you want?”

Jackson turned the key in the ignition and shifted to Drive. “I need to know what you know about your sister’s ex.”

“Which one?”

There’s more than one? “Frank Gallagher.”

“He went to vet school with her. Total pretty boy player. Dad hated him.” Davis sighed, and in background, a bed squeaked. “From what I know from Jeff, he used her. Stole her ideas and took credit for them as his own. I’ve only met him three times—once every Christmas. He tried controlling Autumn, and you know my sister. She didn’t stand for it.”

“He has money, doesn’t he? Comes from a rich family or something.”

“Yeah. A whole line of veterinarians. I think Autumn even said they were her professors or something. Why do you ask?”

“He’s at the top of my suspect list.” Jackson pulled into the parking lot of the local Home Depot. “The clinic was broken into last night, and the perp wrote ‘bitch’ on the brick outside

and ‘whore’ on the inside walls.”

“Fuck.” Davis sounded wide awake now. “This is a personal job, Jack. Is Autumn okay?”

“She’s fine.” He stuffed his keys in his pocket as he walked toward the front doors. “She’s still Autumn, though. I think the writing on the wall got to her more than she’s letting on.”

“I’m sure it did,” Davis replied. “Do you need some backup. I’ll tell Reiner I need time off. Honestly, I’d love nothing more.”

Jackson laughed. “And why would I want to give you time away from the cadets?”

“‘Jackass’ should have been your name,” Davis huffed. “Seriously though, Autumn’s my baby sis. My dad would kill me and everyone around if something happened to her.”

Jackson grabbed a cart from the front and entered the store. “Nothing will happen to her. That is something I can guarantee.”

After they hung up, Jackson put in a call to Jeffery—who didn’t give him the option of choosing whether or not he needed backup. He and Kristen both would be down in a day or two. Jeffery also promised to call Nick to let him know what went on.

When Jackson was through with his errands and a visit to the grocery, he returned to the clinic. Marc, Summer’s boyfriend, waved at him when he pulled in the parking lot. He waved back, then parked, and carried his purchases inside.

“Autumn so doesn’t deserve this.” Summer slammed a pile of collected papers in a basket. “She does nothing but care for others, even when they least deserve it.”

“Where is she?” Jackson glanced around the office.

“At the insurance company. Something is wrong with her policy, and she has to figure it all out.” She blew out a breath. “She looked like she was going to cry.”

Jackson spread the food out on the counter he had finished replacing and glanced over at Summer. “Who do you think is doing this?”

“It reeks of Frank, the slimy little worm. He probably saw her with you and decided to hit her where it hurts by writing shit on the walls and destroying her nearly remodeled office.” She slammed more papers in the basket making Marc flinch as he entered the building. “You know, when they worked together, Autumn took nearly all his business from him. People like her. She loves each animal, good or bad. She doesn’t discriminate against furry or aquatic friends. She just a good person with a good heart and all her clients know that.”

Marc cautiously moved toward his girlfriend and kissed her cheek. “Hey, babe. What can I do?”

“Well, plenty.” She finally turned to give him a real kiss. “Let’s eat first.”

She looked at the food Jackson laid out on the counter. "Did you get enough for all of us? I mean, if not, we can go out. It's not that big of a deal."

"Yeah, sure." Jackson began to make his own sandwich. "When will Autumn be back?"

She shrugged. "You could try her cell."

After everyone settled down with their food, Jackson got Autumn's cell number and punched it in his phone. She picked up on the second ring.

"Hey," Jackson waited for a response and then added when she said nothing, "Uh, did you get everything settled?"

"No."

"You okay?"

"No."

Jackson glanced over at Summer and Marc, who were watching attentively. "When are you coming back to the clinic? I got lunch for us and Marc came over after his shift to help out."

"Jackson, I can't deal with this right now." She sniffled. "I just can't, so please stop."

He stood, food forgotten and went to the door. "Where are you?"

"Driving back to the clinic from the bank."

Jackson pushed the door open and stepped outside away from the crowd. "What happened with the insurance?"

She sniffled again. "Their records say I haven't paid my bill for an entire year. It's not true, but the agent said they canceled my insurance and that I'll be fined if I don't come up with money to pay them and renew my policy."

Jackson pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why would the records say that if you paid them?"

"I don't know. I thought my bank statements or canceled checks would account for proof of payment, but they magically disappeared from my account as well. The bank said the checks were voided or not cashed. There was no record of them anywhere in the system. I tried pleading with Dan at the insurance place, but he said it was business not personal." He heard something make a thumping noise. "I swear Gallagher is behind this. I just know it."

"Why?"

"Because they are friends. I wouldn't put it past him to pay Dan to suddenly make paperwork disappear. Frank always said everyone had a price, you just had to find out what it was."

Jackson fumed. He gripped his cell phone tight in one hand while he fisted the other. "How much money do you need?"

She told him the amount.

"Fuck. That's ridiculous. Go with a different company."

"I can't. It's a monopoly in a small town, Jax. There is no other company."

Jackson pursed his lips and stared out into the street. Fishy didn't even begin to describe what was going on. Nor did anything make sense.

"I'm at the bank. I'll call you when I'm on my way."

They disconnected and Jackson went back inside. He told Summer and Marc the bullshit Autumn told him about the insurance and the non-payment and the owed bills. "So how did she get mixed up with him?"

Summer shrugged. "Gallagher was the stud of their vet school. He came from a line of veterinarians, and his father was dean on the board. He was like the cool kid in a long list of nobodies." She sorted through some of the papers and handed them to Marc who filed them away. She brushed her hair from her face. "Autumn, of course, was the intelligent one. She showed him up on everything they did and Frank couldn't stand that. It was almost like he had to be good at something just because his family expected it. I don't know why Autumn agreed to date him, but he only used her. She was his lab partner, the one who basically did all his work for him. She didn't see it then, but the little twit used her ideas and backed them with his money so he came out smelling like a rose. Finally, though, he called her a name, and she gave him a good punch or two. I was so proud of her that day."

Jackson didn't need to ask any more. He had heard enough as it was. The protective streak he had developed was a mile long and at least a mile wide. He would love nothing more than to visit this pompous asshole and finish him off.

"How long have you known Autumn?" Jackson asked Summer.

"Going on five years. I worked at her clinic in the city when she was with Gallagher. She did her internship at his family's place where I worked as a receptionist." Summer looked up from her work. "How long have you known her?"

Jackson pursed his lips and returned to painting the wall. "The first time we met was a little over fourteen years ago. Her father was my commanding officer, and he invited me to stay at his ranch for the summer after I joined the Marines."

"Is that when you guys dated or did that come later?"

Jackson focused his attention on the wall. "We didn't really date."

Summer snickered. "Okay. Is that when you guys became lovers or did that come later?"

"Ah, so she told you?"

"Not really. I asked who you were and she said an old friend and ex-lover. That's about all I know."

Jackson didn't really know where Summer was going with this and decided to keep his comments to a minimum. "We were that then. Nobody knew about it though."

"Ah. Secrets."

Jackson finished the wall with the help of Marc and without anymore comments or questions from Summer. Autumn returned close to three in the afternoon, stressed more than ever with a phone to her ear. It wasn't her choice to shut down the office but customers complained anyway about needing services. *Couldn't people understand?*

"I don't know what the hell I'm suppose to do." Autumn closed her cell and pressed it against her lips. "I obviously can't work here, yet I'll lose all my clients if I don't. I'm going to have to move it to my house. It's the only option."

Jackson dusted his hands on his jeans and pulled Autumn into his arms. "Take a deep breath." He rubbed her back, feeling tension in every muscle. "The two back rooms are cleared for business. Have your clients come in the back door. The computers may not work, but you do have handwritten forms. I saw Summer gathering some a while ago. You'll use those until we get the computers set up."

"You make life seem so simple." Autumn wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek on his chest. "Thank you."

He kissed her forehead. "It's what I'm here for."

Jackson held her until she pulled away. Both weariness and apprehension settled into her features. Her blonde hair hung loosely around her face. She wore no makeup yet he thought she looked no less beautiful without it. He brushed her cheek with his knuckles and she closed her eyes as two tears fell.

"Uh, I need to call some people back. Can you get some boards to board up the windows? The repair company won't be here until tomorrow."

"Sweetheart, everything is going to be okay. You take care of the clients and I'll deal with everything else." He kissed her gently and smiled. "You go be the Amazing Dr. Callahan and help all those innocent animals."

Autumn's hands slid beneath his shirt. "I'm not that amazing."

"You, sweetheart, have no idea what you're talking about."

Chapter Eight

With so much to do and not enough time to do it, Autumn and Jackson didn't arrive home until eleven that night. She delivered two litters of puppies, performed emergency surgery on a cat who would have died without her help, and scheduled numerous patients for anything from regular checkups to annual shots to keep her busy tomorrow. Autumn couldn't have done it without Jackson, Summer and Marc. And she told them so before they left for the night.

Now sitting in a bathtub full of strawberry-scented bubbles, she lay back and relaxed for the first time that day. There was no doubt she was worn out and probably wouldn't lie in bed five seconds before she was sound asleep.

She didn't think about her problems. Jackson had worked so hard to make her life easier, and it only made her fall harder for him. She honestly didn't know what she would have done without him.

She fished around the bottom of the bathtub for her bath puff and poured a generous amount of bath wash on it. The warm water surrounded her, easing her muscles. The comforting bubbles popped against her skin and crackled in the silence of the bathroom.

Jackson knocked on the door. "Autumn, you have a phone call. It's your dad."

She smiled and granted him entrance. After handing the phone to her, he turned to leave but Autumn stopped him with her hand, grabbing his wrist.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hey, pumpkin. How is everything going?"

Tears gathered in her eyes. "Better now that I'm talking to you. When are you coming home?"

"Possibly at the end of the month. We're still working on some things, you know finalizing them." He cleared his throat. "I don't want to talk about work though. I want to talk about you. Are you mad at me for sending Cooper to be your bodyguard?"

Autumn rubbed her thumb in a circle along his wrist. "At first, I was pissed. But Jackson's sort of grown on me. Did he tell you about the vandalism?"

"Yes. I don't know what I can do to help you though, sweetie." Her father's voice faded in and out.

"Just hearing your voice helps more than you know."

He chuckled. "Well, you can expect two bear hugs when I get back. Be ready for them."

She ended the conversation and handed the phone to Jackson. She let the water out of the

tub and stood to wrap a soft navy blue towel around her. She noticed the heated look in Jackson's eyes though neither one of them spoke.

"My dad may get to come home at the end of the month." Bubbles dripped down her legs, the soft bathmat at her feet catching them. "Do you think all this will be resolved before then?"

Jackson leaned against the vanity, arms crossed. "I called Davis. If things get out of hand, we're going to see Gallagher."

She grabbed her toothbrush and dabbed a bit of toothpaste onto it. "I don't want you to get Davis involved or go cause trouble with Frank. Nothing will come of it."

Jackson glanced at her. "I guess I should keep the bit of info about Jeff and Kristin coming in a secret?" He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "They're going to help out at the clinic along with the rest of us."

She finished brushing her teeth and turned in his arms. "You called my overbearing brother? Damn it, Jackson. Why?"

"Because he knows the info I need about Gallagher." He kissed her. "Not to mention you are his sister."

"What do you need to know about Gallagher?"

"All the dirty details you won't talk about." He pressed a finger against her lips. "Don't say anything because you and I both know you won't talk and Jeff is the only one who can weasel juicy gossip out of you."

Autumn frowned. "What do you want to know?"

"Nothing. Not right now." He rubbed his hands along her sides. "Right now, I want to crawl in bed and forget about everything."

Autumn sympathized and let it go. "Thank you for being there for me today. I hate to admit it but I really needed someone and I'm glad you were there."

Jackson smiled and pressed his forehead against hers. "Let's get some sleep."

After turning out all the lights, Autumn put on a slinky turquoise chemise. It wasn't the sexiest thing she owned but it definitely had its own appeal. Jackson's gaze roamed the length of her body, but he didn't comment. She didn't know why, but she really wanted him to say something about it.

"Sweet dreams, babe." He kissed her forehead. "Are we catching Pepé Le Pew tomorrow?"

"No." She smiled. "I'm sleeping in."

Jackson stepped back, making his way to the door. If she didn't know better, she would have said that he hesitated a bit before going to his room. A small part of her wanted him to stay, even if they didn't have sex.

Autumn crawled in bed and tucked the covers around her. She had to get things back on a professional level before they totally fucked up her life. First thing being ending all intimate interactions with Jackson. No matter how great it felt to be in his arms, she didn't belong there.

* * * *

After lying in bed three hours, Autumn was still awake. She was exhausted from lack of sleep and the adventures of the day but her mind wouldn't turn off. Finally, she threw the covers back and stood. The house was silent and dark as she walked down the hall toward Jackson's room. Her heart beat erratically in her chest. *What the hell am I doing?*

Before she talked herself out of it, she knocked on his door, slightly opening it. "Jackson?"

Nothing. She pushed it open more and walked into his room a few feet. She saw his figure sprawled out in the middle of the bed in a pool of moonlight shining through the window.

"Jackson?"

He moved slightly. "Hmmm?"

Now what? She walked closer. "I can't sleep."

He rolled on the bed and flipped the bedside lamp on. The light nearly blinded her. Jackson rubbed his eyes and yawned, sitting up. He looked so sexy in his disheveled state, stubble along his chin, no shirt, and she was willing to bet no pants either.

He lifted the sheets and patted the empty spot on the mattress. "Come on."

"Do you mind?"

"Sweetheart, you don't even have to ask."

She crossed the room and climbed in beside him. The sheets were warm and smelled like him, a scent that was nothing but pure pheromones. He leaned over her to take care of the light.

"Jax, I don't expect anything from you. I just want to make that clear."

His hand brushed against her breasts and then down her stomach. "Are you talking about feelings or sex?"

Autumn shrugged in the darkness. "Either. It wasn't professional of me to say that this morning. Not after I admitted I still have feelings for you."

“You think way too much.” His hand went lower, to her thigh where he pushed the hem of the chemise upwards a bit. “I’m not going to lie. I’m also not going to apologize for anything.”

Autumn bit her lip when his fingers brushed against her pussy. “Sex only complicates things. It was a weak moment, and I promise it won’t happen again.”

He stopped and pulled away completely. “Is that what has your exhausted mind all worked up? Autumn, I’m not looking for a relationship. Me going down on you in your living room is hardly anything to fret over. I told you I wanted you and I’ve never hidden it.”

“Are you saying I’m more than an orgasm to you?” She held her breath.

Jackson sat up and reached across to flick the lamp on. “It offends me you even have to ask.”

She sat up, too. “Well what am I suppose to believe, Jackson? I fully acknowledge I instigated it. I accept it for what it was, but you confuse me. I can’t help but wonder if this is history repeating itself.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “That was fourteen years ago. I was an ignorant fool back then who said all the right things to get between a woman’s legs. I admit that. But I don’t want it to be like that with us.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “How do you want it to be?”

Jackson met her eyes. “Honest. I’ve been honest with you since I stepped through your doorway.”

“But you don’t want a relationship, so why does honesty matter?”

He groaned and fell back against the pillows. “I didn’t say I didn’t want a relationship. I said I wasn’t *looking* for a relationship.”

“So you do?”

“Autumn, go to sleep.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “No. Answer me. I tell you I have feelings for you and you say nothing. And then we have sex and you what? Forgive me for thinking the past is repeating itself.”

“I said nothing because you wouldn’t believe me if I had said anything. And I hardly call tonguing you sex. If you want to believe history’s repeating itself, then that’s your prerogative. I’m tired and not talking about it any more.”

He rolled over, effectively ending their conversation. Autumn turned out the light and lay on

her side away from him. His scent surrounded her, as did his warmth. She didn't have a clue as to where they went from here, but strictly professional was out of the question.

"Autumn, for what it's worth, I like the nightie. You look hot in turquoise."

* * * *

The sun peeked through the blinds and lined curtains to shine right in Jackson's eyes. He ignored it for a while, but the longer he lay there, the worse it got. Soon the damn light nearly blinded him. He rolled over to a warm, sleeping Autumn curled up beside him. She looked so beautiful lying there peacefully resting without a care in the world. He couldn't help leaning over to kiss her softly on the lips.

"Don't make me get up now."

Jackson chuckled. "I'm not. We can stay in bed today for all I care."

"No can do." Her eyes fluttered open. "I need coffee."

He smiled and stretched. Autumn wasn't a morning person by any means. "My vote is to stay in bed all day." She smacked his arm. "Ow! What was that for?"

"A laundry list of items. You deserved it."

Jackson knew it was true. He sat up and glanced at the clock. It was too early to be functioning. "You have to give me one hell of a good reason to get out of bed at this indecent hour."

"I'll make you breakfast." She pulled the covers aside and sat up.

"Not good enough." He fell back against the soft mattress.

She grinned at him. "You sure? Waffles with fresh-picked strawberries and whipped cream."

His stomach growled. After all these years, she still remembered his favorite breakfast. Jackson reached for her and tugged her toward him until she conveniently settled on top of him while they spoke.

"I only eat whipped cream off someone." He grinned. "As you recall, that someone was you."

"I doubt I'm the only one."

Jackson saw something change in her eyes, as if his past—their past—would forever haunt them. He wanted to think they could overcome it, that Autumn would believe him and they could move on. He was a real shithead to her before and didn't understand why he wanted to make amends now. He just knew he had to.

“Do you want a relationship with me, Autumn? The full-fledged boyfriend–girlfriend kind that includes romance and hand-holding?”

“You know I do.” She scooted to the side and stared at the closet. “I’m not going to force you into it, though. I know the reality of the situation and haven’t got a clue about how we can work around it. You’ll leave once the mission is over, and then where will I be?”

Jackson contemplated that too. “Can I tell you something?” he asked.

Autumn turned her head and gave him her full attention.

“I’ve never been in a relationship. I’m thirty-four years old, and I can honestly say, I’ve never had a girlfriend. Isn’t that pathetic?”

“A little.” She smiled. “What are you getting at?”

Jackson didn’t even know himself. “I want you to be my girlfriend. My first.”

He knew in the back of his mind that sounded more pathetic than admitting to never being in a relationship and scolded himself mentally for it.

Autumn needed someone to depend on. He didn’t know how he’d do it with his schedule, but he’d try. If it meant taking cases only in the U.S., so be it. He wanted the chance. Even during the summer they had spent together, he saw her as being different. It hadn’t stopped him from using her, but it opened his eyes now. She deserved to be loved.

“Say something.” Jackson itched to touch her but he held back.

“Yes.”

Chapter Nine

After hours of nonstop clients, Summer finally pulled Autumn to the side while they prepared to examine a litter of puppies in the back room.

“So, how is living with the hot hunk?” Summer wiggled her eyebrows.

“We’re sort of dating now.”

“Dating as in having really hot sex?”

Autumn blushed. Summer shook her head and snickered. For as long as she could remember, Jackson equaled hot sex no matter what the circumstances were. She found watching him work the ranch with her brothers, his body gleaming with sweat from the exertion, to be overly enticing and a delicious turn on. Sort of like now when he pulled his shirt off while working on remodeling the place. Autumn found herself staring at him when she was supposed to be working herself.

“He’s definitely a million steps up from Frank.” Summer took each of the puppies back to their mother and locked the cage behind her.

“Ugh. Don’t mention him.” Autumn gathered her bottle of water and the reports to calculate the bills for her customers. “I need you to run a few errands for me. We need a new filing cabinet since the shelves were torn down, and we also need some kind of scheduling book.”

“Sure we do. You just want to be left alone with the hottie.” Summer grinned.

Autumn felt her cheeks heating again. “Fine, I want to be left alone with the hottie.” She walked to the door with the files and glanced over her shoulder at Summer with a grin. “You don’t have to worry about coming back.”

In the main lobby, Autumn found Jackson painting over the harsh red letters of “Slut” written along the wall. His bare back was to her, his body slightly turned giving her a perfect view of his tattoo. It was the same one her father had on his back, the same one Nick and Davis had on their chest. The eagle sat on top of the world with an anchor piercing through the side. It was common in the military, and Autumn knew just like her brothers that Jackson did it for one cause.

She sighed. “Hey, Jax.”

He turned his head at the sound of her voice, though he continued to paint. “Hey. Something wrong?”

“You’re distracting me.” She smiled and sat in the middle of the floor to calculate the day’s bills.

“Sorry.” He watched her tip her water bottle to her lips and paused. “But I think you’re the

distracting one.”

He dipped the roller in the paint pan and began to roll the excess off. His muscles flexed with each push and pull, the tattoo dancing to its own beat. Autumn sat mesmerized, thinking that never in a million years would he ever date a girl like her. They had met through her father and had slept together out of stupidity. But if the circumstances were different and they had met out on the street, a guy like Jackson would look the other way when given the opportunity to be with her.

“You’re staring at me.” Without looking at her, he resumed painting.

“Sorry. I’m tired and just thinking.” She looked down at the pile of papers in her lap. “What made you decide to join the Marines?”

Jackson sat the pole with the paint roller attached aside and grabbed his shirt. Groaning, he rubbed the sweat from his face and tossed the shirt aside. “My life. It wasn’t exactly perfect, far from it actually, and the military was the only way out.”

“Do you ever see your family?”

“Nope.” He grabbed the pole again and dipped the roller in the paint.

Jackson offered no more and Autumn let it go. He hated talking. Unless it was making some smart-ass remark or turning her on. He detested talking about feelings most of all. She didn’t understand it since her mother had raised her to speak her mind and to get everything off her chest, good or bad. Her father never protested when she’d question him either.

She was a *feelings* kind of girl. One who said what needed to be said. Jackson spoke his mind, but left the emotions bottled up inside. Why it killed him to tell her anything significant, she couldn’t comprehend. *Give him time*. But how much time did they really have?

Two hours of billing and she wanted to pound her head against the wall. She ached, and she couldn’t stop thinking about the mysteries of Jackson. He wanted to know about her relationship with Frank, and all the nitty gritty details she told Jeffery. *Good luck with that*. She didn’t know if it hurt her more that he didn’t ask her about her life or that he went behind her back to ask her brother.

He finished painting the walls when he ran out of paint and decided to finish working on the countertop. The place was slowly coming together again and all Autumn could do was pray it remained that way.

“Okay, I need a break and couple of Tylenol.” She scooped up the papers around her and stood with them in her arms. “I want to do something together. Something that has nothing to do with work and something that is out of my house.”

Jackson sat the paint roller aside and focused his attention on her. “What do you want to do?”

"I want to go on a date. Something that is just us having fun. I need to have fun." She sat the pile on the counter and twisted the top of her water bottle. "What do you say?"

"Depends. Do you put out on the first date?"

Dropping her jaw, Autumn scoffed.

"Oh, all right. I suppose I'll suffer through the agony of having fun with you with no intentions of sex afterward. It'll be torture but I'll manage," he said.

Autumn rolled her eyes. "You're a buffoon."

"Yeah and you're smiling. I succeeded with my mission." Jackson gathered all the painting supplies. "You pick what we do and where we go while I rinse these brushes."

She watched him walk toward the back. Although she'd seen his body many times, she simply couldn't stop staring. When he returned, he shook a few brushes at her, sprinkling water across her cheeks.

"Quit!" She grabbed his hands and pushed them away from her. "You're getting me wet." He chuckled. "Isn't that the point?"

His arms came around her. She was helpless against the strong man and surrendered with a light kiss. "You're so bad."

"To the bone, baby. Where are we going?"

"I want to walk in the park. It's not overly romantic or even remotely fun, but it does let me clear my head." Jackson's hands slid to her ass and she lifted her legs around his waist. "You can even hold my hand."

He smiled. "Whatever you want. What about the much-needed work to be done?"

She looked around the room and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Well, since Summer went on hiatus, I think our work can wait until tomorrow. Besides my no-good brother and his wife are coming in. Got to save something for them."

"Jeff will get a kick out of that."

After they grabbed their stuff and locked the door, Autumn crawled in the truck beside Jackson, grateful to be alone with him outside the mess. He put his shirt back on, though the simple fabric did nothing to hide the strong muscles beneath.

After spending an hour walking hand in hand at the park, they stopped by the local Chinese place and grabbed a quick order of takeout. Home couldn't have sounded better to Autumn when they pulled in the drive, her bed sounding even better.

"How come you don't wear your dog tags?" she asked out of the blue.

He tilted his head to the side. "I'm not really in the Marine Corp any more. I do odds and ends kind of stuff, but I'm basically a soldier for hire. I don't really have a need to wear them any more."

"I used to wear my dad's when he was home. I snuck in my parent's room and took them off the dresser. He used to get so mad at me because he was afraid I'd lose them. I don't know what made me think of that just now." She sighed and gathered her belongings along with the food.

"The Major is really special to you, isn't he?"

"Of course. He's my dad." Autumn saw pain that she couldn't identify in his eyes. "I don't want to pry, but I would like to know where you come from sometime."

"My life began when I turned eighteen and entered the Marines. That's all there is to know."

She watched Jackson climb out of the truck and walk toward her house. She didn't understand what his statement meant but knew he would tell her in his own time. If he really wanted her to know, he'd tell her everything that she saw hurting him. He never showed weakness, and she chalked up his behavior to male pride.

"I'm going to take a quick shower," he said when she came through the door. He started stripping, walking toward the hall. "It's been a helluva, day and I stink. I'll only be a minute."

Autumn glanced at the bag of food in her arms and sighed. *The food will be cold by the time you get out and sweet and sour chicken is never good cold.* She kept her thoughts to herself and went to the kitchen bar to begin sorting through the containers. She didn't bother with plates, too tired to clean up the mess when they were done. After everything was situated, she poured herself a glass of iced tea and sat in her regular spot.

Ten minutes later Jackson came back with a towel wrapped around his waist, damp from his shower. "I'm starved." He took his seat next to her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired. It's seven and I'm ready to fall asleep. How sad is that?" She bit into her egg roll.

"I'm with ya." Jackson literally dug into his food, inhaling it more than actually chewing it.

Autumn watched him, amazed at how different women were from men. Even living with four men for nearly five years of her teenage life, she still didn't understand them, couldn't begin to fathom their way of thinking or their rationality on things.

"Jax, that food isn't going anywhere." She chuckled and stood. "Take a breath in between bites and actually chew it."

Jackson turned his head toward her. He looked adorable sitting on her bar stool naked with sweet and sour sauce on his lips. She couldn't help leaning forward to lick off the excess,

which gained a groan from him

His lips parted, and she slid her tongue between them. It was their first real kiss for the day, the peck this morning not counting. She ached for this man all day long, and now, she could finally have him.

Autumn pulled away and licked her own lips. "I'm going to bed. Will you clean this up?"

Jackson nodded. "I'm almost done."

"Good night." She kissed his cheek. It crossed her mind to add the "I love you" phrase, but deep inside, she knew it wasn't the right time. She felt it, had for years in fact, but Jackson was easing into this relationship with baby steps. He didn't need to be scared away before they even got started.

She entered her room and pulled out a black cami and boy short set to sleep in and changed. She didn't bother picking her clothes off the floor but kicked them to the side and crawled into bed. The headache eased with the food, but her muscles ached.

She heard Jackson clanging around in the kitchen and saw the light flick off as he came down the hall. She held her breath wondering which room he'd pick to sleep in, and let it out when he entered hers. He dropped the towel with a soft thud and then she felt the mattress dip beneath his weight. He pulled the covers over him as he settled in beside her.

"I know you said you don't put out on the first date, but do you wanna fool around? It's been a long day and I think it's the least we owe ourselves."

She chuckled. "You're such a romantic."

"I'm not in the mood for romance."

Honestly, neither was she. "Fine. But I'm not moving. You have to do all the work."

He laughed. "I was hoping you'd be the one to take the lead."

Jackson found her mouth and started kissing her. His hand came to her side, slipping beneath the cami to touch skin. The moon cast a warm glow in the bedroom, giving them the perfect amount of light. In its own way, the soft glow created a romantic vibe.

Jackson moved over her, pushing her legs wide with his body as he settled between them. This was it. Jackson was finally in her bed, in her life again. It may not be exactly like her dreams, but he *was* here. Alive and in the flesh. For some reason, it's all that seemed to matter at the moment.

He didn't break the kiss as he worked at removing her clothing. The cami came off quickly, and his mouth found hers again. The shorts came next. His fingers lingered along her thighs. Each brush against her heated flesh sent shivers throughout her body. He touched her pussy, and she gasped.

Autumn was thirsty with an unquenchable lust. Not only did she want this man, she had to have him. It was a force to be reckoned with, a need so strong her body was on fire from it. Jackson didn't dare force anything on her. With his tongue in her mouth, his lips caressing hers, Autumn knew she had definitely brought this on herself. And now his fingers were sliding inside her, mimicking the most intimate act two humans could possibly partake in.

"Jax." She fisted her hands in the silky wet strands of his hair. "Oh, God, Jax."

She wanted him filling her up, bringing her release the way no other man had. This morning had been a mere appetizer, a preview of what she had lost and a promise of what she'd find.

He pulled his fingers from her body and lightly pinched her nipple. Raw pleasure shot down her spine heading straight for her clit. He stopped kissing her long enough to lick off her cream, swirling his tongue around the hard peak and then pulling it into his mouth to suck. Autumn whimpered and melted back against the soft sheets.

This was how it was suppose to be. With nothing separating them, Autumn reached out and stroked his hard flesh. He groaned in pleasure, the smooth languorous strokes she knew would drive him absolutely mad. A drop of fluid already emitted from the tip of his cock, and she used her finger to spread it around. Jackson's breath came harsh from his lungs. He simply rested his head against her stomach and let her touch him.

Autumn slid one hand down his side, raking her nails along his back from shoulders to ass before gripping him tightly and pulling him closer. "Jackson, please."

She held his cock in position for him to enter her. Autumn hooked her legs around his thighs and waited for him to move. As if the heavens aligned and the gods all agreed, Jackson pushed a tantalizing inch inside, stretching her completely.

He grunted and thrust deeper. Sweat poured out of his body with his strained control. By sheer force of will, Autumn gripped his buttocks and pulled him to her, pushing him completely inside her. She clung to him, wrapped her arms around him. He dropped his forehead against her chest, a signal she took to mean he, too, felt he'd come home. This was all she ever wanted. It was all they ever needed.

"You are too much, sweetheart." He nuzzled against her, kissing every part he could. His breath was hot against her breasts, his lips a tantalizing caress. "I want to stay like this forever."

He pulled back completely and thrust inside her again. Jackson made sure he continued to kiss her. He took her mouth greedily, kissing her hard. The taste of him, the smell of him branded itself in her mind. She never wanted it to end.

Three days ago, if she mentioned Jackson Cooper's name, she would have fumed. And now . . . now upon hearing his name she felt a yearning embedded deep inside she didn't want to ignore. Jackson made her crave him. It was beyond anyone's ability to stop, but Jackson gave her pleasure beyond her wildest fantasies. He gave her body the sweet bliss of climax from a

great round of sex. Most of it may only be physical, but she couldn't get enough of it. She'd never be able to separate her feelings from the act, and knew without one doubt she only set herself up for hurt again.

But this time she didn't care. She simply didn't care.

Jackson came, pouring himself into her with little jerks of ecstasy. Autumn watched pleasure fill the dark features of his face, his lips drawn back, teeth bared.

She wanted him to be the one for her, the one her mother was convinced was out in the world searching for her. Her better half, as her father would say. Nobody made her feel like he did, both in the good and bad times.

His finger brushed her clit, giving her the little push she needed. "Come for me, baby," he whispered, and she did.

Sparkles of light shined behind closed eyelids as fireworks exploded within her body. She clinched him tight between her thighs, dug her nails into his back. She never wanted it to end. Slowly, she came back to earth.

After a while, Jackson rolled to the side and stared up at the ceiling. Neither said anything, and the moment couldn't have felt more perfect. She laced her fingers with his and smiled with her eyes closed.

The thought of their last time together drifted into her mind, the one before he left her father's ranch. She convinced him to have a picnic with her at midnight, in the moonlight. The grilled cheese sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies weren't exactly the best meal in the world. They made love beneath the moon in the middle of her father's field, something she'd never forget for the rest of her days. The stars cast a luminescent glow on their sweaty skin, a reminder that some moments in life are meant to be remembered. Cherished even. That moment, with Jackson above her, wearing only his dog tags around his neck, she knew would stay with her forever.

"How come you never told your father about us?" he asked, drawing them out of silence.

Autumn rolled to her side and pressed a kiss against his tattoo. "Can you imagine what he'd say? I was his angel. He liked you, but I doubt he'd like the idea of you taking my virginity. Hell, didn't he assign you as my bodyguard against our neighbor, Evan, from down the street? The poor boy was too scared to even look at me, much less touch me."

Jackson untangled their fingers and wrapped his arm around her. "I told him I'd snap his neck if he touched you."

Autumn pulled back to look at him. "You did not."

He chuckled. "Okay. That was Jeff, but I was standing beside him. Of me, Jeff, and Davis, I suppose I was the most threatening. I was the biggest, and poor little Evan didn't stand a chance."

Autumn laid her head on his chest and circled his navel with her fingertip. "What about now? Does Evan stand a chance with me now?"

"Not with me around." Jackson squeezed her tighter against him. "You're all mine."

His words thrilled her like nothing else. A small part of her insisted that he only said it because they were dating now, but the other part firmly said that he's good at telling women what they want to hear. Autumn was the queen at reading too much into words spoken, and with Jackson, she didn't know what to take to heart and what to brush away.

"Since your family is coming in town, how are we going to work out the sleeping arrangements?"

"Jeffery and Kristin will get the bed I gave you, and you'll get my bed." She closed her eyes against him, picturing in her mind what Jeffery would have to say about that. "I don't care what other's think, Jax. Do you?"

"No. Why would you think that?"

"Jeffery is Jeffery. He's the big, bad know-it-all. Don't let him get under your skin." She yawned and smiled. "Besides, I'm supposed to be mad at you for calling him in the first place."

"Yeah. You sure looked mad when I made you come." Jackson kissed her and then pulled the covers over them. After tucking them around her he leaned over to kiss her again. "You need some sleep, *jolie fille*."

"Hey." Autumn grabbed his arm. "You never did tell me how you learned French."

Jackson kissed her and plopped down on his side. "You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do. Tell me."

Jackson huffed a breath and stared at the ceiling. "I fucked my French teacher in high school. She taught me the language and gave me straight A's."

Autumn blinked, not knowing what to say. "Is there a woman on earth you haven't fucked?" He snorted. "Yes, smarty-pants."

"You know, that's the first bit of information you volunteered about your days before the Marines. Why is your past such a secret?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

Autumn rolled to her side away from him. "It's something lovers do, Jackson. They share parts of themselves with each other that the rest of the world never gets to see. I wish you'd trust me enough to tell me about it."

He was silent for a while, and Autumn was certain he was either ignoring her or fast asleep.

“It’s not about trust, Autumn. There’s no point in rehashing my past or anyone’s past for that matter.”

“Do you trust me, Jackson?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“The kind that needs an answer. Do you trust me?”

Autumn waited staring at her bathroom door knowing the answer before he ever spoke it. This explained a lot, she realized. It wasn’t about hurting her this time, because she honestly didn’t think he’d do that intentionally. He simply didn’t trust her.

“I trust you about as much as I can.”

Autumn closed her eyes as a tear escaped. “At least I know where I stand.”

“Autumn”—his fingers wrapped around her arm—“Shit. That didn’t come out right. I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about.”

“You’re talking about your feelings. Something you seem to have a hard time dealing with.” She brushed him off and wiped the tears on her cheeks. “Why can’t guys just say what they feel? They have no trouble expressing themselves otherwise, but emotionally they clog up worse than a hairball in the pipes. It’s not fair.”

“Autumn, would you please listen to me? I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.” He blew out a breath, and she felt the mattress bounce as he moved closer to her. “You want to know about my past, fine. I grew up in a house where love didn’t exist. I grew up with a parent I didn’t trust and ultimately wanted to get away from every time I was forced to stay with him. I didn’t get along with my dad at all, and I refuse to talk any more about that relationship with anyone. It has nothing to do with me trusting you. I’m sorry I can’t be the guy who has the perfect life, the perfect everything that you fantasize about. I want to, I do, but it’s impossible.”

Autumn felt his lips against her arm. “Jackson, *you* are what I fantasize about. I feel so foolish in admitting this, but you’re the only guy I’ve ever wanted.”

She scooted the blankets aside and faced him. “And it is about trust, Jackson. If you can’t trust me with the details of your past, what can you trust me with? I’m not forcing you to tell me. But I want you to want to tell me. It’s part of giving yourself to someone, something that no matter what, no one will take away.”

Autumn silently scolded herself for sounding like her mother. “Look, part of being in a relationship is sharing your life with someone. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Otherwise, without the sharing, there is no relationship and we’re back to being fuck buddies. Is that

what we are to you, Jackson? Am I still the same dumb fool who let you use her body and blindly wishes maybe—just maybe—you'd have an ounce of love in your heart for me?"

He looked straight into her eyes. "I can't say what you want to hear, Autumn. I won't. I'm not using you. I admit that, but I can't admit I'm in love with you—not the way you want and need."

"I'm going to sleep. Jeffery is coming in the morning, and knowing him, it'll be at an ungodly hour."

"Autumn." Jackson groaned next to her.

"Good night." She tucked the blankets around her.

"What do you want from me?" Jackson raised his voice.

"Nothing," she yelled back. "Not one fucking thing, Jackson." She threw the covers back and grabbed her silk robe. "I want you out of my house tomorrow. And most importantly out of my life. I should have known you didn't have it in you to give something of yourself to someone else. And I'm an ignorant fool to assume that someone would be me. I hate you, and that is something that will never change."

She grabbed her pillow and yanked the comforter off the bed. Ten minutes ago, they were cuddling and loving each other. Now, the true colors shined. Jackson wasn't capable of loving anyone but himself. Sadly, she wasn't even sure he could love himself.

Deciding to make her bed on the couch, she flipped the television on and found a late-night program to watch. It was well past eleven, and she was bone tired, but sleep evaded her. *Why did you have to push him? Why didn't you leave well enough alone?*

"Come back to bed."

Autumn clicked the volume button twice, turning it up.

"Damn it, what do you want me to do? I thought we were doing fine. We spent a nice evening at the park. We had a nice dinner. We made love. After that, shit hit the fan. Forgive me for being ignorant, but what did I miss?"

"You've got to have love to make love." Autumn clicked the volume up three more times. Jackson grabbed the controller from her, muted the television and threw the remote across the room. "I never said I didn't love you."

"It's implied, Jackson. You give me some bullshit speech about your family and how you grew up in misery yet you continue to live in that misery each and every day of your life." She punched her pillow.

"Just come back to bed." He ran his hands through his hair. "All this can wait until morning."

“My mom always said you should never go to bed angry. I’m fuming right now.”

“Don’t make me pick you up and carry you in there.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He came at her. With full brute strength of a man on a mission, he scooped her into his arms, blanket and all. She kicked, though no real effort to get away was made. He held her too tight, kept her close to his body as if she was the most precious thing on earth.

“If you’d stop being the badass for a minute you’d see making love is more fun than fighting.” He threw her in the middle of the bed and followed behind her, pressing his body against hers. “Don’t pick fights with me, Autumn. I’m constantly fighting everything else in this world. Don’t make me fight you, too.”

“So I just ignore it?”

“Ignore what?”

“You said you didn’t trust me!” She pushed at his chest. “You don’t love me. Now you don’t trust me. We’re not really friends. Who are we kidding, Jackson? We are nothing more than fuck buddies.”

He kissed her hard with lots of tongue. *Probably just to shut me up*, she mused.

“You are not my fuck buddy. And I’m tired of repeating myself,” he said, coming up for air.

“Then what am I, Jackson? We’re not friends because we’ve had sex. We’re not lovers because you don’t trust me. Don’t even think about us having a real relationship because both the sex and trust go hand in hand. What are we?”

“Does everything always have to have a definition?”

She scoffed and pulled away from him. “Just leave me alone.”

Autumn curled up on the side of the bed opposite the one she was used to and hugged her pillow tight. *This is what happens when you ask for it.*

Chapter Ten

When Autumn woke the next morning, Jackson wasn't beside her. She had little sleep and laid awake most of the night contemplating her life. If Jackson had entertained her ideas of marriage and a family all those years ago, where would they be now? As much as she wanted to think they'd be the Brady Bunch with a happy family to come home to, she seriously doubted it. He kept too much of himself a secret. He didn't trust her with the painful details of his life.

She stood and dressed in the cami she wore the night before. Thoughts of him calling that love flooded her mind, and she took a deep breath. She wanted to believe it. With all that she was, she wanted to.

Jackson came in the bedroom just as she hung her robe on the rack attached to the bathroom door. He had pulled on a rugged pair of jeans and looked like he had as much sleep as her.

He stopped in the bathroom doorway, propping a hand above his head as he leaned. His eyes met hers in the mirror. Something unspoken lingered between them for a few seconds before he cleared his throat. "Your brother just called. He'll be here in about thirty minutes."

She didn't say anything, figuring the less words spoken the better.

"Uh, I talked to Davis, too. He's taking off for the weekend to come down, though he said it was mostly just to use your hot tub." He smiled and shook his head.

Autumn glanced down at the washcloth she'd twisted into a knot. Not only one brother but two. *As if life couldn't get any better.*

"Look, I'm not leaving, Autumn. You can hate me, fight me, curse me—whatever. I'm not leaving."

She uncoiled the cloth and flipped the faucet on warm. She pursed her lips while she held a finger beneath the streaming water, waiting for it to heat. She knew he wasn't leaving. Telling him to was a joke. She probably couldn't get him to leave the bathroom so she could pee, much less her house. And if she weren't so stressed out, she'd be the one to leave. He was smothering her enough as it was.

"Fine. Don't talk to me." Jackson threw his hands up in the air. "You think you know everything anyway, why bother trying to clue you in."

Autumn watched him leave, waiting until he was out of her sight before letting the sobs come.

* * * *

"Autumn Bottom," Jeffery pulled his sister into a hug when she answered the door. "How is the world's most annoying little sister?"

“Pissed off.” She squinted in the sunlight. “Who the hell is bright-eyed and bushy-tailed before eight?”

She pulled away from Jeffery and stepped to the side. He and Kristin entered her house, each carrying a duffel. Jackson stood with a bowl of cereal in the living room, freshly showered and dressed in a white chest-hugging tee and loose, worn-out jeans.

“You’re a vet. Don’t you deal with emergencies at all hours of the night like MDs?” Jeffery tossed his bag on the couch and turned toward his sister. “Besides, what would Dad think of you not being up at the crack of dawn, doing jumping jacks?”

“Dad never made me do all the shit he made you boys do.” Autumn smiled and shut the front door. “Daddy likes me, remember.”

Jeffery scoffed. “Right. Just like those puppies you favor can fly, huh?”

“Get over your jealousy, Jeffery.” Autumn smiled at Kristin. “How do you ever put up with him?”

She hugged her sister-in-law. Kristin Wilson came into their family during a rough patch of their lives. When their mother died, she and her family helped Autumn’s father and the rest of the family take care of themselves. Somehow, Kristin and Jeffery became really close and eventually married three years later.

“He only acts up when we’re out.” Kristin smiled. “I guess I’m going to start leaving him at home.”

Jeffery plopped down on the couch and propped his feet up on the coffee table. “You wish. You just want me as your twenty-four-hour boy toy.”

Autumn held up her hands. “Eww. Do not mention anyone being anyone’s twenty-four-hour boy toy in this house.”

Jeffery looked over at Jackson, who simply observed their conversation as he ate his cereal, and then looked back at his sister. “Tell me, little sis, you have a new boy toy in your life? I’m surprised to see you haven’t killed each other yet.”

“Give her time. She’s planning my death as we speak.” Jackson crossed the living room to return the bowl to the kitchen.

“What? Are you saying you kept your grubby paws off my sister? *The* Jackson Cooper who fucks anything with a skirt.” Jeffery waited for a response.

“Jeffery, language,” Kristin scolded.

“Your sister doesn’t wear skirts.” Jackson took his seat in the recliner. “And she’s got bigger balls than the both of us combined.”

Jeffery glanced from Jackson to Autumn. She simply stood there smiling. “Uh, did I miss something here?”

“Let me fill you in. Jackson pissed me off, and I’m not talking to him.” She ended it with a smile at Jackson.

“She has no reason to be pissed off in the first place.” He flipped through the morning shows and settled on the same cartoons they watched the day before. “But she reads too much into shit and goes all huffy-puffy when she doesn’t get her way.”

“Funny, really that he says that, Jeffery, because just an hour ago, he promised to be straightforward and never lie to me. Now it looks like he’s changed his mind. Or am I reading too much into that, too?”

“If you tell me what you want from me, all this can be solved and put in the past!” Jackson voice rose, and Kristin flinched at their conversation.

Autumn narrowed her eyes at him and then returned her attention to Jeffery. “There’s plenty to do at the clinic. Yesterday we got the major stuff done, but a lot needs to be cleaned, and I’m planning on doing some shopping since they ripped my furniture to shreds. Since you have a degree in interior design, Kristin, I’d appreciate it if you’d help me with that.”

She watched Jackson clench the remote, never taking his eyes off her. He hated to be ignored and she personally, found it hilarious. She couldn’t help noticing Kristin’s sideways glance toward Jeffery as if seeking permission to respond. Or decline. Maybe they would all pack up and leave her the hell alone.

“What happened between the two of you?” Jeffery asked bluntly.

“If you could figure out the answer to that, clue me in,” Jackson mumbled.

Autumn’s control snapped. She picked up the nearest thing and threw it at him. Luckily for him, it was just a pillow. “You! Ugh. I’m so mad at you right now that I would love nothing more than to beat that cocky attitude out of you!”

Jackson threw the pillow to the side. “You started all this shit.”

“Oh, I started it. Yeah, okay.” Autumn’s jaw tightened and she simply shook her head. “That’s your typical answer, isn’t it? Blaming others. I honestly don’t know how you ever became a soldier because working together as a team is vital for your brigade, not to mention your life. My dad may think you’re a class act with all the shit you’ve kissed his ass to do, but I think you’re worse than the lowest scum on the face of this earth.”

Autumn left a wide-eyed Kristin, a narrow-eyed Jeffery and an equally angry Jackson in the living room, and she ran to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. He simply didn’t get it, she realized. In his mind, if you don’t talk about it, it goes away.

She shook her head and slid down the door to the floor. Maybe he was one of those who would never get it?

* * * *

Jackson stared at the closed bedroom door, torn between slamming his hand into a nearby wall or calling the Major and telling him he simply couldn't see the case to the end. He'd never backed out on a case, but then again, dealing with Autumn wasn't like tracking miles in the Amazon and hiding from rebels while he rescued a scientist either. She was worse.

Jackson flipped through the stations to give him something to do with his hands. She hated him. He got that. She thought he was scum. He got that, too. What he didn't understand was why she was so pissed off. He didn't tell her that he didn't trust her. He told her he trusted her as much as he could. He told her he wasn't in love with her, but not that he didn't love her. In all honesty, he didn't know if he was capable of loving.

"What the hell are you thinking?" Jeffery asked as he moved his bag to sit. "I don't know what's going on between you two, but a deaf and blind mute could see you've hurt her. She went through enough the first time, Jack. And damn it, she still loves you."

"Fuck off, Jeff. You don't know shit about anything we're talking about, so mind your own business." Jackson settled the TV on an action channel and couldn't have cared less about the movie.

"Maybe, I should talk to her," Kristin offered.

"No. Autumn likes to dwell in misery alone." Jeffery grabbed Kristin's hand and pulled her beside him on the couch.

Jackson's cell rang, and he flipped it open after reading the Caller ID. It was Davis. "What?"

"Why hello, darling, how are you?" Davis snickered.

"Knock it off."

"Jeez. What bit you on the ass?"

"Your sister." Jackson stood and left the room, deciding Jeffery and Kristin had heard enough of his private life. "And I don't mean that literally."

"What's happened now?"

Jackson spent the next moments telling him everything that happened between them. If Davis knew anyone, he knew both Jackson and Autumn. They'd been friends since they were eighteen, worked together, and even went on missions together. And well, Davis had known Autumn all her life.

"So tell me what I missed?" Jackson sat in the spare bedroom with the door closed, waiting

for his best friend to explain everything to him.

“Number one, are you fuckin’ nuts? You never tell a woman your true feelings unless it’s the same as theirs because they never want to hear it. And you most certainly never tell them *after* sex. Lord, has your dick truly overruled your brain?”

He could picture Davis rolling his eyes.

“And secondly,” Davis continued, “why don’t you trust her? I know my sister pretty well, and I’m probably being biased, but she’s the one person I want in my army if we ever went to war.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t trust her. I said I trust her as much as I can.” Jackson started ripping the sheets off the bed. Since this room would be Jeffery and Kristin’s, it was only courtesy to change them himself.

“Dude, I’m not fooled. I know what you mean about the whole trust as much as you can bullshit, but it’s just an excuse to distance yourself from my sister. You need to let the past go.”

Jackson wadded up the bed clothing and tossed it toward the door. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Do you want to have a relationship with my sister?”

“Of course.” Jackson didn’t know what it was, but being with Autumn was different than with any other person. He wanted to call it love because he’d never found it in the fourteen years they were apart. Last night only proved that much when they united again in her bed.

“Then you’ve got to be honest with her. If I know my sister like I think I do, you holding back and not giving your all is telling her that when this little fucker is caught, you’ll tuck your tail and head for the door. She’s scared of losing you again, and she wants you to make the commitment to her that proves you’re not going anywhere.”

“What’s the commitment?”

“Dude. Have you really never learned any of this stuff?”

Jackson pursed his lips. “If you recall, I didn’t have a mommy to take care of me the same way Faye took care of you.”

“Fine. If you love her, tell her. When she needs you, be there for her. Love isn’t something that’s only said with the *L*-word. You’ve got to show it as well.”

“So you’re saying I’m in love with her?”

“No. I’m saying if you’d stop being a stubborn bastard, you’ll fall harder for my sister than a boulder from the top of Mt. Everest.” Davis sighed. “She’s not the bad guy. And most

importantly, she's not your father. Just remember that. Anyway, I've got to go. I'll be down Friday night."

Jackson disconnected from his friend and stared at the unmade bed. *You've got yourself in some deep shit, Cooper. How the fuck are you going to get out of it?*

After he put fresh sheets on the bed, he traipsed down the hall and knocked on Autumn's bedroom door. "Autumn, we need to talk."

The door swung wide. She stood in fresh pair of green scrubs with her hair in a hot pink towel. One eye was lined with makeup as if she'd been putting it on when he interrupted her. Jackson walked inside and closed the door behind him. He sat on the edge of the bed and stared at his feet. "Look, I'm sorry."

She snorted and rubbed her wet hair a little before pulling the towel from her head. "A few minutes ago, you didn't even know what you did wrong. Hell, you blamed me for it. And now you're suddenly sorry? Sorry for what?"

She wasn't about to crack. Jackson licked his lips and tried again. "I don't open up, Autumn. Not just with you, with everybody. I think Davis is the only person who knows everything there is to know about me, and even telling him stuff, I still have a hard time. I shouldn't have said I didn't trust you because I do. Trust is a hard issue with me because growing up I could trust no one. I wasn't raised in a loving environment where good things happened on a regular basis. I just don't know how to give you what you need, I guess."

Autumn stared at him without saying a word. Jackson couldn't read her thoughts but prayed to everything holy she wasn't ready to pound her fists into him.

"Did Davis tell you to say that to me?"

"No. He told me I needed to be open with you. So I'm going to work on it." He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "That's the best I can do."

"You said you trust me. If that's so, then tell me what happened that made you cold inside."

Jackson licked his lips. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I can't. I've only told two people face-to-face what happened, and they were your brother and your father. Both times, I was piss-assed drunk. I may have even cried, I don't know."

Autumn came to him and sat on the bed. "It's not fair to me, you know. I'm not forcing you to do anything—you'll do it in your own time—but secrets rock the boat for relationships." "You have secrets of your own."

She stared down at her feet. "Yes, I do. Is that what this is about? I tell you something, you tell me something?"

Jackson reached out to touch her thigh. "No. Please stop taking offense to everything I say."

“Fine. Where do we go from here? We haven’t really solved anything.”

“At least we’re on speaking terms. That’s good right?” Jackson smiled at her and finally she smiled back at him. “I mean you haven’t punched me yet. So my luck is faring better than Gallagher’s.”

Autumn laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. Jackson closed his eyes, wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her neck. She made everything bad, disappear by doing nothing at all. That was something to hold on to.

* * * *

“My sister’s in love with you.” Jeffery hadn’t spoke to Jackson the entire time they worked at the clinic and instead waited until the very moment Autumn left with Kristin to drop this bomb on him. “She told me herself she loves you, and she wants a relationship with you.”

When Jackson kept quiet, he added, “Don’t you have anything to say?”

“I know you love your sister and want to protect her, but our relationship is our business.” Jackson waited for a retort and was granted silence.

After a few minutes, Jeffery finally asked, “Is she just another fuck for you, Jack? Are you just having your fun like you did before? I need to know because I’ll be the one to clean the mess up.”

Jackson pushed the mop along the floor in the waiting area. “She was never just a fuck. Even back then.”

“Then what is she? Special?”

Jackson pursed his lips. Autumn was special. He couldn’t even begin to count all the ways. “You know she’s special.”

“Then why the hell did you crush her heart?” Jeffery sat the paint brush down. “She went after you. We spent two days looking for her, and when I finally found her, she wasn’t herself. She was bitter with anger, much like this morning when the two of you were going at it. She cried on my shoulder that night, confessing everything that happened between the two of you.”

Jackson thought back to that night when she came to his house. He’d only been gone a month, and when Autumn showed up on his doorstep, it scared him a bit. He didn’t know how to deal with women beyond taking them to bed. He’d admit it to her that he was scared of what she proposed. He wasn’t ready for a relationship. Hell, he barely knew how to take care of himself, much less a girlfriend—or wife, like she’d hinted. So he did the most brash thing he could think of and felt like shit for it now.

“Autumn is an intelligent woman. She’s free to make her own choices, but she is still my little sister and always will be.” Jeffery wiped his hands on his pants. “She has a tender heart,

and I don't want you or any other punk screwing it up. It took a while before she became herself again, the sweet, loving Autumn we all know and love. Don't fuck with her feelings, Jack. I'm serious. There will be repercussions this time, and none of them are in your favor."

Jackson wrung the mop out and pushed the bucket toward the front door. "Don't threaten me, Jeff. The last person who did wound up dead at the end of my gun."

* * * *

Autumn and Kristin spent most of the day at Greensburg Mall picking out stuff to buy. Kristin was a huge help. She told her what kind of colors to have and what styles. When she got her clinic up and running again, Autumn knew it be much nicer than before. And most of the stuff they picked out was within her budget.

"Thank you for coming with me," Autumn said on the drive back. I really needed some girl time away from the guys."

"Anytime." Kristin sat in the passenger seat staring out the window. "I don't mean to pry, but are you and Jackson okay?"

Autumn shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Kristin turned in her seat. "Are you romantically involved?"

She held back her grin. "Yes."

"Is that what it was about? Jeff gets cranky when I turn him down, and we usually have a big fight about it."

Autumn bit her tongue. She really didn't need to know about her brother's sex life, even if Kristin was her friend. "Sex is the least of our worries."

"You said some pretty mean things to him." Kristin bit her lower lip. "Jackson's a good guy."

Autumn didn't know what she was getting at and left it alone. They pulled into the clinic parking lot around three. Both of the men outside working on the graffiti. Both men had lost their shirts since they'd been gone, and sweat now coated their backs as their muscles contracted with every movement. Autumn smiled to herself. *This is ridiculous.*

She parked the car and grabbed her purse. "We'll leave this stuff in the car and unload it later."

They climbed out and made their way to the men.

"You guys are actually working well together. What gives?" Autumn rubbed her hand down Jackson's sweaty back.

“We’ve been busy.” Jackson wiped the sweat from his face on his arm. “What did you girls buy?”

“Plenty.” Autumn smiled. “I need to talk to you alone. Follow me inside.”

Jackson glanced toward Jeffery and Kristin and then back at Autumn. “Am I going to get yelled at?”

“If you don’t follow me.”

Autumn led him inside the clinic, grabbed him a cool water bottle from the back and turned to face him. “I found something really neat today.”

“What?” Jackson wiped the excess water from his mouth.

“There was a machine at the mall that makes dog tags.” Autumn giggled. “And I made us some.”

Jackson stared at her like she was crazy. “You made us dog tags? Honey, if you wanted a set, I would have given you mine.”

“Not following me. I engraved them to say what I want.” Autumn grabbed the set she made for Jackson and handed it to him. “Read it.”

He glanced down at the metal tags on a chain. After he read it he lifted his eyes and busted out laughing. “You are amazing.”

Autumn grinned. “Fits doesn’t it?”

“‘Horny’ and ‘boy’ do fit me, yes.” Jackson wrapped his arms around her. “What’s yours say?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Not fair.” He pulled back and looped the necklace around his neck. “Is it something dirty, too?”

She shrugged. “My secret.”

Jackson leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Thanks, babe. I love it.”

Autumn picked up the dog tags as a joke originally. She hadn’t thought that Jackson would actually wear them, but he had looped them around his neck. Maybe some time away from each other really did them well.

“Are you still mad at me?” Jackson asked.

“Not really. I don’t like what you said, but I can’t change the way you feel.” Autumn ran her

hand down his chest. “You’re all sweaty.”

He chuckled and tipped the bottle to his lips. “Yeah, you slave driver, you.”

“You’re pretty hot.” She grabbed the dog tags and pulled his mouth down to hers. “It kind of makes me want to lick you all over.”

Jackson opened his arms. “Have at it.”

“I love you, Jackson.” She didn’t know what came over her but she said those three little words that scared him off the first time. “I’ve tried to deny it, but it’s there. I love you.”

She licked his lower lip and then closed her eyes to kiss him fully. He tasted raw and male, something she’d grown to love over the past few days. She knew she was a fool for saying those words to him. But this relationship hadn’t exactly been the smartest for either one of them.

“I’m sorry I said those mean things to you. I didn’t mean them.” She let the dog tags go and glanced away with tears in her eyes. “I’ll feel really bad if you don’t forgive me.”

He cupped her cheeks in his hands. “That’s what people do when they fight. And thank God our first fight is over. Now we can make it our goal to never do it again.”

“It’ll happen again.” She gave him a small smile and rubbed her hands along his biceps. “Do you forgive me?”

“Yes, Autumn. Stop worrying your pretty head about it.” He kissed her nose and then her lips. He moved his mouth over her face planting butterfly kisses everywhere. “Does this mean we get to have make-up sex?”

“Funny, Jax.” She wrapped her arms around him. “Really funny.”

Chapter Eleven

Two days of nothing but work and Autumn was about to go out of her mind. A call came in to deliver twin calves, and it took all four of them, plus Summer to succeed.

Autumn glanced at the baby calves sleeping next to their mother and sighed with relief. Two healthy newborns just entered the world, and she helped them along the way.

Granted it took the men's strength, Summer and Kristin's quick hands, and her common sense to get them here, but they did. Two beautiful, black-coated newborns were lying next to their mother.

"Uh-oh. You've got that look." Jackson's eyes went wide.

"What look?" She packed up her tools in the stall, she and Jackson being the only ones left in the barn.

He propped his arms on the gate and met her eyes. "The look that says you want to have a baby. That look."

She shook her head and stuffed the items in her pack. "You're crazy."

"Then why are you looking at those calves like you want to take them home with you?" He opened the gate and squeezed in the stall to help her clean up. Both were covered in birthing fluids and neither smelled the best in the world. Showers were definitely next on the agenda.

"I don't have that look." She chewed on her bottom lip. "It just gives me a reality check when I do this. I mean that's another life. A little baby who is now in this world with the rest of us. It makes all the bad days worthwhile, you know?"

He nodded. "Did you always want to work on both small and large animals?"

"I hadn't really thought about having a mixed practice since most only do either one or the other. In school, I was stuck doing my rounds at the small animal clinic and then a call came in for a cow in labor and bleeding out. I was apart of the critical care team, and I got such a high from it. I'd love to open up my own critical care center specializing in both large and small creatures. That was actually one of my dreams."

Autumn yawned, tired from the day and the events within it. A hot bath and cozy bed sounded better and better as the moments went by. Jackson lifted her case for her and carried it out into the main alleyway.

"So you don't want a baby? Am I safe to breathe again?"

"You're not funny."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and leaned close to her ear. "Maybe not, but I am up for the challenge of perfecting the craft. You know, baby making and all. In fact, we

could do it here, right now in the hayloft.”

“Lord. Does your libido ever take a holiday? I’m covered in birthing slime and blood and you’re ready to jump me.” With one arm around his waist, she laid her head against his shoulder. “That is seriously twisted. Maybe you’re the one who wants to have a baby.”

Jackson stiffened. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Honey, no offense but with your previous lifestyle you could have created a bunch of little Jacksons. It never once crossed your mind?”

“I used condoms. I wasn’t getting any chick pregnant.”

“Condoms break.”

“Yeah, but mine didn’t.” He rubbed her arm. “Can we stop talking about it?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m curious now. You used condoms with every chick you slept with. Every time?”

“That’s what I said.” He dropped his arm and grabbed her hand. “Why is it so hard for you to believe?”

“Because you didn’t use anything with me.”

Jackson stopped, his face pale with a look of horror. “Should I have?”

“A little late for that now, isn’t it?”

Jackson’s eyes widened and dropped to her stomach.

“I’m not pregnant, though,” she said.

His shoulders drooped with relief. “Thank God.”

“But I still don’t get why. If you used it every time with everyone else, why not with me?”

He smiled. “Because you’re Autumn. My brain’s in my dick when I’m around you, and in all honesty, you are the only person I’d ever consider having children with. With the others, it wasn’t an option.”

“STDs don’t factor in? You could have picked up something.” Autumn started walking again tugging him along with her. “I could have contracted some horrendous disease that made your eyes bleed or something. You never know nowadays.”

“Bleeding eyes? That sounds painful.”

“Or what if this horrendous disease made your dick fall off? That could happen, too, you

know.”

Jackson shook his head. “If you had a horrendous disease, you wouldn’t have even considered having sex with me for the fear you’d spread it. My manhood is safe.”

“How can you be so sure? Maybe I contracted it to pay you back. Created it, like a mad scientist.”

Jackson laughed as they walked around the farm house. Autumn couldn’t help it. Being with him made life fun again. Even if they were talking about a girl’s ultimate nightmare, they were laughing and having fun with each other.

“I must repeat myself,” he said pulling the tailgate down and sliding the vet box in the back. “You are Autumn. The very same Autumn Faye Callahan who couldn’t possibly harm another soul on the face of this earth. I know you too well, sweetheart. You’d find a cure or go celibate for the rest of your life. No question.”

“That’s a lot of trust you’re putting in me. Did your feelings change from the other night?”

“I told you I was trying.” He glanced over her shoulder and she knew the rest of her crew was done using the farmer’s bathroom to clean up. “Looks like we’re ready to go.”

* * * *

“Damn, you keep long hours.”

When they arrived home, Davis waited on the front porch legs crossed and propped up on the banister. Jackson had forgotten about him coming to help out with Gallagher.

“What is that smell?” Davis scrunched his nose in distaste.

“It’s my new fragrance, blood and birthing fluid.” Autumn smiled and wrapped her arms around him even though he tried pushing her away. “Come on, it smells good and you know it.”

“I’m going to puke.” Davis choked.

She backed off and fished her key from her purse. “You always were the wimp of the family.”

Jackson shook his head knowing the brother and sisterly love was about to begin. Of the four Callahan children, Davis and Autumn teased each other the most. He says its because they were close in age. She says its because he’s the idiot of the family. Either way, the bantering was only beginning.

“I’m not a wimp. I’m sorry if you can’t handle someone telling you that you stink.” Davis pinched his nose and lifted his bag from the porch. “And why is it only you and jackass? Is that some kind of new sex smell I want no part of?”

Autumn pushed the door open and slapped Davis on the back of the head when he passed by. "If you had a brain, which you clearly don't, you'd understand my previous explanation. We delivered twin calves tonight. All of us smelled this way except three of us got to shower."

Jackson tugged his shirt over his head. He was the one who got to walk the newborn around after the birth and helped it up when it fell. His clothing really did reek of the scent and it started to nauseate him. "I'm heading for the shower."

He fumbled with his fly as he walked toward Autumn's bathroom and away from their guests. She wasn't too far behind while in the living room, Davis made some comment about shower sex. She shut the door and groaned.

"My muscles are killing me." Her forehead thumped against the wood.

"Come on then." Jackson twisted the knob, and the water squirted out full blast. It only took him five seconds to peel off his jeans and boxers and be standing in the middle of the bathroom naked and waiting for Autumn.

"No shower sex." Autumn closed her eyes as she tugged her uniform off. "I really need to bathe."

As she revealed every inch of her body, Jackson's cock hardened. Her flat belly was meant to be touched while her breasts begged for his mouth. She bent slightly to pull off her pants and panties, revealing a sweet pussy that was made for his cock. Yeah, she was perfection, if he ever saw it.

They climbed in the stall together, him after her. She simply stood underneath the water with her eyes closed as it came down around her. Jackson reached for the shampoo, deciding to work from the top to the bottom and make her come along the way.

"I didn't mean you had to bathe me."

He scrubbed her hair, the silky wet strands so soft against his fingers. "Maybe I wanted to."

He worked the shampoo in and then positioned her underneath the water rinse it out. Afterward he grabbed the soap and formed a lather between his hands. He cupped her breasts, washing them with small movements of his fingers before pinching her nipples lightly. She gasped at the pleasure, and he continued to tease her.

By the time his hands moved to her stomach, she had melted to putty. She leaned back against the wall and gave him the go ahead to do whatever he wanted. Jackson reminded himself to take it slow, fighting the thrill of pleasure he got from the look in her eyes. Those deep blue pools of mystery darkened and dilated as his hands aroused her body, touching all the right places he knew she loved.

His hands slid between her thighs, his fingers finding her slick clit. She closed her eyes and

arched away from the wall, giving him complete access to her most feminine parts. She moaned as he touched her, rubbing her clit between his fingers while his other hand kneaded a breast. Whether she knew it or not, Autumn was made for loving. Her body responded and begged for his touch. And he wasn't about to deny her any longer.

She gripped his wrists in each of her small hands holding him to her. "Jackson."

He brought her pleasure the first time with his fingers alone. Her body stiffened when he pressed inside, her slick pussy clenching around him as she came. He'd never seen anything more beautiful than Autumn's face in ecstasy.

Cupping her head in his hands, he kissed her. Watching her tonight with the calves, knowing exactly what to do to help that heifer deliver two healthy babies, Jackson could be nothing but proud of her. He didn't understand it at all but she was no longer the clingy child he once knew and used. She was a wonderful woman who made a great life for herself. A life Jackson felt he didn't belong in.

* * * *

"Okay, here's how it goes. I get the spare bedroom next to Jeff." Davis grabbed a bowl of bean dip and a bag of chips and plopped down in the recliner.

"How about you sleep with the dogs?" Autumn smiled and grabbed a chip and some dip.

"Is that anyway to talk to your favorite brother?"

Autumn sat on the arm of the chair. "Why are you here, Davis? The clinic is clean. We should be opening for business this coming week. Why are you here and away from work?"

Jackson grabbed a handful of chips before Davis could hide them and spooned some bean dip onto the top of the container. "Because Davis doesn't like his new babysitting job."

Autumn glanced between the two of them. "What are you two hiding?"

Her brother smiled. "We'll take our secrets to the grave."

Jackson chomped down on a chip. "Trust me, it's nothing you want to know about."

Autumn narrowed her eyes at her brother. "Tell me anyway."

"Okay. See there was this chick back at the base that was semi-cute, nothing much to brag about but not dirt ugly either. Anyway, I bet Jackson he couldn't get into her panties."

"Hold it." Autumn held up a hand. "Jackson's not getting into any girl's panties while he's with me."

Jackson grinned. "Only yours, babe."

Davis narrowed his eyes. "That's not the best part. Turns out the girl was a guy. He's a prostitute looking to get a little action from Jackson."

Autumn snorted. "Is there anyone in this world who doesn't want to fuck you?"

Davis held up his hand.

"You're an idiot." Autumn grabbed the chips from him. "And you think telling me that story is going to take my mind off why you are really here, you are highly fooled."

"Don't worry your pretty little head," Davis said in his best Southern drawl. "Leave the plotting and planning to the big boys."

* * * *

Gallagher's office was packed wall to wall with people waiting to have their animals checked. Jackson and Davis stepped inside out of the muggy heat and scanned the area.

"Can I help you?" a lady at the counter asked them.

"Uh, yes. I'd like to talk with someone about boarding my dog here." Davis gave the woman a soft smile.

"What kind of dog do you have?" she asked.

"A Shih-Tzu," Jackson replied before Davis responded.

Davis gave him a look and Jackson smiled. "Uh, yeah. He's a badass Shih-Tzu, too, so he'll need supervision around other pets and children."

The lady glanced from Davis to Jackson. Her thoughts were displayed plainly across her face, something which only made Jackson's smile widened. She obviously had the hots for Davis.

"What my lover doesn't know is that children wouldn't be back there, right?" Jackson wrapped an arm around Davis, his fingers hooking inside his back pocket. "Honey, you are just so overprotective."

The lady frowned at them. Davis, trying his best to play along instead of ramming his fist into Jackson's jaw, shifted from one foot to the other, hinting for him to remove his arm. Jackson could honestly say he hadn't seen Davis squirm this much in all the time he's known him.

"Uh, you'll have to fill out these papers, and then I'll have someone give you a tour of the rooms." She handed them a clipboard. Davis accepted it and jerked away from Jackson.

Once they seated themselves, Davis bent forward and whispered, "I'll rip your fuckin' head off if you grab my ass again."

“You so deserved it.” Jackson glanced at the papers. “Where do we go from here?”

“While they give you the tour, I’ll excuse myself to the bathroom and sneak around the place. If I get caught I’ll say I got lost.” He idly filled out the papers. “A Shih-Tzu. You couldn’t say a Boxer or St. Bernard, something a bit more manly and monstrous? You had to go with Shih-Tzu?”

“It was on the poster behind the lady. Hell, just fill out the paperwork and let’s get this over with.” Jackson glanced over to an elderly lady who eyed them cautiously. Speaking to her, he said, “I still love him, even though he’s bullheaded.”

Jackson ran a hand along Davis’ thigh. The elderly lady turn her head in disgust. Davis’ hard eyes, tight jaw and red face was priceless. Jackson just grinned.

After conning their way into Gallagher’s office and having a look, Jackson and Davis arrived separately at the truck, neither one speaking until they climbed in and were on their way back to Autumn’s clinic.

“Well, the big boy wasn’t at the office today, but it’s definitely him, Jack. He’s got a picture of her on his desk and everything.” Davis turned in his seat. “He’s always considered her the competition.”

Jackson went into full marine mode. “So he’s an obsessed stalker? The if-I-can’t-have-you-then-I’ll-make-your-life-a-living-hell kind? Is that what you think we’re dealing with?”

Davis shrugged. “He has some big guns, Jack. He’s got money, his family name, a whole community backing him—”

“But he doesn’t have Autumn.” Jackson focused his attention on the road. “And as long as I’m around, he’ll never have her.”

Davis stared at him. “You love her, don’t you?”

Jackson busied himself with switching lanes. “She’s just the job.”

“You never fuck the job, Jackson. And don’t deny it. You and my baby sister have slept in the same bed for a few days. Don’t you dare tell me that you haven’t fucked her since you came back and that you won’t fuck her again. I know better.”

Refusing to say more, Jackson pursed his lips. Sometimes the Callahans could be relentless. And they were relentless every time Autumn was the topic of conversation.

“You can ignore me all you want, but you’d better listen to me right now. She’s not like the laundry list of other women you bang then leave the next morning. Like it or not, she is my baby sister. Don’t hurt her, Jackson. She’s been hurt bad enough in this life. Don’t tease her with the idea of something coming out of this thing you’ve got going if you know perfectly well nothing will. It’s not fair.”

Damn it, if Davis wasn't right. Again.

* * * *

Three weeks went by before Jackson and Davis could finally get away to snoop around Gallagher's place.

"Pull down that road." Davis pointed to a narrow, hidden road barely giving Jackson proper time to maneuver the truck. "Our little friend lives back this way, if memory serves me right. Let's see if he's at home since it was a long shot at the clinic."

Jackson did as Davis instructed, turning down the secluded drive. Trees kept privacy, shielding nothing short of a cabinlike mansion from anyone who cared to pass by. Dogs barked at a distance, some growling with fury.

"Are you sure we should be here? It says no trespassing."

"Where's your balls?" Davis scoffed. "And to think, you were a Marine."

"Shut up. I hear those damn dogs and I'd like to keep my balls, thank you."

Davis grinned. "You never were an animal person. Maybe I'll pay you back now for grabbing my ass and rubbing my thigh at the clinic."

"Do and die."

Luckily for them, Gallagher wasn't home. No cars in the massive four-car garage, no sign of recent activity. Wherever Gallagher was, he planned on being there for a while.

"This is almost too easy." Davis pointed to the cages of animals.

Small puppies whimpered in their cages and the closer Jackson and Davis came, the more they realized their intentions. The puppies' mothers had thin weak bodies as if they hadn't been fed in weeks. Their cages hadn't been cleaned, and the small animals looked as if they suffered a great deal. Jackson glanced at the dogs inside the building next to the puppy cages and found four quarantined pit bulls growling to the point spittle flew from their mouths in strings.

"Uh, Jack, is this blood?" Davis pointed to the ground.

Jackson left the quarantined dogs and looked at the ground. "Looks like it. What is he doing with these animals?"

Davis started walking, leading them both to a caged ring serving only one purpose. Fighting.

"We need to get out of here, Davis." Jackson shook his head. "And if this sorry ass doesn't leave Autumn alone, he's going to be in some serious trouble."

Halfway home Davis' cell rang. He answered it and hung up shortly afterward. "He's struck again. Jeff said this time it was bad."

"What happened?"

"He torched the place. And there were about thirty-some animals inside."

Chapter Twelve

“Ma’am, I’m not going to tell you again. Go sit on the sidewalk and stay out of our way.” Smoke filled the air around them, fire licking at the walls of the building Autumn valued so much. Thirty animals were inside, helpless creatures that probably wouldn’t make it and it was all because of her. She’d tried several times to go inside, each time a bulky fireman pulled her back. This time though, the fireman simply dared her to disobey.

She glared at him. “Those animals are hurt and I’m a veterinarian. I need to help them.”

“Those animals are probably dead.” He shoved her aside. “Now move out of our way.”

She refused to cry. She had left for lunch with Jeffery and Kristin feeling good about their accomplishments for the day. Dodo was inside, and so was Bear, a beloved family pet of a small child with cancer. Two litters of puppies and several that simply had come in for shots while their owners were working. Autumn’s heart broke at the thought of losing all those beloved pets. She needed to get those animals out safely, no matter what the stupid fireman said.

“Autumn, why don’t you sit down?” Kristin handed her a bottle of water and ushered her to a vacant bench in front of the clinic, away from everything.

“I need to get those animals out.” Autumn met Jeffery’s eyes. “Please. Can’t we do something?”

Her brother pursed his lips and glanced at the building. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Why is he doing this to me?” Tears gathered in her eyes but she refused to let them fall.

“I don’t know. He’s a sadistic bastard.” Kristin wrapped her arms around Autumn. “It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is.”

Jackson’s truck pulled into the parking lot. He and Davis burst from the truck and ran over to where they sat. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“It’s him.” Autumn pulled away from Kristin. “We went to lunch and came back to the place erupting in flames. He obviously found out he couldn’t get to me by normal means so he decides to torch the place and kill the animals inside.”

A small sob escaped her as she started to walk away from the blazing building, Jackson right behind her. “Autumn, come here.”

She tried to pull away but he was stronger. His arms tucked her against his warmth and strength even though she fought him. She hated crying in front of people. She hated the sympathy.

“There’s a dog in there that belongs to a cancer patient.” She sniffled. “His name is Bear, and he’s been helping the little girl win her fight with it. And Dodo’s in there. She may seem like a grumpy pit bull, but she’s really sweet and lovable. And there’s two litters of pups with their momma’s—” Her voice broke.

“Shh.” He kissed her, using one hand to keep her close and the other to comfort. “We’ll get them out. I promise. Davis is already over there with the firemen.

“It’s all my fault.”

Jackson kissed her forehead. “You are not to blame, sweetheart. Davis and I need to talk to you and the police about all this.”

She glanced up at him. If she didn’t know better, he was angry. “Where have the two of you been all day?”

“Nowhere.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“I’ll tell you about it later.”

He kissed her, holding her to him. She knew he was up to something, with both he and Davis gone for nearly the entire day. When the phone call was made earlier, she’d been frank with Jeff, instructing him to tell Jackson about the fire and that she needed him here. Autumn wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her face against his shoulder, relishing the comfort of his scent and warmth.

“I love you, Jackson. I don’t expect you to say it back, but I had to tell you. I couldn’t go another minute without saying it to you.”

It was the truth. With all her heart, Autumn loved the man. And him being here, her in his arms and surrounded by his comfort, only made her acknowledge it more. She felt safe with him. No matter what happened in the world, being wrapped in his arms would keep her safe from harm.

“Autumn!” Jeffery yelled. “Come here!”

Autumn jerked away from Jackson, following the direction Jeffery’s finger pointed. Davis was charred with soot, a dog carrier in each hand. Two firemen followed him also carrying animal crates.

Jackson grabbed her hand and they ran to the animals. Summer jumped in examining the puppies and their mothers while Autumn examined the larger dogs. Dodo and Bear were fine. Bear had minor smoke inhalation and was coughing, but his tail wagged, and his ears were alert. Dodo growled at everyone who looked at her wrong, and Autumn couldn’t help laughing at the stubborn dog.

“Doc, one of the mothers is hurt. She has a few burns on her back. I think she was protecting her puppies from the fire.”

Autumn grabbed her bag and began taking care of the animal, assessing and dressing the wound. She checked over the puppies as well, counting them and noting any disturbances.

After working with the animals for a few minutes, Autumn was satisfied each of them would survive. She doctored the hurt, loved the scared, and petted the contrary. *You lose again, Frank. Might as well give up.*

“Well, sis, you’re the miracle worker.” Davis wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pressed a light kiss to her temple. “Again.”

It wasn’t often that Davis was nice to her, but he always showed he cared. “Thank you for helping.”

“What was I suppose to do?” He moved away from her and picked up one of the puppies that was whining for attention. “Leave these little guys in there to die. I don’t think so.”

The bloodhound licked at Davis’s fingers and nibbled on them as he scratched its belly. Autumn pet the dog in his arms and shook her head. “You need one of those.”

“Yeah. You gonna take care of him while I’m out of the country?”

“Sure.” She focused her attention on the mother. “I’d rather you have a dog than a kid.”

Davis chuckled. “You and me both.”

* * * *

After fighting the fire most of the night, the crew returned to Autumn’s house. Davis called dibs on the shower first, though all of them felt gritty and were plenty dirty.

Autumn pointed her finger at him. “If you use all the hot water, I’ll murder you in your sleep.”

“Kiss my ass.” Davis hit his rear and headed down the hall.

Kristin grabbed a few towels to throw over the sofa and recliner to keep them from getting dirty and the rest of the crew plopped down, exhausted from the night full of events.

“Bed sounds really nice,” Jeffery commented, rubbing his eyes. “Did you guys find out anything?”

Jackson had the loveseat all to himself and stretched out the length of it. “Yep. Gallagher is running a puppy mill for one thing, breeding mostly pit bulls. There were a few other breeds, but they looked mostly hybrid. We also think he’s into dog fighting. He has a ring in his backyard and everything.”

“What?” Autumn sat up from her spot in the recliner. “You went to Frank’s house today? That’s where you and Davis were all that time?”

Jackson propped his head up with his hands. “Don’t be pissed, Autumn. We’ve all had a long day. I promise you can yell at me first thing in the morning.”

She stared at him, mouth open, eyes wide. “No. I’ll yell at you now if I damn well please! What do you mean he’s running a puppy mill? Did you report him to the police? You should have stayed until they came and took care of everything. They need to be out of there.”

Jackson groaned and dropped his head back. “Here we go.”

“And what about the dog fighting? Did you see them? Did he have the animals fighting while you were there?” Autumn paused and glared at him. “What do you mean ‘here we go’?”

“Autumn, all I’m asking for is a break. I’m tired. I stink, and I really just want some sleep.” Jackson sat up. “So I’m asking you to hold off on the bitching and complaining until morning and then you can have at it.”

“Fine.” Autumn stood and directed her attention to Jeffery and Kristin. “Good night.”

She left the room annoyed and frustrated with Jackson. This was the second time he wanted to wait until morning to talk things over. He never wanted to deal with anything in the moment.

She went straight to the bathroom and ran a tubful of water adding strawberry scented bubbles. She tossed her dirty clothes in the hamper making a mental note to carry them to the wash first thing in the morning. All she could smell was the stench of smoke, and if she didn’t watch it, her entire bathroom would smell that way.

She lit a few candles, dimmed the lights, and closed the door. Afterward, she stepped into the bath and sank back in the large tub. Intent on relaxing, she grabbed her pink blindfold and pulled it over her eyes. It didn’t matter. She wouldn’t let Frank get to her tonight.

She hadn’t been in the bathtub five minutes before the unlocked door opened. Immediately, she knew she forgot something. She pushed the blindfold up and narrowed her eyes at Jackson. “Go away.”

“Why do you do this?” He sat on the edge of the tub propping his head on his fist as he watched her. “Our last fight was only a couple days ago. I was hoping we wouldn’t have another for at least ten years.”

Autumn kept her mouth shut and pulled her blindfold back in place. Of course, it was *her* fault. Again.

“And here we go with the silent treatment.”

Autumn ignored him. He was worse than Davis when he didn't get his way. Both cried and pouted until someone gave in. Jackson, she found, hated the cold shoulder. She heard the rasp of his zipper and the soft sounds of his jeans coming off and being tossed in the hamper. *Nice to know he's making himself at home.*

He then stepped next to her legs and situated himself at the other end of the bathtub. He pulled her legs up and propped her feet on his thighs.

"Can't I have some privacy?" She tore off the blindfold and threw it across the bathroom. "Maybe I want to be alone. Did you ever think of that? You don't have to be with me twenty-four-seven. Maybe I just want a simple bath with some quiet time all to myself."

Jackson rested his head against the wall, eyes closed as his thumbs traveling the length of her soles. "If that's what you really wanted, I would have given it to you. It's not what you want."

Autumn narrowed her eyes. "You don't know what I want because you never ask. You just do what everyone in my family does. You do what you *think* is best for me."

He opened his eyes, the tips of his fingers gently caressing the tops of her feet. "We're a lot alike, Autumn. You don't think so because your eyes only see what you want, but we are."

She pulled her feet from his grasp and sat up, baring her breasts to the cooler air. The bubbles drizzled down popping against her skin in a tingling sensation.

"You think you know me?"

"Yeah. I do." Jackson glanced down at her bare breasts then closed his eyes again, resting his head against the wall. "You say you want peace and quiet which just means you want to sulk until I come in here and make it all better. Don't deny it because that's exactly what you want. You want me to beg your forgiveness, tell you I'm a complete moron and kiss every inch of your body to make up for it."

"Sex doesn't solve everything, Jackson. I'm sorry you think it does." She grabbed the loofah and squirted some bath gel in the middle.

"Sex does solve a lot though. Releases tension. Creates intimacy. Give you reason to cuddle without your best friend making fun of you." His lips tilted up in a smile, and his voice deepened, became more intimate. "Not to mention it gives you pleasure at the end of a crappy day. In my book, that takes care of most problems."

Autumn rolled her eyes with a small smile on her face. Typical Jackson answer. "What if your sex partner is mad at you?"

"You apologize your fuckin' heart out so she'll give you some." He opened his eyes with a smile.

“Wow.” Autumn threw the loofah at him and rinsed her body with handfuls of water.

“Oh, come on, Autumn. Lighten up. I’m just joking.” He grabbed her arm and she pulled away. With quick movements, he went for her ankles and achieved his goal, pulling her legs apart and moving over her. He pressed her into the side, his face inches from her own. “You’re so beautiful. Even when you get riled up, you have that postorgasmic glow. Rosy cheeks. You nibble at your lower lip trying to hold in your smile. Wide, attentive eyes. Do you have any idea how lost I get when I’m surrounded by you? When I’m deep inside you I never want to pull out. When I’m staring into your eyes, I never want to look away.”

Autumn closed her eyes though her hands still gripped his biceps. “I feel like I’m in a one sided relationship with you, Jackson. That I’m giving it my all and you’re livin’ it up. You keep things from me, mainly your little trip to Gallagher’s.”

His hand came out of the water to tilt her chin up. “Is this really about Gallagher? Because if it is, I’ll tell you everything we did today starting with us leaving the house.”

“This is about you, Jackson. I want to know we’re in this together. I’m tired of feeling like I’m the only one who cares.”

“The only one who cares about what?”

“Everything.” Tears leaked out the corners of her eyes and she blinked them away. “I feel like a burden. Nobody really gives a damn whether I get my clinic open. Nobody really cares about those puppies that almost died in the fire. Nobody cares about Frank’s puppy mill or the dog fighting.”

“I do.” Jackson moved to her side to sit by her. “I’ll admit I didn’t at first. I distanced myself from you and considered you a job, but after I saw you working with Dodo, something changed. You’re not a burden. Your family loves you, and they care about the clinic and the puppies and the shit going down with Gallagher. They care because you care. We all love you, Autumn, so quit feeling sorry for yourself.”

“You love me?”

He stood and grabbed a towel. With his back to her he wrapped it around his waist and took a seat on the closed toilet, staring at her. “You’re pretty hard not to love.” Tears formed in her eyes again. “No. Don’t you dare do that to me. I don’t have the energy.”

Autumn pulled the drain plug and stood, reaching for the towel on the rack next to him. He handed it to her, and she wrapped it around her body, bubbles sliding down her legs and onto the bathmat.

“I don’t know why that’s so hard for you to admit, but one day, I hope telling me you love me comes easy for you.”

She blew out the candles and exited the bathroom leaving Jackson alone in the dark.

Chapter Thirteen

When Jackson awoke he was alone in Autumn's bed with the sheets bunched around his hips. He yawned and sat up, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. 12:45. *Damn.*

He grabbed the pair of pajama bottoms draped on the papasan chair in the corner of the room. He hadn't meant to sleep this late, though he'd been damned tired when his head hit the pillow. Autumn, however, stayed up and talked to—no drilled—him about Gallagher until he finally told her enough. She hadn't been too happy when the lights went out and from the looks of it, he was seriously going to have to kiss some ass to make up for it.

"Autumn?" he called to the silent house. He walked through the living room and into the kitchen, with Autumn nowhere to be found.

He grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with orange juice. Tipping it to his lips, he spotted the note she left him hanging on the refrigerator.

When you decide to wake up you can meet us at the clinic. ~A

Jackson groaned and grabbed the phone. After punching in Autumn's cell number, he took another sip of orange juice.

"Did you finally decide to wake up?" she asked when she answered on the third ring.

"Hello, darling. It's so good to hear your voice."

"Can it. I tried waking you up three times and you ignored me so we left without you." He heard the background noise lessen as if she walked away from the crowd.

"You talked me to death last night. I needed my beauty sleep." He leaned against the counter and looked out the small window over the sink.

The day was really crappy. Rain drizzled enough to make it wet outside but not enough to claim it was actually raining. He could imagine what the clinic looked like and dreaded meeting them there.

"I don't have time for a comeback. The fire marshal met with us today. He ruled the fire as arson. It seems there was a card found at the sight. Frank's business card. I didn't see it, but Jeffery spotted it, and I had to have a big sit-down discussion with the police." She paused. "Are you going to come down here?"

"As soon as I get ready. Why? Do you need me?" He stood to his full height and reached in the cabinet for a Pop-Tart.

"No. I was just wondering if you were avoiding me."

Jackson propped the phone between his ear and shoulder to open the package. "I thought you wanted time away from me? That's what you said last night."

“Jackson, please don’t do this. I can’t handle the smart-assed comments right now. I’m running purely on coffee and adrenaline.”

He rubbed his eyes. “Sorry. That was real shitty of me. I’ll be there in an hour or so.”

After they hung up, he dropped the two Pop-Tarts in the toaster. *Today is going to be so much fun.*

* * * *

Autumn’s head pounded, feeling on the verge of exploding. The smoke smell sank into her clothing, and the charred building a hazard to everyone and everything around them. She talked with the fire marshal for over an hour about what he thought happened. Then, she went to the police station to report all that had happened with Frank. She thought getting everything off her chest would help, but the police only nagged her about why she hadn’t come in sooner. After spending most of the morning there, she finally wound up back at the clinic where Jeffery and Davis had carried out filing cabinets and Summer and Kristin had sorted out the salvageable records.

Now, she sat outside in the rain, contemplating the next move to make. The building was obviously not going to be repaired after the last ordeal. So that meant she was out of work. No income meant no food, clothing, or shelter over her head. She calculated her savings and figured she could live possibly two months maximum on that if she needed. She’d be stretching every penny, but she could sacrifice.

Jackson’s truck pulled in the parking lot, and Autumn straightened from her crouched position. She watched as he parked and got out. His pull-over windbreaker protected him from the rain, and Autumn couldn’t help noticing the stubble covering his face made him dangerously sexy. She hated the fact that even when she wanted to be mad at him, she couldn’t. She simply couldn’t when she looked at him and he knew it. He took advantage of it.

“Why are you sitting out here by yourself?” He tucked the keys in his pocket.

She held up the phone. “Phone call. The police are bringing in Frank for questioning.”

Jackson sat beside her on the wooden bench outside the door. “You look like you’ve lost your best friend.”

“I’m contemplating my life. It’s not exactly a party right now.” She flipped her phone open and flipped it closed. “I have no job, no income. I have no place to open a clinic, no money to do so. Hardly anything is salvageable in there from the fire and water damage. I just . . .” She blew out a breath and continued to play with her phone. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Jackson turned toward her, propping his arm on the back of the bench. “I hear McDonald’s is hiring.”

She glared at him tears welling in her eyes. "Thanks, Jackson."

Jackson rolled his eyes. "Autumn, you know any one of your family members would help you out. Hell, your dad would buy a state of the art clinic for you if you asked. You know I'd help you, too. I probably don't have enough for a clinic, but I have money. The only thing I ever spend my paychecks on is upkeep on my great aunt's house. Why worry about the small stuff? Let's get Gallagher and make him pay for his dirty deeds, and then we'll talk about the rest."

She wiped her eyes and glanced away. "Everything is so cut-and-dry with you, isn't it? Black and white with no gray in the middle."

He wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her shoulder. "No. It used to be but it isn't anymore. I don't think you want pity, Autumn. You're a strong woman and you're very capable of standing on your own two feet. But when I try to be nice to you, you bitch at me and when I'm smart with you, you cry. So I'm caught up in the middle, trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do and what's the right thing to say to you."

Autumn pulled away from him. "I'm tired of talking. I need to get away from here."

She stood and the world spun. She reached out for Jackson just as warm liquid ran down her leg. He questioned her, but his voice sounded so far away. Autumn closed her eyes and gave into the darkness.

* * * *

Jackson paced the hospital floors until the doctor came out for an update. Autumn came in with uterine bleeding and after an examination, the doctors diagnosed her as having a miscarriage. He sank into one of the nearby chairs with Kristin at his side, rubbing his back comfortingly. Davis called the Major and Nick, to let them know what was going on. Both said they'd come home as soon as possible.

It was around eight that night before Jackson could go in and see her. They wanted to keep her overnight for observation, a precautionary measure the doctor explained. He promised that if all went well throughout the night, she'd be released in the morning.

Autumn curled up on her side in the bed watching a comedy on the television. She didn't see him enter the room. He walked to the bed. "How are you feeling?"

She shifted slightly, though she still didn't look at him. "I'm cramping. The doctors said it'd last a while longer so I have to just tough it out."

He pulled a chair to the bedside giving Autumn the space he assumed she needed. "Davis called your father and Nick. They said they'd be here as soon as they could."

"I don't need them here." Autumn shifted again and sucked in a breath. Jackson watched her hand go to her stomach, her eyes closing as tears slid down her cheeks.

He pulled his windbreaker off, each of her sobs killing him slowly as she lay there in pain. He climbed in bed beside her, careful not to hurt her. She buried her face in the pillow as her body shuddered, the sound of her cries muffled. Jackson rubbed his hand the length of her arm. He waited for her to calm down, literally stopping due to exhaustion. Eyes closed, she laid her head on the pillow she hugged.

“I want to stay all night with you.” Jackson kissed her shoulder. “But if you want me to leave I will. I really want to stay with you, though.”

Autumn didn’t say anything. She reached behind her and grabbed Jackson’s arm and pulled it around her stomach. She laced her fingers with his and hugged his arm against her.

“I don’t want you to go.” She kissed his knuckles tears falling to wet his skin. “I love you, Jackson. I don’t want you to leave me.”

Jackson laid his cheek against her, pressing a kiss to her neck. “Rest, sweetheart. I’m not going anywhere.”

* * * *

Autumn was discharged from the hospital early the next morning, and Jackson immediately carried her home. For the sake of her sanity, he asked Jeffery if he’d leave. He promised to keep them updated and requested he keep his father and brother updated as well. Davis kept his distance, working with the police on behalf of Autumn and helping when necessary.

Ever since he put her in bed, she slept. He held her when she cried and forced her to eat a little bit of food. The doctor explained her grief over the baby, and that it would take some time to heal emotionally. He also explained Jackson’s need to be there for her.

“I was suppose to meet with the detective today,” Autumn mumbled, waking up for the third time that day.

“I sent Davis. Don’t worry about it.” He rubbed her back, wanting to pull her closer to him for protection if nothing else.

“I’d really like to take a shower.” She pulled away. “I’m okay if you have something else you need to do.”

He brushed her hair from her face. “Trying to get rid of me again?”

She gave him a sad smile. “No. I just want to be by myself for a little bit.”

He watched her gather her clothes, a new set of pajamas, and walk slowly into the bathroom. After he was satisfied she was okay, he left the bedroom in search of something to eat. He wasn’t really hungry, but his stomach ached and he felt weak. He needed some energy and nourishment to keep going.

“Hey. How is she?” Davis stood in the kitchen, smearing Miracle Whip on two slices of bread.

“She’s Autumn. Buries everything deep inside until she explodes with emotion.” He took a seat at the bar watching Davis pile turkey on the bread. “She hasn’t talked about it yet. She just cries, which the doctor said was part of the grieving process.”

He grabbed Davis’ sandwich and started eating. Davis didn’t seem to mind, grabbing two more slices of bread and lunch meat to fix another. “What about you, Jack? Are you doing okay?”

He chewed slowly. “I’m fine.”

Davis cleaned up his mess. “You’re allowed to grieve too you know. It was your baby.”

Jackson stared at his sandwich. “I don’t know what to feel.”

“Have you told her you love her yet?”

Jackson shook his head.

“Why not?”

“It’s harder than you think,” Jackson said.

“Don’t push her away, Jack. Withholding that kind of info, including your past, is keeping her at a distance from you. You need to tell her everything.”

He hadn’t told but two people what happened twenty years ago, and Autumn sure didn’t need that info to worry about on top of everything else. He and Davis finished eating in silence. Davis knew everything about Jackson’s past, as did the Major. Both in a sense helped him through dealing with the pain.

Autumn came out freshly showered and dressed in her pajamas. Jackson opened his arms to her and pulled her onto his lap while he finished eating.

“I love you.” He kissed her lips and wrapped his arm around her back, resting his hand on her thigh. “Are you hungry or thirsty?”

She shook her head, tears forming again. “Do you mean it?”

“Yes. I love you, Autumn.”

She hugged him to her, pressing her face against his neck. Jackson met Davis’s eyes. His friend grabbed his sandwich and pointed toward the hallway where he disappeared a few seconds later.

“You have no idea what that means to me, to hear you say those words.” Tears streaking her

cheeks, she smiled and kissed him. "I love you so much."

Jackson's heart broke every time he looked into her eyes. "We need to talk about it, Autumn. We need to talk about losing the baby."

She stiffened. "What's there to talk about? I was pregnant and didn't even know it. How can you grieve for something you didn't even know you had?"

He glanced down. "I'm grieving. Trust me, I never pictured myself as a father, and I sure as hell wasn't expecting them to say you miscarried but that was my baby inside you. Even if it was so small we couldn't see it, it was a part of me and you and I'm grieving the loss of that."

Autumn withdrew from him and went to the kitchen, snatching a bag of Cheetos with a shaky hand. "It wasn't my first miscarriage."

Jackson stared at the back of her head. "What?"

"I was pregnant four years ago. I made it to the eleventh week and then I miscarried."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"No. I didn't show and I didn't bother to share the info." She leaned against the counter. "Frank was an ass, and I felt so bad because I was relieved I wouldn't be having a child with him."

Jackson watched her every move letting her sudden bout of information sink into his brain. *She was going to have a kid with Gallagher. She miscarried.* As wrong as it sounded, he was relieved too even though he had no right to be.

"You went through it alone?"

She nodded. "I stayed home a couple days. I told Summer that I had a heavy period and that my doctor wanted me off my feet to see if it would lighten up. After that, I went back to work as if nothing happened."

Jackson propped his arms on the counter before him. "It's okay to not want a baby. It's not your fault you miscarried, Autumn."

She leaned her head against the refrigerator. "I know that. It's just, I wanted a baby with you."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her they would try again. But while she was being examined, he read the pamphlets the doctors gave him and found out that wasn't the best way to go about helping her through this. He was at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put you in this position." She shook her head and resumed eating her Cheetos.

“What position?”

“I’m not making any sense.” She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to give me another child because I miscarried the one we didn’t know about. I didn’t plan on it, but it was there evidently. What I’m trying to say is I’ve always wanted you. And I’ve always pictured you as the person I had children with. That’s what I meant when I said I wanted a baby with you. I love you, and I want to share that with you one day.”

Jackson stood to throw away his trash. “Did you name the other baby?”

Autumn glanced down at the floor. “No. I wanted it to be a forgotten memory.”

“And you’re beating yourself up about it, aren’t you?”

“I can’t change how I feel no matter how much I want to.” When she lifted her head, tears rolled down her cheeks.

Jackson’s chest ached at the sight of her crying. *Where was the damn pamphlet on this?* “It’s okay, Autumn.” He pulled her to him. “You weren’t ready for a child and that’s okay.”

“It still hurts.”

They held each other until he finally picked her up in his arms and carried her back to the bedroom. He wrapped the sheets around her and stood back to strip himself of his clothing, leaving his boxers on. Then, he crawled in bed and wrapped his arms around her again, his head resting against her stomach.

“I’m sorry I’ve cried on you all day. I know how much you hate tears.” Autumn’s fingers combed through his hair. “I’m also sorry I keep picking fights with you.”

“It’s okay to cry. Cry as much as you need to. I’m right here ready to hold you tight and kiss away your tears.” Jackson pressed his lips against her stomach. “And forget about all the other shit. It’s all in the past.”

“It just seems like my life is crashing down before me, and I don’t know how to stop it. I’ve never played the pity party, but I really want a break. Just one day that is perfect, where nothing goes wrong.”

Jackson lifted his head and looked up at her. “Tomorrow will be our day. Whatever you want to do, okay.”

Autumn brushed her thumb across his cheek. “Can we name the baby? I mean I know it sounds corny, but I think the least the little life deserves is a name.”

“What name did you have in mind?”

“My mom bought me a doll when I was seven and I named her Peyton Reilly. I played with her constantly to the point that Peyton Reilly became part of the Callahan family.” She smiled. “It’s a unisex name so it would fit either a girl or boy.”

“Peyton Reilly, it is.”

“Do you want children, Jackson?”

He sat up and grabbed a pillow to prop himself up with. “I don’t know how to be a father. I’m afraid I’ll screw up since I didn’t exactly have the best example.”

“I think you’ll make a great father.”

Jackson recalled his past in a flashback. His mother screaming, his father repeating horrible names. The beatings. “There’s a lot you don’t know, Autumn. A lot I don’t talk about with anyone.”

“Tell me.” She ran her hand along his chest. “Trust me with your story.”

Jackson shook his head. He couldn’t do it. Not after all they’ve been through in the past twenty-four hours. “I’ve dealt with enough emotions today. I really don’t want to talk about my past.”

Autumn gazed at him, drawing circles around his navel with her finger. “Are you sure? It might help with some of the pain you’re going through if you talk about it. I’ve got two shoulders for you to cry on, or a pillow you can punch.”

He smiled. “I haven’t cried since I was nine.”

She rolled to her side, propping her head up on her hand. “Maybe it’s time you did then.” She kissed his chest. “It’s okay to cry. You can cry as much as you need to because I’m right here ready to hold you tight and kiss your tears away.”

Autumn rested her chin against his chest. He looked down at her. She was beautiful in his eyes. Her face was free of makeup, a rare feature itself. She stared up at him with deep blue eyes that mesmerized him each and every time he looked into them. He wasn’t kidding about getting lost in their depths. He lifted her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips.

“I’ll take you up on that some other time.”

They spent the rest of the night talking about his life over the years. Not his past or his parents but his missions and his achievements as a soldier. He told her about the trip to the Amazon and about the rebuilding effort going on in Africa. They spent hours talking about the summer they spent together and the fun things that happened. Autumn started to smile again, and that was the only thing he wanted. He hadn’t seen that smile in several days and missed it.

Finally, when she decided they should go to sleep it was well past three in the morning. She

flipped off all the lights and crawled between Jackson's legs to lay her head on his stomach. They were silent for a while, nothing but the sound of cicadas singing outside her bedroom window. The moonlight cast a glow of light inside her room. Soon the sun would be rising and their perfect day would begin.

"Jackson?"

"Yeah?"

"Everything will work out won't it?"

He smoothed a hand over her hair. "Yes. Everything will work out. I promise you, so don't worry about it."

Chapter Fourteen

Davis woke Jackson up around seven the next morning, tapping him on the shoulder. “I need to talk to you.”

Jackson glanced down at Autumn sprawled out across his body, her head on his stomach. “I can’t get up. Can it wait?”

He shook his head. “I’ll be in the living room.”

After Jackson moved Autumn to her pillow, he covered her and kissed her before following Davis, closing the door behind him when he went. He yawned and sat in the recliner, waiting for his friend to start talking.

“They made an arrest but the prick will make bond. He has an alibi for the time of the fire so that cuts him out of the arson charge, but they received an anonymous tip he’s running a dog fighting ring. They found the ring and a few pit bulls so they charged him with that while they continue to investigate. It’s really looking like a long shot though since no one actually saw a dog fight. He might walk free and clear.”

“Fuck.” Jackson ran his hands over his face. “That’s not what I wanted to hear this morning.”

“He’s paying them off.” Davis flopped down on the couch. “The only way someone that shady can evade the law is to buy it.”

Jackson agreed. “Do me a favor. Don’t tell your sister today. We’re supposed to have a planned ‘good’ day, and this will only make it shitty.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Good. We stayed up talking and she actually started smiling again. The poor girl has had more than her fair share of downs lately. I promised her we’d have a fun day today so if anything happens talk to me about it and not her.”

Davis nodded. “And what about you? Are you suppressing your feelings or are you really doing okay?”

His best friend knew him well. “I’m fine. I was a little shaken and shell-shocked, but I’m fine. She wanted to name it and we chose the name Peyton Reilly.”

Davis smiled. “That was the name of her favorite doll.”

Jackson nodded. “Anyway, it’s a unisex name and gives us a memory of the small baby’s life. No matter how short it was.”

Davis stared at Jackson for a while not saying a word. The two had been through thick and thin together, each seeing the other at his worst as well as his best. Jackson had been there

when Davis got shot and everyone thought he'd bleed out before they got him to the hospital in Iraq. Jackson donated blood to save his friend's life and it only brought them closer.

Davis, however, had been there in Jackson's darkest moments, on every anniversary of his mother's death. After Jackson got drunk and passed out in his own vomit, Davis had been the one who carried him back to his room, cleaned him up, and poured gallons of coffee down his throat so he wouldn't get in trouble with the commanding officers the next day.

In their own way, they were a team. They were partners in crime and best friends all other times. And they each shared a love for Autumn that was indescribable.

"Do you realize what the other day was?" Davis asked.

Jackson thought back. The days were running together in his mind. "No. What?"

"The anniversary of your mother's death." Davis leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "Maybe you should go to her grave."

"I can't." Jackson stood and escaped toward the kitchen. "Autumn will be with me. I promised nothing bad would happen today. Visiting my mother's grave is anything but a fun time."

"You haven't been to see her in years, Jackson. It won't hurt you to pay your respects. Plus, it gives you an opening to tell Autumn about your past." Davis followed him, heading straight to the refrigerator for a soda.

"It's not happening, Davis, so drop it."

"What's not happening?" Autumn came around the corner, hair tousled from sleep and a frown on her face.

Davis popped the top of his can. "Jack just woke up on the wrong side of bed this morning. He's grouchy."

Autumn rubbed her eyes and yawned. "We stayed up late last night. I suppose he has right." Davis shrugged. "He likes to think so." He walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Your niece or nephew's name is Peyton Reilly. We named the baby last night." She leaned against him, depending on his strength to keep her upright.

"So I guess Peyton Reilly did make it to being a part of the Callahan family." Davis kissed her temple. "She used to carry that ugly doll around and make each one of us treat it like it was her child. I can't count how many times I had to change its diaper."

Autumn nodded, glancing down. Jackson knew the tears were about to fall from the look on her face and decided to change the subject. "So what did you have planned for us to do?"

She blinked them back. "I want to go bowling."

"Oh, have you ever played Jackson in a game of bowling? The boy needs bumpers to get the ball to the pins." Davis stepped away and grabbed his drink. He glanced over at Jackson. "And my sister was the best in the league."

Autumn met his eyes. "If you don't want to, that's fine. We'll do something else."

"Bowling is fine." Jackson gave Davis a look, warning him to shut his big fat mouth. "Gives me an excuse to have you teach me."

Autumn seemed happy enough with that and went to get ready. Jackson rubbed his brow. "Davis, do me a favor and keep your big mouth shut."

"What did I do?"

"She's still sensitive about the baby. Just don't talk about it unless she brings it up."

Davis waved him off and parked his butt on the couch again.

He knew a million and one things were going through her mind. Not only was she grief-stricken, she saw Peyton as the child she always wanted, the child she'd never get to know. Jackson saw it in her eyes when Davis talked about her doll, making fun of it almost subconsciously mocking her. He knew he meant well, but sometimes Davis just didn't use his brain.

* * * *

Autumn held Jackson's hand as they walked through the park. Davis was right, Jackson needed kiddie bumpers. She smiled at the act he put on, knowing full and well he only wanted her to guide him. He probably thought it made her feel needed.

"You're a terrible liar." She pulled him to a cozy remote area where they could sit in the grass and watch the geese swim on the lake. "I know your hiding something from me. Might as well spill it."

Jackson sat with her between his legs, arms holding her close. "I was just thinking."

"About what? The baby?"

He pressed his face into her neck. "Among other things."

She was an emotional wreck ever since the doctor told her what happened. She understood his need to protect her but hated that he walked on egg shells because of it.

"Tell me."

“You miscarried on the same day my mother died.”

She remained quiet, letting him talk about it and not pressing him for information.

“My mom was pregnant when she died, with a little baby girl. Chloe was her name.”

Autumn laced her fingers with his. “Chloe’s a beautiful name.”

“Yeah.” He licked his lips. “My mom let me help her pick it out. She wrote down three names she liked and I got to choose out of those three which one we’d call the baby. I chose Chloe.”

“How old were you?”

“Nine.”

A million questions ran through Autumn’s mind, each one being something she knew she couldn’t ask him. She wanted to know about his past. She wanted to understand his background, where he came from, who brought him into this world and made him the man he is today. She wanted to ask these things but at the same time she never wanted to talk about it. His past brought him pain, and no matter what age, losing a parent is hard.

“Look, I didn’t mean to bring a rain cloud in on our sunny day. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.” He kissed her and she laid her head back against his shoulder.

“Jax, there’s no such thing as a ‘perfect’ day. Being with you is my perfect day, and honestly, that’s all I can ask for.” She turned in his arms. “I want you to know you can tell me anything, Jackson. Don’t hold back your feelings because you’re afraid you’ll upset mine. I hate that you’re dealing with so much pain by yourself. I know it’s in the past. I know losing a parent is hard, and you’d do anything you could to spend just one more day with them. But talking about it might help clear the air.” She framed his face with her hands and kissed him. “You’re a good man, Jackson. A good, honorable man who deserves to be happy no matter what happened in the past.”

She stroked his cheeks with her thumbs. “I love you so much, even if you don’t think it’s possible and even when I’m mad at you.” She smiled at him and he gradually returned the favor. “I love the look I put in your eyes when we’re together and alone, being casual or intimate. You make me feel so special with that look, Jackson, and I could only hope I reflect the same.”

“I’ve got to do something.” He glanced away from her, tears filling his eyes. “Something by myself.”

Autumn gazed at him. She wanted him to open up to her, not pull away. “Do you want to take me back home?”

He nodded. After the quick drive home, she stood in the front yard with her arms wrapped around her stomach and watched him leave. Davis came outside and pulled her into the

porch swing where they sat together for a while, peacefully quiet.

“How did his mother die, Davis?” Autumn pulled her legs up and turned toward her brother. “He told me she was pregnant and that she was killed. What happened?”

He met her eyes. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Was she murdered?”

“Autumn, he needs to be the one to tell you.”

“Why? He’s hurting, Davis. I tried to get him to open up, but he’ll only talk about losing the baby. His past is off-limits.” She hugged her legs to her chest. “He said I miscarried on the day his mother died. That hurts me enough as it is, and I know it’s hurting him.”

Davis wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Beverly was pregnant with Chloe, Jackson’s unborn little sister. Both died as a result of protecting him.”

Autumn tears filled her eyes. “Where was his father?”

“Autumn, I really want to tell you, but he needs to be the one having this discussion. Not me.” He kissed her cheek. “Did he say where he was going?”

She shook her head. Jackson was in military mode which meant he was all work and no play. He was in the hardcore, don’t-fuck-with-me mode where he would chew you out in a heartbeat should you look at him wrong. She hadn’t seen him that way since the first day he walked back into her life.

“Do you really think he loves me?” Autumn shifted away from Davis, needing some space. “Because I love him, and if he walks away this time . . . I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Her brother leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. “Do you really need to ask that question? I know he doesn’t say it, but I’ve seen him showing it with my own eyes. He may not know it’s love, may not want to admit it, but it’s there and there is nothing he can do to get rid of it.”

Autumn nodded. “He told me once, in the kitchen. He said he loved me.”

Davis turned toward her. “Do you believe him?”

“I don’t want history to repeat itself.”

As far as she was concerned, they had a long way to go. She wanted to believe that no matter what, they could conquer anything if they stuck together. But he would eventually have a decision to make, one that possibly excluded her from his life. She hated thinking it. Hated that the thought of him saying, “I love you” to cater to her emotional needs crossed her mind. He said he meant it, but he only said it once. Why that was so important to her, she didn’t understand.

* * * *

After two days of drunkenness, Jackson tipped his fifth beer of that day to his lips and stared down at the grave of Beverly Ann Cooper. It'd been years since he'd been to her grave. The first five after his father's death, he had brought vodka or beer to numb the pain. He couldn't stand the memories seeing her name brought, couldn't relive the past as he often did. She'd been gone twenty-five years, and each one hurt worse than the last.

Jackson's eyes burned from the tears. The beer in his hand didn't numb the pain any better today than it had back then. His heart ripped to shreds and losing his baby on top of it all just added to the mix.

Autumn became his comfort, he realized in the short time he stayed with her. No matter what stupid comments he made, what actions took place she was there. And she cared. She loved him like no other person on earth ever had. She gave him stability when all he had in his life was chaos and he needed her now.

He grabbed his cell and punched in her number. He just wanted to hear her voice. He knew she was in pain herself and ached to hear her laugh or see her pretty face. It was time to bite the bullet and put it all on the frontlines. He needed to talk to her about everything no matter how bad it hurt.

The phone rang and she picked up. "Hello?"

Jackson's tears felt like hot lava flowing down his cheeks. He tipped the bottle back and wondered what the hell he was doing. Where he was supposed to go from here.

"Hello?" she asked again.

"Hey," he croaked, his heart breaking all over again.

"Jackson?" Autumn's voice seemed almost relieved. "Where are you? I've been worried about you."

"Fort Dix Cemetery."

Her side of the line fell silent and then she said, "Are you okay?"

He tipped the bottle to his lips with a shaky hand. "No."

His head ached from the continual buzz, but his mind was clear. He still saw the horrid pictures of his mother lying on the floor, blood pouring from her body. The image ha haunted him for years, still haunted him, as he sat in the cemetery talking to the one person who could possibly help make it all go away.

"Jackson, will you stay where you're at so I can come to you?"

“Yeah,” he rasped. “Hurry.”

He clicked the phone off and dropped his head to his hands. Autumn would know what to do. She had a good heart and a strong mind. She would know what he needed to do to get over this. She would be his only hope of getting over his sins of the past.

* * * *

Autumn spotted him immediately and knew he was drunk. Davis promised her Jackson would be fine but two days without him was torture. He knelt over someone’s grave—his mother’s, she assumed—with his head in his hands shuddering.

She walked toward him slowly. Her heart ached as each step brought her closer to him. She wanted to comfort him, to take away the pain and kiss away his tears. She wrapped her arms around him and he held to her tightly. He smelled like beer as he cried on her shoulder, shaking with sobs while she held him.

“It all my fault.” He pressed his face against her neck, the stubble on his chin scraping against her skin. “She’s dead because of me.”

Autumn glanced at the tombstone. In bold letters, it stated: Beverly Ann Cooper. Beneath it, it showed the date of her death, twenty-five years ago. She stroked his back, holding him as tight as he held her. He clutched her shirt in his hands with his lips against her neck.

“I’m sorry.” He spoke, though she knew he wasn’t speaking to her. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Autumn kissed him. “Jackson, why don’t we get a motel for the night?” Home was only a few miles away, but he needed to be alone with her. “Let’s get a room at Fort Dix Motel.”

He nodded against her shoulder.

She helped him up and walked him to her car. After settling him in the passenger seat, she got behind the wheel and drove to the motel just a few blocks away. When they arrived she rented a room and then unlocked the door and helped him stumble inside. She stripped off his clothes and forced him into the bathroom where she turned on the shower and pushed him inside.

She stood there, holding him up with the cold water spraying down on him. Whatever pain he harbored inside, getting drunk was hardly the way to deal with it. She grabbed the bar of soap and lathered her hands and began to wash the stench of beer and sweat from his skin.

“I want to be inside you, Autumn. You’re the only thing that can make the pain go away. I want to fuck you now.”

Autumn rubbed her hands along his stomach. “Jackson, neither one of us is ready for that. You’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk.” He shook his head. “If I were drunk I wouldn’t feel the pain anymore.”

She stopped her movements and glanced up at him. He broke her heart standing there. She looked into his glossy eyes and saw the pain he talked about. A pain that to him was not on the surface, but soul deep.

“Tell me what happened, Jackson. Tell me everything.”

He pulled her against his wet body and kissed her. She closed her eyes and squeezed him in a hug, afraid to let him go. The only thing that mattered was him. She wanted him close to her just as much as he needed her near him.

After the water turned icy against their skin, she pulled away long enough to flick the water off and grabbed a towel to wrap around his waist. She pulled one for herself and quickly shed her wet clothes and wrapped the soft terry cloth around her. Jackson stood in a stupor, hurting so badly she could see it in his eyes. She reached for his hand and led him to the bed where he fell face first against the mattress. She climbed in beside him and waited for him to start the conversation.

“I was just nine,” he began with a whisper. “My mom was pregnant with a little girl, something she thanked God for every day. My dad, however, was an abusive man and liked to take a lot of his troubles out on others.” He grabbed a pillow and propped it up under his chin. “He hardly hit me, but I’d done something that day and he took off his belt and hit me, over and over. My mom came in, in the middle of it and snapped. She pushed me away from him and put herself between us. She told my father he could do anything he wanted to her, but he wouldn’t touch her child. She stood up for me.”

Tears filled his eyes when they met hers and Autumn reached out to touch his hand. He stopped talking and she wanted to push him to tell her more. She brushed his wet hair back and waited patiently.

“They started fighting, and my dad pinned her to the floor. He called her every name in the book as he punched her. She begged him to stop, but he kept on until she started bleeding.”

Jackson went quiet. The silence was almost deafening to her ears as she waited for him to resume talking again. She couldn’t imagine what he went through witnessing that. She couldn’t imagine what he lived with feeling the way he felt. In a silent signal telling him it was okay to continue, Autumn scooted closer to him. She rubbed his neck and kissed his forehead before pressing his head against her shoulder.

“I’m right here, Jackson.” No matter how hard she tried, Autumn would never get Jackson close enough.

“I know. I wanted to stop it. There was so much blood coming from her, and she wasn’t moving. I tried stopping him. I screamed. I cried. I jumped on his back. Nothing stopped him, though. He slammed me into the wall and kept hitting her until she stopped fighting.”

Autumn closed her eyes, forbidding the tears gathering in her eyes to fall. “What happened afterward?”

“My dad looked over at me and said my mom paid for my sins and that he was stuck with a sorry bastard son like me.”

“Oh, Jackson.” The tears fell. She wrapped her arms around him.

Gently, he pushed her away and sat up. Autumn saw him change right before her eyes. He went from the caring, loving Jackson who made her feel like the luckiest woman alive to the hardcore Marine that was out for blood and would stop at nothing to get it.

“He convinced the police he came home to find her that way. Ruled it as a burglary or something. Naturally, the investigators in our small town found nothing, and he walked away free and clear. I spent nine years with that man. He beat me for no reason other than the fact he took great pleasure in it. I spent many nights wondering if there was a better life for me out there, something that didn’t hurt, you know? I guess I wanted a Brady Bunch kind of life.” He shook his head. “I don’t know if that even exists, but the only solace I found was in women’s bed. I lost my virginity at fifteen to a woman who took me into her home and gave me a safe place to sleep at night. I begged my friends to let me stay with them so I wouldn’t have to go home. I did my best to finish school and hopefully make something of myself.”

Jackson tossed the pillow aside and fell back against the mattress with a groan. “I know how that makes me look in your eyes, but you don’t understand what it was like living with that man.”

Autumn tilted her head to the side, absorbing the information he just gave her. “I’m not here to judge you, Jackson. I love you with no conditions and everyone has bits of the past that their ashamed of. You had your reasons for what you did, and those reasons are something I accept. You were just a kid and you didn’t deserve any of this, Jackson. Nor is any of it your fault.”

“Why do you have to be so nice? You could cut me down and yell at me for what I did, not only to you but also the women before and after you. I did fuck anything in a skirt for the pitiful excuse of finding some kind of happiness in my pathetic life. How can you just sit there and be nice to me?”

Autumn debated her words, choosing them wisely. “Would you rather I be mean? You want me to be like every other person who has come into your life and cut you down, treat you like shit and make you feel like a failure? I know what you’re thinking, Jackson, and it won’t work. I will not give you reason to push me away. You were hurt. Not only physically but emotionally and spiritually as well. Trust me, I’m not being nice, as you put it, because I pity you. You don’t need my pity or anyone else’s for that matter.”

She carefully straddled his lap and leaned over him, forcing him meet her eyes. “I love you, and people who love each other, support one another. You were hurt and you’re still hurting.” She placed her hand over his heart. “You are special to me and I’m here for you.”

Jackson’s hands smoothed over her back, gliding down until he cupped her buttocks. “You really mean it?” he whispered.

She kissed him, unable to voice anymore words. All the time she'd known him, Jackson was strong. Even when they were intimate, he showed little vulnerability. Autumn hugged him, wishing she could do more to make his pain and suffering go away.

"There's more to the story." He propped his chin on her shoulder. "When I turned eighteen, three days before I was set to leave for boot camp, my father pulled a gun on me."

Autumn's heart raced. She pulled back and stared at him while he spoke.

"He didn't like it that I was leaving. He threatened me, among other things, and finally lashed out at me physically, and I snapped. I was older and stronger and could take on the drunk better than I realized. I felt so much anger toward him, and I don't know what happened. The Major said I probably blacked out since I only remember pieces of it but I started punching my father just like he did my mother. The gun fell to the side, and when he laid motionless, I picked it up."

He stopped again, obviously tired of telling his story. Autumn ran her fingers through his wet hair, trying to catch his attention, to get that lost look of darkness off his face.

"I didn't think, only reacted, and pointed the gun at him. I saw it all over again like a horror movie flashing before my eyes. He taunted me, told me I wasn't man enough to stand up for my family, that I was a worthless piece of shit who should have died with my mother." Jackson gulped a breath. "I shot him."

Autumn could see much more than hurt on Jackson's face. It was physically painful for her to watch him suffer so much. Maybe she shouldn't have pushed him to tell her. Maybe if she kept her big mouth shut he would have been better off.

"I explained everything to the police, of the abuse and the beatings and told them I shot him in self-defense. A day later, I was enlisted and boarded a plane to North Carolina to meet your father." Jackson glanced toward the bathroom and then looked down at the hand that rested against her thigh. "I'm sorry there isn't a happy ending to this tragic tale. I actually talked to both Davis and the Major about it years ago. Your dad, being the great guy he is, sat me down piss-assed drunk and made me spill my guts to him after he roughed me up a bit." Jackson smiled at the memory. "Davis was there on every anniversary of my mom's death. We were in Germany together when I told him the first time and I was drunk then, too. Only three people know about it, you being the third."

"Jax, I love you so much." She kissed him and hugged him. "I don't know what to say or do but I want to help you heal. To help you get through this."

He pressed his face into her chest. "I need to be inside you. Please, Autumn. You're my only hope of healing because up until now, all I've done is survive. I want to be happy and I'm only happy when I'm with you."

Autumn's heart rejoiced just as much as it wept for him. She pushed him away and tugged the towel from her body, tossing it to the side. Jackson watched her, waiting. Autumn

kneeled beside him and tugged the fold of his towel.

“Sex isn’t going to change anything, Jackson. Whether you believe it or not, you need my love and you have it all. You always have and always will.” She cupped his cheeks and leaned forward to kiss him. “I love you, Jackson Cooper. And I’ll keep saying it over and over again as much as you need to hear it.”

Autumn could guess Jackson laid next to her trying to sort out his emotions. She pulled the covers around them and simply held him against her body. The last thing Jackson needed was to continue burying his feelings from the past. She refused to be like all the other women he essentially used, and thankfully he didn’t argue or put up a fight.

“I feel like shit.” He rubbed his eyes.

Autumn kissed his hair, breathing in his scent while she looked for the right words to say. “Why do you feel like shit?”

“Because I couldn’t stop it. Even if I couldn’t physically stop him, I should have told someone who could. I should have done something to help her out. Maybe if I hadn’t cried or run from him, maybe she wouldn’t have found out and would still be here today.”

Autumn stroked his back. “Honey, it was something completely out of your power to control. Playing the what-if game will only drive you crazy.”

Jackson hand rested against her stomach. “I don’t think I ever told her I loved her. I made Chloe a Valentine’s card—she was due on Valentine’s day—that had a big heart that popped out of the middle. I told my baby sister all the time that I loved her, but I can’t remember telling my mother.”

“She knew.” Tears formed in Autumn’s eyes. “That’s the funny thing with love. It’s not always expressed with words. I have no doubt in my mind your mother knew you loved her and Chloe. And I have no doubts about how much she loved you.”

“She made me feel special.” Jackson rolled onto his stomach. “She used to take me shopping with her and buy me things. Even when my father used to bitch about her spending all his money, if I asked for a toy or piece of candy she didn’t say no. I got to pick out stuff for Chloe. She always made me feel a part of everything she did, and I felt on top of the world.

“She loved my father. I can’t understand or comprehend it, but she was madly in love with him.” Jackson stuffed the pillow under his chin and rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers. “That’s what I don’t get. How could she love such a sadistic bastard?”

Autumn curled around him, running her fingers through his damp hair. “Love’s not something that is meant for us to understand. It’s an emotion we choose to accept. My mom told me one time that she didn’t love my father for any reason other than she wanted to. I didn’t really understand it until I fell in love with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well”—she sat up to wrap the covers around her—“I always pictured my life would be like the fairy tales. My prince would ride up on a white horse and rescue me from the evil in my life and fight until death for my love. And then we’d live happily ever after.” Autumn chuckled. “Needless to say, I don’t believe in fairy tales anymore.”

“You wouldn’t let anyone rescue you even if it did happen.” His lips tilted upward. “You’re too hardheaded.”

She shrugged. “Probably. The exact moment I fell in love with you was our last night together. I convinced you to go on a picnic with me and we spent time talking about life and where we wanted to go. You were just about to head out to the Amazon with my dad, and I was about to enroll in vet school. We had a heart-to-heart discussion for the longest time that ended with sweet lovemaking under the stars right there in my Dad’s field. I suppose I was stupid and too young to know anything, but to me, that night meant everything.”

Autumn reached for his hand. “My point is, I loved you because I wanted to. I didn’t need a single reason but I have plenty. Aside from your cocky attitude, I saw a different part of you that night which made me fall head over heels faster than anything. It’s a choice I made by myself that night, and it’s a choice I made all over again when you walked back into my life.”

“And I walked out on you.”

“You did the right thing.” Autumn brushed her thumb along the back of his hand. “Granted, you handled it in a very crappy way, but neither one of us was truly ready for a real relationship. We weren’t ready for marriage or kids at that age, and we sure as hell had way too much youth to get out of our systems. But now we’ve got a second chance.”

Jackson pulled her to him. “You’re an amazing woman, do you know that? I don’t know what it is about you but you make everything more bearable. I love you, Autumn. I never thought I’d ever say those words to another human being in my life, but I do. I love you and you mean more to me than what words can describe.”

Autumn rested her cheek against his shoulder. “Ditto.”

Chapter Fifteen

Jackson woke with Autumn curled against his body. His head pounded and the more he moved, the worse it got. He rubbed his face, realizing he hadn't shaved and was way past due. He opened his eyes, squinting at the light streaming through the window. It took him a minute to realize where he was, what had happened.

"I have some Tylenol in my purse if you want some." Autumn pressed a kiss to his chest.

"Tylenol would be great."

Autumn threw the covers back and stood to find her purse. Jackson watched her move about the room totally nude and perfectly comfortable with herself. She grabbed the bottle and disappeared into the bathroom. When she came back she held a Dixie cup of water and she sat on the edge of the bed beside him.

"Here." She handed him the cup and then poured two gel caps in her hand.

He sat up. "God. It's been two years since I had a hangover. I'm too old for this."

Autumn stroked his cheek. "Do you feel any better?"

"A little bit." He swallowed the pills and set the cup to the side. "Thank you."

"Anytime." She smiled.

He smiled back. "I love you."

The entire time he talked to her last night, he couldn't help wonder why such a wonderful person would want to be with him. He thought the same thing fourteen years ago when they'd first met. He would have bet for sure when she found out he shot his father she'd head for the door and never look back again. But she stayed. She hugged him, kissed him and told him she loved him. And he couldn't deny it any more. He didn't want to deny it anymore.

"You look lost in thought." Autumn propped herself up with a hand. "What's on your mind?"

He shook his head and then immediately regretted the action. "Fuck."

Autumn rubbed his leg. "How about we take a shower and get some food. Breakfast will do you some good."

While she went to the bathroom to start the shower, Jackson followed slowly behind. He really was getting too old for hangovers. He wanted nothing more than to make love with Autumn in the shower but his legs barely held him up. The bitter taste of beer lingered in his mouth and his stomach growled from abandonment.

“Do you happen to have any toothpaste?”

Autumn looked around the bathroom. “No.”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and laid his head on her shoulder. “I feel like an old man.”

“Drinking isn’t the same as it was when we were twenty, is it?”

He rubbed his forehead against her from side to side. “Every muscle in my body hurts.”

“Tough it out, old man. It’s only going to get worse as you get older.”

Jackson groaned when she forced him toward the shower. “You aren’t ready to trade me in, are you? For a younger stud?”

Autumn narrowed her eyes. “I just got you to confess that you love me after all these years you tried to deny it. No way in hell am I trading you in now.”

She stepped to the side and waited for him to move inside the stall slowly. Jackson stood under the hot spray, allowing the heat to soak into his skin. Each muscle began relaxing as the water pelted him. He rested against the wall, eyes closed, water droplets rolling down his face. Steam filled the stall creating a cocoon of warmth around them.

Autumn grabbed the bar of soap and worked up a lather between her hands. “My dad is supposed to come in tomorrow. Davis said he didn’t want to be on another continent any longer after all the shit that’s been happening to me. I told Davis I would staple his damn mouth shut if he didn’t learn to quit yakking to everyone.”

She ran her hands over his body, slow and sensual as she took her time to feel every contour.

Jackson moaned, his body relaxing. “Your family loves you. And whether you admit it or not, you want them around.”

“I do, do I?” She wrapped her hands around his cock. “I’m not a damsel in distress. I can take care of myself.”

“Maybe.” Jackson watched her work, liking how he fit in her small hands. “But it’s easier to deal with when people who care about you are around.” She stroked him until he was hard. “You’re getting pretty good at that.”

She leaned forward to press kisses against his chest. “If I didn’t feel sorry for your poor head and aching body, I’d smack you for insinuating I was ever *bad* at it.”

She licked his nipple and rolled it with the tip of her tongue before she bit down lightly. He hissed with pleasure, a hand on each wall to hold him up. She did it again to the other nipple and started working her mouth down his body, nipping and licking.

Jackson gulped in air, his legs trembling as her cheek brushed against his cock. She knelt before him kissing his thighs with closed eyes as the water cascaded down on them. Her hand gripped him firmly, her thumb stroking the under side and driving him crazy. Jackson waited, albeit impatiently, as she took her time, slowly driving him insane with lust.

When her lips surrounded him, Jackson head fell back against the tiles with a moan. The softness of her hand didn't compare to the silky warmth of her wet mouth. She surprised him. The thought alone of her mouth surrounding his dick was enough to make him come.

She started with a slow pace, bobbing her head and taking more of him in her mouth. Jackson shifted so the water wasn't in her face and pulled her hair back to watch. Her lips formed a wide O and took most of him inside. He groaned when the tip of his cock bumped the back of her throat. His balls tightened, his heart hammered, and the need to come pulsed higher. Autumn must have sensed it and pulled back, replacing her mouth with her hand. Two strokes and he came, shooting semen across her breasts.

"Perfect cure for a hangover." She smiled up at him.

Jackson leaned forward and kissed her. Although the room spun around him, he could go another second without kissing this woman. "You're perfect."

* * * *

After they ate breakfast at a local restaurant, Autumn drove Jackson back to the cemetery to pick up his truck. She held his hand as they walked toward the grave, Jackson all but cutting off her circulation with his clasp. As they neared his mother's grave, he slowed his pace, almost resisting.

"This is the first time in years I've visited my mother's grave sober." Jackson stopped and tugged Autumn to him, wrapping his arms around her from behind. "It just hurts, you know?"

Having lost her mother at a young age, she did know that aspect. The day of the funeral, her brothers and father couldn't get her to leave the cemetery until nightfall.

Autumn brushed her hands along his arms. "I do know. My mom died after you left, when I was eighteen. I miss her more and more as each day passes. It's hard to let some go when you love them so much." She tilted her head to the side, resting her cheek against his biceps.

"How did your mother die?"

Autumn sighed. "She was a nurse at the local hospital and contracted a disease. It was a simple infection everyone thought could be treated with antibiotics, but the treatment didn't work, and her body rapidly shut down within days after the infection. She didn't live a week after she contracted it."

Jackson's lips pressed against her cheek. "I'm so sorry, babe."

Autumn held back her tears. “Me, too.” She kissed Jackson’s forearm. “She actually liked you, believe it or not. She hated the fact I was head over heels, but she liked your loyalty and dedication. She told me you reminded her a lot of my father.”

“That’s a pretty nice compliment.”

Autumn swallowed back her emotions. She wanted nothing more than her mother to make everything okay again, the same way she always did when Autumn was a child. She’d have been there when she lost Frank’s baby just as she would have been here now had she been alive. Wanting her advice, love, and comfort hurt now almost as much as the day she had to say good-bye forever.

“Do you want some time alone? Or are you ready to go?”

Jackson pulled away from her and walked away. She watched him open his truck door and lean in for something. And then she saw the bouquet of flowers in his hand. When he came back, he knelt and placed them on his mother’s grave.

Tears gathered in Autumn’s eyes.

He arranged the flowers the way he wanted them on the grave and stood. He gave Autumn a small smile and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

“Beverly would be proud of her son.” Autumn slid her arms around Jackson’s waist. “I know I am.”

Jackson simply held her for a moment, not saying a word. She knew he struggled with his own emotions, never really dealing with anything and keeping it bottled inside.

“Me, too,” he finally said. “I love you, Autumn. Thank you for being here for me.”

She glanced up at him. Although he didn’t cry, his eyes held the emotion. “You know there is no place I would rather be. The good, the bad, and the downright ugly, I’ll always be here for you.”

Jackson leaned down to kiss her. She opened her mouth to him, greeting his tongue with her own. *There is no place on earth better than Jackson’s arms.*

Autumn tried to pull him closer and he lifted her in his arms. Her legs automatically went around his waist as they kissed in the cemetery.

Finally, when they broke the kiss, he smiled. Autumn played with the hairs at his nape, running her fingers through the short length.

“How come you don’t have a pet? I would think being a vet you’d have at least a goldfish,” he said.

Autumn chuckled and shook her head. “I don’t know. I sort of made it a rule not to have

that kind of attachment to an animal when I was in vet school.”

“But you’ll let me get a dog, right?” He kissed her, nibbling on her lower lip. “A big hairy mutt that hogs our bed and steals your pillow. You’ll allow that, right? Because you love me?”

“We’ll go pet shopping after the Gallagher thing is taken care of.”

Jackson chuckled. “You are the best girlfriend ever.”

He started walking toward the vehicles with her still in his arms. “Just remember that when you get up at two a.m. to take the dog out to pee,” she warned him.

* * * *

It was close to six when they arrived back at Autumn’s house, the day spent alone together. The living room was full of Callahan’s, the Major and Nick along with Davis. Nick sat in the recliner dressed in his fatigues shaking his head at the ever entertaining Davis. The Major stood in the kitchen pulling out brownies he’d just baked.

“There’s my baby sis.” Nick stood, ignoring Davis, and immediately wrapped his sister in a warm embrace. “You are in so much trouble for not having any of your famous brownies here when I arrived. I had to put Dad up to making them.”

Autumn smiled at her father over her brother’s shoulder. “Dad’s aren’t as good as mine.”

Major Eric Callahan hadn’t even changed from his fatigues. He and Nick were both dressed from head to toe in full military regalia, with the personality to match. Autumn pulled away from her brother and walked toward her father.

“I’ve missed you.”

Her father nodded toward her and opened his arms. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” She hugged him close. “I’m sure Davis made everything up to be a bigger deal than it really is.”

“Autumn you had—” Davis choked off the words he was about to say, catching Jackson’s look.

“All right you guys,” she pulled away to face her family, “I’m not a little girl who can’t take care of herself. I have my fair share of problems and I battle them all the Callahan way. I’m just as much of a fighter as any one of you so don’t you dare treat me like the wounded victim.”

Jackson took a seat next to Davis on the couch, neither one commenting on her remark. Nick remained silent as well, sitting back in the recliner. She glanced over at her father who had yet to take his eyes off Jackson.

“Autumn.” Her father finally met her eyes. “You are still *my* little girl and you always will be.”

“Dad, I’m fine. Jackson and I talked about it, and even though it hurts, we’re okay.” She plopped down on the couch next to the boys. “So drop it.”

Davis and Jackson raised their eyebrows at her while Nick simply shook his head. No one told the Major to “drop it,” not now, not ever. Eric Callahan, however, was not her drill sergeant or commanding officer. He was her father.

He took off his hat and threw it on the coffee table, making her flinch. “I promised your mother before she died I would take care of you.”

“And yet you send Jackson to do your dirty work.” She stood up to face him. “Don’t get me wrong—I love him and I will until the day I die—but you hardly have right to blame him for anything.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, don’t try to deny it. I see the way you’re looking at him. You trusted him to protect me, and he got me knocked up which only resulted in the miscarriage of your grandchild.” Autumn clenched her jaw, surprised by her own anger. “I don’t need a protector, Dad. I never wanted that. I can handle this and Gallagher on my own.”

He crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at her. “I’m not having this argument with you while you’re in an emotional state.”

“My emotions are fine.”

“No they’re not. You’re acting just like—” He shook his head.

“Just like who?” When he didn’t answer, she pressed him again. “Just like who, Dad?”

“Your mother. She miscarried three times before she conceived you.” He walked to the loveseat with all eyes in the room on him. “I kept telling her it was okay. That we didn’t need a little girl, that our three boys were what we were destined to have. But she wouldn’t stand for it. It broke my heart each time seeing the pain she went through when the doctor gave her the news. He’d given up on us, too. He asked for me to get her counseling and to try to talk her out of having another child.” Her father’s eyes filled with tears. “I couldn’t. She had all your baby stuff picked out—those cute little pink dresses with matching bows. She wanted a little girl, and I wasn’t about to tell her no.”

Autumn sank back against the couch, her father’s words hitting her hard. Her mother had gone through the same thing she had? No one ever knew about it. Faye was a private person as far as her personal life went, but she undoubtedly loved each and every one of her kids.

Autumn stood, unable to deal with it anymore. After all the stuff that happened with

Jackson, seeing him finally able to stand at his own mother's grave and give her flowers only brought the past memories vividly in her mind. She missed her mother. Even after fourteen years of her being gone, she still missed the little things that made Faye Callahan so special. Being there, for one. She walked out of the room and headed for the backyard and some much needed space.

She stood on the back deck with the slight breeze blowing in her face. She'd cried enough over the past few days and simply refused to cry anymore. She needed to figure out how to get rid of Frank's threat and get her life back to normal. It wouldn't be easy with her family breathing down her neck, but it was something she had to do.

Nick stepped outside and Autumn scowled at him. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Because. You're not the only one that needs fresh air in there." Nick stood beside her, quiet as he normally was.

"It's not fair, you know? I thought my life was pretty great up until now. But then Jackson comes crashing in. Frank decides to destroy my dream. I lose my second baby, although this one I really wanted." She shook her head. "And I miss Mom now, more than ever."

"Me too, Autumn. Me, too." Nick leaned against the side railing. "I've been on active duty since as long as I can remember, and I still keep Mom's notes she wrote to me when I first joined the Marines. She wrote one for each day to help me overcome the stupid shit I had to go through in boot camp. She even wrote a few poems and stuff, Mom did that all the time to make me laugh or remind me of home when I was away. Of course, I hid them from the guys because they would have crucified me if they knew my mom wrote me notes, but I miss that about her. She was always there even when you didn't think you needed her to be."

Autumn sighed. "When all this is over, I want us to visit her grave as a family. I haven't been since her birthday, and I think we all need to make the time to go as a complete family, just the five of us."

Nick nodded and turned toward her. "Are you really okay, sis?"

"I'm doing what I've done since I left home. I'm surviving."

* * * *

Frank Gallagher smiled as his plans slowly unfurled. One by one, the incidents he created in Autumn's life happened like clockwork. She didn't take to the bomb he had planted so he vandalized the property. Autumn knew it was him, no point in denying that much, yet the police didn't need to know that tidbit of information.

Ever since Autumn graduated, she'd been recognized for being at the top of her game. She had the personality that went with the job, the ability to make friends and explain dire circumstances to unsuspecting clients. She cared, which was usually long forgotten by the time you receive your diploma and are on your own.

Frank hated how much his parents liked her. He hated how much they wanted him to be like her. He never wanted to be a veterinarian, yet his inheritance would be cut short should he choose to go a separate way. Now he was stuck in a dead-end job that did absolutely nothing for him and he was still being compared to Autumn Callahan, the woman he should have married.

He tipped his glass to his lips and let the soothing whiskey slowly burn its way to the pit of his stomach. Nothing had worked so far and he was about to take matters into his own hands. He turned in his chair and reached for the bottom drawer of his desk. Inside was a 9 mm handgun that fit perfectly in his hand.

Soon. He rubbed the barrel of the gun against his thigh, almost in a caress. If Autumn couldn't take his blatant hints, he'd have to put an end to her "good" charade once and for all.

* * * *

"That was Summer." Autumn threw the phone down on the bed and stared at Jackson, who arched his eyebrow at her. "Gallagher's got all my patient referrals. He's even running some kind of deal where my patients get a discount for coming to see him. Can you believe that?"

"He's just a dickwad, Autumn. Don't let him get to you."

"Why aren't you getting mad? Normally, you're the one I have to hold back and you're sitting there placid as can be."

Jackson rolled his neck. "I think you have a little bit of anger to unleash."

"A little bit?" Autumn started pacing. "He's taken everything from me. My name, my clinic, my damn career. Now he has my patients and is offering a damn discount for the referral. I'm not angry. I'm pissed."

He nodded. "You have every right to be."

"Stop being nice! Get angry or something."

Jackson chuckled and stood. He pulled his bag out and grabbed his gun from the side pocket. "Let's go kick some ass."

Autumn stared at him, a few seconds passing before she finally smiled. "I swear I'm so pissed off and you have me smiling. What the hell is with that?"

"It's my charm." He replaced the gun in his bag.

"Maybe."

"Autumn"—the Major appeared in the doorway—"this just arrived."

He handed her a package and waited patiently for her to open it. Davis and Nick crowded around the door. Autumn looked at the writing, noting immediately it was Frank's. *What does he want now?*

Inside was a note, a newspaper and some photos. Autumn chose the note first.

Your days are over. Pack your bags and get out of the city.

She sat the note on the bed and reached inside the envelope for the newspaper. The front page had her picture on it with a needle in her hand the day she sedated Dodo. Down below it, there was a white pit bull—obviously not Dodo—lying in a puddle of blood. The headline read: Trusted family vet killed beloved pet.

She threw the newspaper aside and pulled out the photos, gasping at what she saw. Pictures of her and Jackson every time they were together. Intimate pictures, naked pictures, on the couch, at the motel, in the cemetery, in her bed—she flipped through them all and even spotted some at the hospital and in the park.

“Sweetheart, what is it?” Jackson asked after a while.

“I’m going to kill him!” She shoved all the stuff back in the envelope and pushed past her father and brothers with a harsh, “Move!”

How dare he. Tears of rage formed in her eyes. After all I’ve done for him. After all the hell I’ve put up with from him, he treats me like this.

“What was in the package?” Jackson followed behind Autumn, the Major, Davis, and Nick on his heels.

“He just made this little battle a full-fledged war.” She sat on the couch to lace up her tennis shoes. “I’m ending this today.”

“You’re not going to see him alone, Autumn. No negotiations.” Jackson crossed his arms, standing firm.

“Excuse me? What did you say to me?” She grabbed her purse and slung the strap over her shoulder.

“You’re not going by yourself.” Jackson narrowed his eyes. “And you’re going to tell me what was in the envelope.”

“You think you can make me?”

“If I have to handcuff you to the bed again, I will.”

Davis snickered behind them, being the only one in the room that knew what he was talking about.

“Don’t push me, Jackson. I’m already pissed off as it is.”

“Tough.” He grabbed the envelope from her hands. She screamed at him and tried to get it back. Jackson opened it and pulled out a couple of pictures.

“Son of a bitch.” He flipped through them before turning back to Autumn. “How were these taken? This one is in your home? How the fuck did he get pictures of us in your home?”

“I don’t know.” And she didn’t. Anyone of them could have been taken through the window she supposed, but most of the blinds were down and the curtains pulled at all times. Especially at intimate times.

“The motel, too?” Jackson asked outraged. “The cemetery. The park. The clinic. Your bedroom. The only one he’s missing is our time spent in the fucking bathroom!”

“You didn’t read the paper.” Autumn pointed to the envelope. “He sent a note and a newspaper along with the pictures.”

She glanced over at her family and blushed at the hard looks on each one of their faces. She wasn’t about to let her family see pictures of her and Jackson and really didn’t want to show them to the police.

Jackson shifted, pulling the paper from the envelope. After reading the headlines he threw it at the couch. He grabbed the note next and crumbled it in his hand.

“You’re staying here, Autumn.” He looked up at Davis. “Nick, Davis, let’s go.”

The two men moved forward, not bothering to ask questions. Autumn stared, jaw dropped. “No. I’m going to take care of my problem.”

Jackson eyes narrowed, his jaw hardening. “No. You’re going to sit your ass on that couch”—he pointed—“and let us handle this.”

Autumn fumed. “You are not going to tell me what to do.”

Jackson grabbed the newspaper and the crunched note and shoved them back in the envelope. “I just did.”

Autumn glanced over at her father. He simply stood there watching the three men pack up to leave. “Be sure to call Jeffery so you have the law on your side.”

“Doing it right now, Dad.” Davis punched the number in his cell phone and stepped outside on the porch.

“What are you going to do?” Autumn grabbed Jackson’s arm. When he didn’t stop, she followed him in her bedroom stopping in the middle of the room while he rummaged through his bag. “Answer me, Jackson. What are you going to do?”

He grabbed his gun and checked the ammunition. "I'm ending it."

Her eyes widened. "I told you I can handle it."

"And I've stepped aside for the most part and watched you 'handle' it the entire time I've been here." He shoved the bag down and pushed the gun in the small of his back. "I'm not handling it, Autumn. I'm ending it. There's a difference."

"Don't do this."

"Too late." Jackson moved past her and she grabbed his arm again. This time he stopped. They stared at each other, both refusing to give an inch.

"Jackson," she pleaded, hoping he'd back down.

"I love you." He moved toward her and leaned down to kiss her. "But please, just for once, listen to me. I don't need to worry about you, okay? Just stay here with your father and play card games or watch movies."

"Jackson—"

"Don't wait up."

Chapter Sixteen

With Nick behind the wheel and Davis in the back of Autumn's SUV, Jackson climbed in the passenger seat. "We all know she'll escape your father's hold so one of us needs to be on the look out for her and her protection."

"I will," Nick said. "Where are we going? To crash the dog fighting party?"

"Yeah. Davis has been watching them and said it was set for tonight. What a perfect way to end all this bullshit and get him out of all our lives." Jackson still couldn't understand how he got the pictures of them. "You'd better not leave me alone with the bastard either because right now I could kill him and not think twice."

"Calm down, Jack." Davis stuffed his phone back in his pocket. "Autumn doesn't want conjugal prison visits for the rest of her life over something as stupid as that. Just suck it up and at most blacken his eye or break his jaw."

Nick snorted. "Is Jeff on his way?"

"Yeah. He's meeting us there." Davis leaned forward. "There's also some special news. Kristin is pregnant."

Jackson thumped his head against the head rest on his seat. "Don't tell your sister."

"She's not okay, is she?" Davis asked.

"She's tough. That's about all I can say." Jackson rubbed his eyes. "She feels guilty about not wanting the baby she miscarried with Gallagher and is grieving for this one."

"Gallagher knocked her up?" Davis asked. "When did this happen?"

"A few years back. That's what made her have the whole emotional thing when your father said your mother miscarried." Jackson glanced out the window. "She'll be fine though. She just needs to get her life back on track and Gallagher isn't helping matters any."

They rode in silence the rest of the way to Gallagher's compound, talking only about their plan for when they got there. Jackson knew he was reacting based on his own emotions and the need to protect Autumn but he would see that Gallagher's taunting ended tonight. Serious consequences or not.

* * * *

It'd been a long time since Autumn snuck out of her bedroom window like a love-struck teenager, a first for sneaking out of her own house. But this is where she found herself after making excuses to go to bed early.

She unlocked the window over her bed and slid it up. Thankfully she lived in a one-story house unlike her parents back when she was eighteen. She couldn't count how many times

she had to climb down trees outside her bedroom window to meet Jackson in the middle of the night. The man really could have been the death of her.

Once she jumped to the ground, she dusted herself off and pulled the window down. She parked her car to the side of the house instead of in the garage by pure dumb luck.

Autumn glanced around, knowing how her father was and how he had the ability to pop out of the shadows at any given moment. All was clear. She walked to the side and immediately noticed her SUV missing. *Jackson*. His truck was in the garage. Her brother's were in the drive, yet she had no keys. And her father's Lexus SUV sat at the end of the driveway beckoning her name.

Autumn smiled feeling like a cat burglar in the middle of the night. Her adrenaline spiked as she moved toward the vehicle. Her father always kept a spare key underneath in the fender. Being a country boy, and living on a ranch, he always forgot to take out his keys when in town.

She bent down and found the box and slid the key out. He was going to be so pissed at her, but she couldn't help it. It was Jackson's fault for treating her like a little kid and her father's fault for imprisoning her in her own house. Once inside, she started the vehicle and pulled out of the drive.

She had overheard Davis mention something to Nick about a dog fight at Gallagher's tonight. That had to be where they went. It'd been three years since she'd seen his place and she could honestly admit she never wanted to grace the grounds or Frank's presence ever again.

So why was she going?

Autumn changed lanes. It didn't matter. Jackson wouldn't treat her like a little kid when she could and always had handled her problems herself. Her father may see her as the helpless victim as the rest of her family does, but she is perfectly capable of laying out Frank Gallagher all by herself.

"I'm ending it. . . . And I've stepped aside for the most part and watched you 'handle' it the entire time I've been here. . . . I'm not handling it, Autumn. I'm ending it. There's a difference."

Jackson's words flooded through her mind along with his past. He took a gun. He shot his own father. She couldn't help thinking his "ending" it meant the worst. Military trained. Dedicated to protecting his family. She worried about Jackson and knew it'd be up to her to keep him from hurting someone.

Amidst her thoughts a phone rang in the silence of the car. Autumn glanced to the side and picked up her father's cell phone. The caller ID read Jackson's cell number. Autumn picked it up and answered it.

"You just can't obey orders for anything, can you?" He sounded angry. "Where are you, Autumn? And don't you dare pull any bullshit with me."

Autumn pulled down Gallagher's street and slowed the car. "I'm close to Gallagher's house. Why?"

"Turn around and go home."

"No."

"Autumn, turn the fuckin' car around and go home." His voice rose as she parked the car.

"Mind your own damn business, Jackson." She clicked the phone off and he immediately called back. She turned it off and tossed it in the passenger seat. If he wanted to be an ass she could be a bitch. Simple as that.

The night was cold. Autumn climbed out of the car and replaced the key in its spot so she didn't have to keep up with it. Darkness surrounded her. Only a few lights illuminating the drive as she walked up the gravel walk. Small pebbles crunched beneath her shoes, filling the silence around her.

Once she got closer to the people milling about, Autumn ducked into the shadows the trees provided. She moved toward a building that appeared to house the animals. A quick glance inside proved Jackson was right. Gallagher bred animals for the simple task of producing prime fighting dogs to win his competitions. She couldn't help wondering if he ever sold any of the puppies to commoners or if he kept it within the dog-fighting cronies he knew.

The dogs started to growl at her, aware of her presence. She dodged behind the building. She heard Frank's voice from a distance. He was informing someone about how the show was run.

"You pay your cash upfront and the winner splits the dough." He opened the door to the puppy mill and the dogs started barking, growling and whining. Autumn listened as he continued to tell the person about his prime fighting dog, one he began to agitate.

The dog's growl was anything but warning. It was out for blood and had it been loose, Autumn had no doubts he'd find blood to quench his hunger. *How could someone dedicated and trained to help animals harm them in this vicious way?* It broke her heart to think she helped him get to where he was today.

"What happens to the dead animals?" the other person asked.

"They're tossed in the dump. No one ever finds out."

Autumn moved to the edge in an effort to look around the building and came face to face with Frank Gallagher himself. At five-eleven and one hundred fifty pounds, Frank was hardly a threat to someone like Jackson. He was hardly a threat to anyone if Autumn recalled right. But the look on his face, the hatred, the surprise, the sadistic satisfaction that she was on his turf now gave her reason to fear him. The Frank Gallagher standing before her today was not the same man she knew all those years ago.

“Well, if it isn’t a blast from my past.” Frank came over to her with a sardonic smile on his face. “This is private property and I don’t recall inviting you.”

Smooth, Autumn. How are you going to get yourself out of this one? She crossed her arms over her chest and glanced around at the massive amount of people attending Frank’s ‘show’.

“I just thought I’d come to see with my own eyes the monster you’ve become. I can’t believe that after all your training and education, you’d do something so horrible to these helpless animals.”

Frank propped his arm on the building, forcing her to meet his eyes. “And what are you here for? To save the world?”

“I’m here to tell you to leave me the hell alone. Stop threatening me. Stop destroying my life to satisfy your meaningless one. I’m sick of it.”

Frank grabbed her arm in one hand and pulled her close enough that their foreheads almost touched. “You’ve destroyed my life. Why shouldn’t I return you the favor, huh?”

“Frank, show’s about to start,” someone yelled.

Frank’s cold expression changed before her eyes to a half-assed grin that was laced with nothing but malice. “We’ll be right there.”

He pulled her toward the walk. “Let go of me!”

“No. You wanted to see the show, you’re getting front row seats.” Frank dragged her to the crowd where she was greeted by over a hundred questioning faces. He leaned in and whispered, “They’re not used to me bringing my bitches to the show so this is a real treat for them.”

“Let go of me.” Autumn jerked her arm from him and scanned the crowd.

Jackson and her brothers were nowhere to be seen. Surely she hadn’t mistaken Davis’s message? She figured since Frank was here tonight this is where Jackson would go. *Great. How are you going to get out of this mess?*

Her cell phone buzzed and she jumped, forgetting she put it on vibrate. Frank cast her a glance and paid her no mind when she narrowed her eyes at him. She glanced at the screen to read the text message. It was from Nick.

Are you okay?

Autumn typed in ‘yes’ and hit send. She glanced back to the cage where two men held the two dogs that were to fight. Both were pit bulls, one brown, one white like Dodo. Both were jumping, lunging at the other in an aggressive form of attack. Autumn knew what was about to happen and didn’t dare allow herself to react emotionally. Frank was baiting her, and if

she wasn't careful, she'd take the bait.

The dogs were released into a sealed, fenced cage. Autumn stared into the crowd, trying to avoid watching the viscous animal cruelty. The men in the crowd cheered as if they were rooting for their favorite football team. The sight sickened her almost as much as the blood spilling from the brown dog did.

You don't have to be here. You don't have to watch this. Just get up and walk out of here. Autumn took one last look at the animals and immediately wished she hadn't. The white dog ended the charade, leaving the brown lying limp in its own pool of blood. The white dog lifted its bloody face to the crowd with pride. She gasped, the urge to vomit striking her like a truck running into a brick wall. Never had she seen anything like this.

"Quite a show, huh?" Frank asked, leaning toward her. "That white one is mine. I bred her myself from only the finest dog lines and she just won me a quarter of a million dollars."

Autumn stood. "You're a sadistic bastard for treating these animals this way. I'm leaving."

He grabbed her wrist in one hand and held a gun in the other. "I don't think so."

He pulled Autumn down beside him and poked the gun in her side. "Now, which one of the next two do you think will win, huh? The German shepherd or the black mix mutt? My money's on the shepherd."

Autumn stared at the man holding the German shepherd and tears formed in her eyes at the recognition. The dog was Bear, the cancer patient's beloved pet that her brother saved from the fire.

* * * *

From where Jackson stood he had a clear view of Autumn, his damsel in distress. *Damn it all to hell and back.* Beside her sat the one and only Frank Gallagher with a gun pressed into her side. Jackson's blood pressure spiked as did his adrenaline and fear for her safety. Why couldn't the woman listen to him for once and stay home?

"What's the plan, Jack?" Davis glanced around at the crowd. "Jeff is bringing the whole fuckin' police crew, but I have a feeling we can't wait until then. How do you suggest we get her out of this mess?"

Jackson kept his eyes on Autumn. She looked sick, like she was about to puke all over Frank's expensive shoes. Fear wasn't on her face but he could tell the love for animals she had was shining through. The longer she sat there watching them, the larger the emotional scar would be. A scar because she couldn't help the animals.

"Keep your eyes on Autumn. We'll wait until Jeff gets here, but if she moves all bets are off and we go in for her." He looked at both Davis and Nick. "Got it?"

They nodded.

Damn this was fucked up. All he planned on doing was punching Gallagher around a little bit, then throwing him into Jeff's arms for the police to handle the rest of the matters. He should have known Autumn wouldn't back down. And he should have prepared for this predicament. He was a damn fool for provoking her into this mess.

He watched the fight while keeping an eye on Autumn's face. She sat like a zombie staring at the bloody battle of the two dogs who went round after round in the enclosed cage. Unlike the first fight which was over in ten minutes, this one dragged out, dog whimpers and screeches filling the air over the crowd's cheers.

Autumn held her emotions in really well, Jackson noticed, though her eyes spoke volumes on how she felt. Even though he was beyond pissed with her, she didn't need to see the action taking place. She didn't need to be put through this after going through weeks of hell prior. He clenched his fist and waited. Jeff would be here soon and then Autumn would be out of this mess. She would be in his arms before he knew it and he made a vow to see she never left them again, no matter how stubborn they each were.

"Dude, Autumn's getting up." Nick pushed Jackson's shoulder and pointed.

She rounded the cage with Gallagher at her side poking the gun against her. She came to the opening and Jackson held his breath as the man in charge of entering and exiting the fighting cage opened the door for her to enter. Gallagher gave her a rough shove, and she stumbled inside with the two fighting dogs.

Jackson was on his feet in two seconds. "Get your brother here now because I'm fixing to kill the bastard."

Chapter Seventeen

“You want to play doctor, go ahead,” Frank taunted. “Be my guest.” He shoved her inside the cage and locked the door behind her.

Autumn’s heart thumped against her ribs almost painfully while fear gnawed her deep inside. Never in her life had she been honestly fearful of an animal until now.

Bear stood above the wounded mutt nipping at it to make it yelp. He taunted it like Gallagher taunted her. *What did he expect to come of this? Me eaten alive with all these witness to my death?* Autumn clutched the chain link fence behind her, looking for an escape. *Is this what they do? When dog fighting gets boring they go all Roman on each other and throw people into the lions den?*

Bear lifted his head and turned toward her, done playing with the wounded dog. Although his mouth was dark she could still see the blood lining his lips. This wasn’t the dog she knew and took care of. This wasn’t the sweet, lovable creature that helped a child cope with cancer. No, this was a dog reacting to malicious treatment by its owner—the man who gave life to the small child dying with a horrible disease eating her insides up.

So what am I suppose to do?

Her first thought was to stay right where she was until Jackson arrived. She knew Jeffery was involved and knew the police would raid the place soon enough. Surely she could wait it out until they arrived.

Bear barked at her, clearly a warning, she knew. She saw that the dog remembered her, sniffing the air in her direction. She hated being vulnerable. She hated she had a stupid stubborn streak that ran miles high and miles wide. But mostly she hated that the outcome was probably not going to be as well as she intended.

“Dr. Callahan?” Troy, Bear’s owner, asked her when he recognized her. “What are you doing here? What are you doing in there?”

She clutched the fence harder. “Oh, I just thought I’d drop by and stand in the middle of a cage with a possessed dog for fun. What are you doing here?”

His eyes widened and if she hadn’t been fearing for her life she would have laughed. *What an idiot.*

“Go on, Autumn. Show everyone the work of the good doctor.” Frank grabbed the megaphone one of his cronies held. “Listen up, everybody. This here is the legendary Autumn Callahan, who is not only a fuckin’ goddess to all who hail her but a fuckin’ dog whisperer as well. She’s going to talk Bear down from his frenzied state.”

Bear growled at him, and Autumn smiled. “I’d let you bite him if there wasn’t a cage between us.”

Bear walked around toward the far side, away from Autumn, growling at the people that

gathered around. Nobody stayed in their seats. They wanted to get closer to see what would come of her being in the cage with the sadistic dog.

“What’s wrong, Autumn? Have you finally met your match?”

“No. But you have.” Jackson pulled Frank back and slammed his fist into his face.

All hell broke loose after that. Autumn watched while the police raided the area making arrests and breaking up fights. Davis and Nick battled their own with Gallagher’s men. Bear went crazy in the commotion, climbing the fence and growling at the men on the other side.

Autumn watched Jackson and Gallagher while doing her best to keep an eye on Bear. Davis finally broke free from the fights and ran over to the cage, Bear following him along the way. He growled at Davis, snapping at the chain link with slobber flying from his gnashing teeth.

“It’s okay, big guy.” Davis watched Autumn as he talked to the dog. “You don’t want to hurt me or Autumn.”

“Davis, he feels threatened.” Autumn scooted farther back in the cage as the dog came closer to her. “He’s scared of his surroundings and is poised to do the only thing he knows to protect himself.”

“What do I need to do to get you out then?”

“Dig a hole on the other side?”

Davis gave her his Marine look. “Not funny, Autumn.”

“Distraction?” She flinched when the dog jumped up on the cage, the chain link clanking loudly along with the surrounding noise. “Unlock the door and go to the other side to distract him.”

Davis did as she said and started to agitate Bear at the other side of the cage. Once he had his attention, Autumn made her move and ran for the exit. Freedom never felt better than closing and locking that door behind her.

“Where’s Jackson?” she asked once Davis joined her again.

“With Gallagher. I don’t know where they are.” Davis grabbed her arm and led her through the commotion which was starting to clear out some as people tried to escape. From what she understood, the police surrounded the property.

Autumn’s adrenaline spiked as she scanned the crowd looking for Jackson. The last time she saw him, he and Gallagher were fighting and she remembered they both were carrying guns. She clutched Davis’s hand against her arm, and he pulled her closer to him.

“I’m getting you out of here, Autumn. Dad’s waiting out front and this time you will stay with him. No negotiations. We don’t need to worry about you while we look for Jackson.

Do you understand me?"

They were at a distance from the main crowd. Autumn stopped and fell to the ground to heave the contents of her stomach in the grass. Davis waited, patiently giving her a little space yet being there all the same.

"Come on. Dad's right around the corner. He'll take you home, okay?"

Autumn clutched his shirt. "You've got to find him. Please, Davis. Don't let him get hurt."

Liking passing bread around the dinner table, Davis handed her off to Jeffery, who then put her in their father's care. He wrapped his arms around her as she broke down, all the emotion of the night finally catching up with her. She pictured in her mind the dogs that died due to fighting and then pictured Jackson and Frank going at it with the probability of one ending the same way. The thought made her sick all over again.

"Sweetheart." Her father brushed her hair from her face and lifted her chin to look into her eyes.

"I can't leave, Dad." She shook her head, a sob slipping out. "I can't leave him."

A gunshot rang through the air and Autumn sank to the ground again, waiting for the news of who had been killed.

* * * *

Life was a bitch. This was something Jackson always knew but hadn't had thrown in his face until recently. When Gallagher's fist contacted his stomach again, Jackson finally decided he had enough. After knocking him to the ground, he repeatedly pounded his fists into Gallagher's face, unable to control himself.

"Stop, Jackson." Davis and Nick were both there pulling him off the nearly limp Gallagher. "He doesn't deserve his blood on your hands. Let Jeff handle the rest."

He wiped the sweat from his brow with his arm, his knuckles covered in both Gallagher's blood and his own. His lip was swollen, and he'd probably have a few bruises but he was essentially okay otherwise. He'd been scarred much worse in battle zones, so the minor bumps and bruises were nothing to him.

"Where's Autumn?" He spat, the metallic taste of blood lingering in his mouth.

"She's with Dad." Davis nudged at his shoulder forcefully to get him to turn away from Gallagher. "Come on. She's scared to death that you're hurt. Go be with her."

They turned their backs and started walking. Jackson couldn't believe the way the night turned out and didn't want to think about what Autumn had been through. He pulled his shirt up and wiped his face, hoping to rid himself of most of the ugliness that lingered from the fight.

“You think you’re so smooth?”

Jackson and the two Callahans turned around to find Gallagher pointing the gun, right at Jackson’s chest. “If she just stayed out of my business, out of my family, then none of this would have happened,” Gallagher said, jerking the gun then bringing it back level with Jackson’s chest.

Jackson swallowed hard. He wasn’t threatened by the gun so much as he was the damn dog standing next to his side. Dodo had nothing on this macho pit bull. Thankfully though another man held the dog’s leash, hopefully able to hold the beast back.

“And if you left her the fuck alone, you wouldn’t have that broken nose either.” Jackson fisted his hands to his side, knowing the gun at the small of his back was there for his utilization.

“Such a cocky bastard. I don’t see how you and that bitch ever got along. It’s not like she’s good at anything but running her damn mouth and being Little Miss Perfect all the time. Hell, she couldn’t even get sex right.”

Davis gripped Jackson’s arm. “He’s not worth it.”

Jackson jerked away from his friends grip. “Funny. She said the same thing about you.”

Anger rolled off Gallagher in waves. He pointed the gun at Jackson, poised to pull the trigger. Although when the gunshot came, it wasn’t from Gallagher’s gun. Jeffery stood behind him in official police mode.

“Get the hell out of here,” he said shifting the gun to the man who held the dog.

Jackson didn’t have to be told twice. He, Davis, and Nick headed for higher ground, away from the madness of the night.

* * * *

Autumn was flooded with relief when she saw Jackson running toward her. Davis and Nick were nowhere to be found. He wrapped her in his arms and glanced over at the Major.

“Jeff said we need to get out of here. I’ll take Autumn in your car and meet you at her house.”

He nodded and made his way to Davis’ truck. Jackson helped Autumn in the passenger seat of the Lexus and hurried to the drivers side. After they were on the road, he reached for her hand and brought it to his thigh.

“What happened?” Autumn squeezed his hand.

“Don’t worry about it.” He glanced over at her. “Why didn’t you stay at home?”

“You know why, Jackson.”

“No, I don’t. Do you deliberately try to raise my temper or is it spontaneity that drives you?” He blew out a breath. “I nearly lost it when he put that gun to your side, and I saw red when he trapped you in the cage with the dog.”

Autumn glanced out the side window. “I’m sorry.”

“Autumn, I love you. Please believe me when I say I’ll take care of you.”

“I was scared. After all that’s happen, all you’ve told me, and all I’ve seen, I was scared you’d do something stupid and go to jail for it.” She pulled away from him and folded her arms across her chest. “Or worse, die trying to avenge my name. Jackson, I can handle the bad reputation, the going nowhere career and all the other shit—even the pictures. I can’t handle losing you again. I’ve done it once and it was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do and I don’t want to do it again. If you can’t understand that then there’s nothing else I can say to make you see my point of view.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way home, stopping only to pick up some fast food. Autumn didn’t bother waiting for Jackson. He carried her food to her bedroom, closing and locking the door behind her. She relocked the window and spread the food out on the floor beside her bed. It’d been a long day and an even longer night.

“Jeff just called. It seems Gallagher wasn’t licensed to practice. The board revoked his license for a previous dog-fighting allegation and never renewed it. They investigated and found dried blood on the ground but no animals. He wasn’t charged, but the board saw him unfit to practice and pulled his licensure.” Jackson came in and grabbed a box of French fries. “That was three years ago.”

Autumn nodded and bit into her burger.

Jackson stopped eating and set the box down. “I understand where you’re coming from, sweetheart, I do. But you got to have a little faith that I know what the hell I’m doing and that I can take care of myself.”

“Why can’t you have that same faith?”

“Why should I? Let me take care of you. You’ve spent most of your life fighting your own battles whereas it’s my job. Depend on me to win your wars for you, Autumn.”

“I don’t depend on anyone to do anything for me.”

“Why is that?” He tilted his head to the side. “You told me you wanted Prince Charming to rescue you from distress. I know you don’t believe in fairy tales anymore, but I want to be your Prince Charming. I want to be the one who makes you feel safe and secure because you know no matter what the world throws at you, I’m there. All you have to do is wake up in the morning and I’ll take it from there.”

Jackson lifted a hand to her cheek and brushed away the tears. "I love you, Autumn. I've waited so long for my life to finally mean something and I thought I'd found meaning in my work but I didn't. You gave me a new meaning and I want to give you the same. You're the one I want to be with, the only person in this world that I love and care about. I want you to be my wife."

Autumn wrapped her arms around his neck, the food forgotten. "I want to be your wife."

* * * *

Three weeks after the raid, all the Callahans pitched in to clean up the old clinic. Autumn and Jackson adopted a brand new six-week-old puppy from Gallagher's puppy mill and named it Roscoe.

"So are all the loose ends tied with Gallagher?" the Major asked Jackson while they shared a beer on the back deck. Roscoe chewed on a toy at his feet.

"Pretty much." Jackson grabbed a toy of Roscoe's and pitched it out in the yard. The little puppy took off after it, running as fast as his little legs would carry him. Jackson tipped his beer to his lips. "His alibi fell through, and he was charged with arson for Autumn's clinic on top of everything else. Two or three police officers made note that he tried to buy them off to cover his ass. I'd say Frankie is staying in the ole pokey for a while."

The Major nodded. "Job well done, son. I guess I need to pay you for your time."

Jackson set the beer on the table between them and picked up the toy Roscoe brought back and threw it again. "Use the money to buy Autumn the clinic she wants. She's been talking nonstop about a doggy ambulance service and from what I hear it'll be expensive."

The Major took a drag from his bottle. "She has so much of her mother in her. She's always wanting to help someone or something. Faye would be so proud of her and what she's doing with her life."

Jackson nodded watching Roscoe lay in the grass and chew on his toy. "It's hard not to be proud of Autumn."

They shared small talk for a while enjoying each other's company. The Major talked about his time in Africa and all the work they were doing. Jackson asked him about getting a local job and the Major couldn't have been happier to help him out.

"Hey, guys." Autumn slid the door open and Roscoe immediately grabbed his toy and ran to her. "Hello, baby. You want to play?"

She grabbed the toy and threw it out in the yard. "The boys went to the movies without me. Mind if I spoil your party?"

Jackson waved her over. Autumn sat in his lap and picked up Roscoe. The puppy licked her

face. "Roscoe, calm down."

The Major laughed. "Someone's happy to see you."

She rubbed his head and kissed him. "He's such a good boy, aren't you?"

Jackson rested his hand against her hip. "I was thinking of a June wedding. Maybe at the ranch if the Major will let us. What do you think?"

She smiled. "That sounds great. Mom's birthday was in June. We could have it on the twenty-third in memory of her."

He drank from his beer. "Whatever you want."

The Major rubbed his hands together. "Will I be getting a grandbaby anytime soon?"

"Dad." Autumn groaned. "Jeffery told me two days ago he and Kristin are having a baby. And we got you a grand dog. Isn't that enough?" She turned the puppy to face him, pouting as she positioned him against her cheek.

The Major laughed. "Not the same. You'd make an excellent mother and we all know it."

Jackson grinned. "I think he wants a little girl. One that's just like his little girl."

"Damn straight I want a little girl. I'm already planning Jeffery's to be a boy. Yours will be a girl." The Major chuckled. "Got any names picked out?"

"I'm thinking Chloe." Autumn set the puppy down and turned to face Jackson. "It's a beautiful name. It would be perfect for our first child."

Jackson smiled at her, feeling so much love in his heart. "Chloe Faye."

* * * *

Autumn crawled into bed while Jackson took a shower. She pulled on a sexy red baby doll nightie she picked up at Victoria's Secret around Valentine's Day when she was feeling sorry for herself and her pathetic love life. If she couldn't have sex, the least she could do was look sexy. Though when she brought it home, she found it pointless to put on such a erotic garment when there was no one to wear it for.

She lay back against the pillows in the middle of the bed, feeling giddy inside. Jackson turned the water off and she smiled to herself. She felt like a teenager on prom night waiting to have sex with the hot guy on campus for the first time. She forced herself to relax, to appear as if there was nothing out of their normal routine.

When the door opened, steam flowed out around him. Jackson stood with a towel wrapped around his waist and flipped off the light switch. The candles she lit earlier cast the room in a soft light, making the room romantic and sensual.

Jackson didn't comment on her attire as he walked to the bed. She saw the lust in his eyes, something that almost overpowered his love. Almost.

"Where have you been hiding that number?" He dropped the towel and crawled across the bed toward her.

She smiled, crazy in love. "I bought it for Valentine's."

"But I wasn't here for Valentine's." His hand slid along her stomach in between the two ends of the fabric. "God, your skin is so soft."

He leaned forward and licked her cherry-flavored lip gloss-covered lips. She opened her mouth, and he plunged his tongue inside. With Jackson, his kisses were anything but calm and gentle. He was like a starving man and she was his first meal after the fast.

It'd been a couple days since they last had sex, though the intimacy of their relationship never dwindled. He was the boyfriend she's wanted, the fiancé she thought she never needed, and the one true love she'd waited her lifetime for. He held her hand for no reason at all. He kissed her when he wanted to, where he wanted to. Although he didn't say, "I love you" too often, when he did say it, it meant so much more than three simple words coming from his mouth. He was by her side when he could be and missed her when he couldn't. And she loved the man, with all her heart, mind, body and soul.

Autumn ran her hand over his chest and brushed against the dog tags she bought him. "I can't believe you're still wearing these." She fisted them in her hand and kissed his lips.

"You never did tell me what yours said." She pushed him up and reached for the bedside table. After searching in the drawer she pulled her set out and handed them to him.

He laughed as he read it. "I heart horny boy."

"Yeah. I was mad at you that day and found myself typing in it into the engraving machine. Totally messed up, huh?" she joked.

He kissed her again and then gave her a devious grin. "Hold that thought. I want to do something we talked about earlier."

Autumn gave him a questioning look though she didn't say anything. She watched Jackson walk to the door naked, open it to look out into the hall and then step out completely in the buff.

When he returned, she laughed at what he held in his arms. "You are crazy. I put on a very expensive piece of lingerie to turn you on and you want to get messy with whipped cream and strawberries?"

Jackson set the dish of strawberries on the nightstand and then shook the can of whipped cream. "Take it off."

“It cost seventy bucks. You take it off.” Autumn laid back waiting for him to make the next move.

“I have to take it off because it cost seventy bucks?” He knelt on the bed beside her.

“At least acknowledge it.”

“Sweetheart, I’m hard. How much more acknowledgement do you need?” He set the whipped cream down and pushed the front of the baby-doll nightie apart to feel her warm skin. He leaned down to kiss her stomach while he pushed the sheer fabric up towards her breasts.

“Okay. You acknowledged it.” She reached for the tie around her neck.

Jackson was poised over her, waiting for the ties to fall free from their bow. “You are so beautiful.”

Autumn pulled the top over her head and threw it across the room. “You’re already going to get laid, ace. You don’t have to compliment me.”

Jackson moved between her legs and pulled her body down, off the pillows. “I’m just speaking the truth whether I get laid or not.”

His hands glided up her legs to her thighs stopping when he reached her hip. “Cute panties.” He traced the black lipstick impression on the front of the sheer red thong with one finger. “These I like a lot.”

“What’s with guys? I think I’m sexy in a seventy-dollar piece of lingerie and you like a ten-dollar pair of panties. What the hell is up with that?” Autumn wrapped her legs around him, locking him to her body.

“Sweetheart”—Jackson leaned down to kiss her—“you should know less is more when it comes to clothing.”

He reached for the whipped cream. Autumn knew they were about to make a mess in her bed, and almost regretted not changing the silk sheets before they began. She planned a romantic night of sex taking Jackson in as many different positions she could think of. Jackson had evidently planned a night of sticky, dirty food sex that she was helpless to say no to.

He pulled back and pointed the nozzle toward her. The cool cream shot out right above her nipple, chilling her heated flesh. Autumn whimpered as he started to draw on her, making lines with the topping as he used her body for a canvas. When he was done, he tossed it to the side and grabbed the dish of strawberries.

“Lie still.” He planted her hands on each side of her body.

He grabbed five strawberries out of the container and laid them in the valley between her breasts. He hooked his fingers in the waistband of her panties and leaned forward to kiss his way down her body as he slid them off. When he removed them, he pushed her legs apart so he could fit between them and continued to paint her body with the topping.

“There’s a song,” he said as he squirted the cool cream along her stomach, “that says something to the effect: I want to lick you from your head to your toes.” He looked up with mischievous intent. “That’s my goal tonight.”

He continued making streams down her legs to her toes, making her squeal from the delight. She squirmed on the bed, clutching the silk sheets beneath her.

“Start licking.”

Jackson grinned and lifted her foot. His tongue traced the path of the whipped cream sliding along her skin. He took his time, making sure he hit every erogenous zone in his path.

Once he was done with one leg, he started on the other, giving it the same treatment. She knew the song he spoke of and decided this was one of her ultimate fantasies.

When he was done with her legs, he leaned over her and took the tip of one of her breasts in his mouth. She ached to touch him, to feel his body close to her, deep inside her but she remained still. This was his show, and she’d get her turn next. That thought alone thrilled her beyond her wildest imagination.

He picked up a strawberry and then bit into it, squirting the juice on her stomach. The tiny beads of fluid rolled down each side of her as he teased. He ate one half and then leaned forward to feed her the other half. Autumn opened her mouth to accept the fruit, biting into the delicious offering he gave her.

“The strawberries are sweet, but not as sweet as you.” He licked the whipped cream off her neglected breast and selected another strawberry. This time, however, he sucked the whipped cream off and skimmed it along her skin. “Do you know how long its been since I touched you?”

While he traced the strawberry in his hand along her stomach, he ate another one, this time keeping it for himself. Her body buzzed, and she soared higher than ever. She counted the days they spent at the clinic, those same days they came home showered separately and fell asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillow.

“Two days,” she replied with a whisper.

He sat back on his heels, staring down at her while he sucked the juice from his strawberry and played with the other along her stomach. He swirled the whipped topping around her navel with the fruit, and then continued his path downward.

“I never did show you my gratitude for the blowjob in the shower, did I?” Jackson lifted the strawberry that played along her stomach and bit into the juicy fruit.

Autumn watched him with dazed eyes. “No. But in all honesty, we’ve been busy.”

Jackson glanced down. “That’s true. But a promise is a promise, right, sweetheart?”

He bit into another strawberry, briefly dipping it in the whipped cream on her body. He didn’t care about the juice rolling down his face or the fact he was making a big mess all over her.

“Jax, quit teasing,” she whimpered, and didn’t care how pathetic it looked. Her hips lifted off the mattress in invitation though he sat still with a smug smile on his face.

“Patience, sweetheart.” He picked up the last strawberry from her chest and dipped it in the whipped cream he had yet to lick off. “Good things come to those who wait.”

He ate it slowly, his motions playing before Autumn like a silent movie. He savored every bit of the fruit, licking off the whipped cream before he bit into the juicy strawberry. She thought she’d die just watching him, his body completely distanced from hers. She wanted to touch him, to lick and suck him the same way he had her.

“Jax, now.” She ran her toes along his legs. “Please, now.”

“What do you want me to do?” He leaned down and sucked the juice and whipped cream from her navel. His tongue dipped inside and swirled around. “I was going to eat your pussy until I wore you out and then fuck you, but I’m in a generous mood. I’ll let you choose. What do you want me to do?”

“Please, Jax, just love me.”

He kissed her and whispered, “I do.”

Jackson moved between her legs, kissing her inner thighs. She lifted her hips and pressed herself against his face. The small act shot a bolt of pleasure through her body, forcing her orgasm closer to the brink. And then he licked her.

“Oh, God.” She clutched the sheets, fisting the silk in her hands and pulling at it. Jackson finally held her hips so she couldn’t move and sucked her clit in his mouth. Autumn arched her back with a silent cry.

She came hard against Jackson’s mouth and he didn’t stop the stimulation. Two fingers pressed deep inside her while his tongue continued to lick her clit, circling and lashing as if she hadn’t climaxed at all. It was almost too much to handle. She clenched her thighs around him and cried out in pleasure as she came again.

Jackson removed his fingers from her body and smiled. “You are one amazing woman.”

Autumn refused to keep still any longer and pulled him to her. “Make love to me, Jackson.” She kissed him, tasting the delicious cocktail of the whipped cream and strawberries mixed

with her juices and his sexy flavor. “Not just sex. I want your love.”

Jackson positioned himself at her entrance and slowly pushed inside. “You’ve got it, Autumn. Anytime and every time you want, you’ve got it.”

Chapter Eighteen

June 23rd of the following year . . .

After the wedding was over and Jackson finally got his beautiful bride all to himself, he grabbed her hand and starting walking from the ranch house towards the fields.

“Where are you taking me?” Autumn asked stepping around the divots in the land.

“Some place special.” He smiled at her in the dark, the moon being their only source of light.

“Jackson, slow down. These heels weren’t made for rough terrain.” She hiked up one side of the elegant party dress she pulled on for the reception and tagged along behind him.

Jackson stopped and scooped her into his arms, surprising her nonetheless with the chivalrous gesture. “Have I told you how beautiful you are, today?”

“About a million times.” Autumn chuckled. “It’s sweet, though.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her cheek against his shoulder. The land was quiet tonight, giving them the perfect escape from the wild party back at the house. The wedding was her dream, the man holding her making the fantasy a perfect reality. The two planned to move closer to the city, to find a place of their own to call home. Autumn didn’t know what they’d do about the clinic but she didn’t care. Somehow they’d find a way and they’d do it together.

“Okay, we’re here.” Jackson stood next to a soft blanket right beneath the moon. The faint glow highlighted his face just enough so that she could see his smile. He set her down and then knelt and began to pull out dishes of food from the basket off to the side.

“You planned a picnic on our wedding night?”

He nodded, still not looking at her. “I figured since you conned me into one the last night we were together fourteen years ago, I’d con you into one on the first night we spend as husband and wife. Plus, you said you fell in love with me beneath the moon. I wanted to make love to you in the same fashion.”

When he was done, he glanced up and held out his hand. “I even re-created the meal. Grilled cheese sandwiches, chocolate chip cookies, and my own personal favorite, strawberries.”

Autumn didn’t try to stop the tears rolling down her cheeks as she took his hand. He pulled her between his legs and hugged her close to his body. He let her cry in silence, kissing her periodically.

“I thought I was doing good, you know.” She laughed and wiped her tears before kissing him again. “I didn’t cry when I first saw you. I didn’t cry during our vows. I didn’t cry when my brother made the toast. I didn’t even cry during the father-daughter dance even when my dad told me I’d always be his little girl.”

Jackson wiped her tears. "It's okay to cry, sweetheart."

"Thank you." She hugged him pressing her cheek against his shoulder. "Thank you for doing this. I never expected it and you have no idea how much it means."

Jackson kissed her shoulder. "I have some idea."

She chuckled and pulled back to kiss him again. "Davis didn't cook this, did he? He really tries to be a chef but the poor boy can't boil water without burning it."

Jackson shook his head. "I did everything."

He pulled out a bottle of sparkling cider and poured the chilled beverage in the provided glasses. He handed her the food, and they ate in comfortable silence. *Life couldn't possibly get any better than this.*

"One more thing." Jackson wiped his fingers on his napkin and reached in the basket for some papers. "I know you can't read them right now since we're in the dark, but this is the deed to your new place. Your father fronted the cost of the doggy ambulance part and all."

She dropped her sandwich and grabbed the papers from him. "What?"

"Your father was supposed to pay me for being your bodyguard and whatnot so I told him to use the money to set up the doggy ambulance service. I planned on buying you a state-of-the-art clinic anyway, and with what he and your brother's chipped in, we bought you the critical care clinic you've always wanted. That's the deed to your new place, and once we come back from our honeymoon, you'll be able to start setting up the shop and hiring new people to work." Jackson grinned. "Davis said he wanted to apply for ambulance driver."

Autumn read what she could of the papers, seeing that it held her name, Autumn Faye Callahan-Cooper as the property owner. She owned her own critical care clinic.

"Oh, Jackson."

"Are you happy?" He waited patiently for her reaction.

"I can't believe it." She sniffled. "I've dreamt of this for so long, and it's finally here. I don't know what to say."

"Well, you don't have to say anything. Giving me a simple kiss would do." He smiled at her.

She couldn't believe her dreams finally came true. Not only did she have her own clinic, she had her man. Jackson was the one man her mother talked about, the one true love it took a lifetime to find. She couldn't believe he was finally hers, that they would now share the rest of their lives together.

"Jackson, I know I've said it a lot today, but I'm going to say it again. I love you. Thank you

so much for doing this for me.” She ran her hand down his chest, feeling the smooth fabric of his tux. “I honestly haven’t felt this happy since before my mom died. And you make me so happy.”

Jackson pulled her onto his lap and held her close. She stared at the document, unable to fathom it.

“I have some news for you, too.” She grinned. “I went to the doctor the other day and he told me we’re about to become parents. I’m six weeks’ pregnant.”

Jackson sat motionless with a deadpan look on his face. “Why the hell did you let me bring you out here? You should be inside in a bed with your feet propped up and a soft mattress beneath you.”

Autumn chuckled. “I’m fine. The doctor gave me a great bill of health. He did an ultrasound and took gallons of blood to make sure everything was okay. Everything is normal, Jax.”

He cupped her cheeks. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure.” She grabbed his hand and brought it to her belly. “You’re going to make a great father, Jackson. You have so much love to give.”

“I learned from you.” Jackson hugged her in his arms and then laughed saying, “Looks like I won.”

“Won what?”

“The bet.”

“What bet?”

“I needed to get you pregnant before July.” He nuzzled her neck and pressed a kiss there.

“Oh, really?”

“Your brothers started it. Jeff’s money is on anytime this year after October. Davis has between August and September. Nick has July. I told them they were all wrong. Looks like I was right so therefore I win.”

“Jackson,” Autumn scolded him.

“What?”

Autumn turned to face him and forced him to meet her eyes. “Do you really want a baby?”

“You know I do.”

“Even if it’s not a little girl? If we have a little boy, you’d still want him too?”

Jackson tilted his head to the side. “You mean we can’t send him back?”

“Not funny.”

Jackson’s hand slid up her thigh to the crotch of her barely-there panties. “I don’t care what we have. I’ll love a little boy just as much as a little girl.” His finger dipped inside her, and she closed her eyes, absorbing her husband’s touch. “As long as I get to make you come, I simply do not care.”

The End

About the Author

Lexie's love for writing began when she wrote her first play in fourth grade. With a big imagination and love for creating worlds, she wrote several more scripts that have placed first in contests. She loves to read but didn't pick up a romance novel until high school and fell in love with the genre. Now she writes steamy stories, with heartfelt characters, letting her imagination take her wherever it may go.