



## *Beyond Seduction*

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## *Dedication*

To all of my readers, thank you for purchasing my work.  
I always appreciate your support as well as your feedback.

## Chapter One

Being a virgin wasn't the wonderful thing Autumn Harris thought it would be. But then, she was about to change that, wasn't she? The question was, just who could she find to help her get rid of her untouched status? Her pickings were very slim.

Staring out the gleaming front window of her small crepe shop, Autumn watched the people of Canton, Texas enjoying a beautiful, cool spring morning. With a meticulous eye, she studied only the men walking along the crowded, narrow main street.

First, she spotted Cyrus Fletcher, eighty-five, heading into the store across the street. He stopped to speak to Jed Danner, father of eight, working on his fourth wife. Autumn shuddered. Rudy Gordon sped by on his bike. Cute, but barely eighteen, for goodness sake. The teenager popped a wheelie as he flew around the corner and disappeared. Hubert Bines, fifty, and just a little too spry, stopped to shake hands and kiss babies. Running for mayor...*again*, and who trusted politicians?

Eli King. Autumn sighed. Nope. Her gaze lingered on him for a moment or two as he strolled down the street toward the snow cone shop. Tall, he wore faded jeans and a short-sleeved, blue shirt. His boots were scuffed, his dark hair ruffled by the light breeze, and Autumn knew without even being able to see them, that his blue eyes would be shuttered. Wary. The only people Eli seemed to trust wholeheartedly was his family, his six-year-old son, Trenton, being at the top of that list. Just then, the little boy ran up to his father and grabbed his hand with both of his. Eli looked down and gave his adorable son one of his rare yet breathtaking smiles.

A shame that Eli wasn't in the running.

"Wouldn't you know it?" she muttered. "I'm finally ready to 'do the deed' and there's no one left to do it *with*."

Back during her freshman year during high school, she'd made the decision to remain a virgin until she was married. At the time, it had seemed like a great idea. What she hadn't counted on was being the only twenty-

seven, soon-to-be-twenty-eight-year-old virgin in the town, for crying out loud.

She'd expected to graduate from college, find Mr. Right, get married and have babies. Pretty old-fashioned dreams, she supposed, in the grand scheme of things. But then, she'd been born and raised in Canton, a small town in east Texas, where the people still had bake sales to raise money for school events. Where neighbors looked out for one another and doors were mostly left unlocked.

Where single men were now harder to find than calorie free dessert bars. So here she stood, almost ten years after high school, as pure as the day she was born. The whole celibacy thing had really lost most of its appeal. She had clung to her vow through the years, despite the fact that both of her younger sisters were married with a baby each. She'd told herself repeatedly that the right man would come along. But honestly, she'd begun to doubt it lately. After all, she'd never been the kind of woman men lusted after.

Her sisters were petite and pretty. Autumn stared at her reflection in the window of her shop. Wide brown eyes looked back at her. Her dark hair was pulled back into the customary ponytail she tended to keep it in. Petite and pretty were definitely not adjectives one could use to describe her. She was tall, curvaceous in the hip area, too outspoken for her own good and stubborn to top it all off. She was terrible at flirting, too honest to play games and too busy building her business to waste time at bars or dance clubs.

But the kicker, the impetus to call this whole virginity thing off, had strolled into Autumn's crepe shop only the day before. Lily Hayman was getting married. Her cousin by marriage, the kid she used to baby sit, had gone into the bakery a few doors down to order her wedding cake. A three-tiered, strawberry cake with green and white roses. Lily—or rather her mother—was sparing no expense. At eighteen, Lily was on engagement number four, and Autumn was willing to bet Lily hadn't said no to number one, two, or three yet, either.

And that's when Autumn had first wondered just who she'd been saving her virginity for. At the rate she was going, she would be buried "intact" and

her headstone would read *Returned, Unopened*. Depressing. Which was why she was so determined to leave the ranks of the pure and untouched behind.

After all, just how much was a woman expected to take?

Naturally, she'd talked her decision over with her best friend over lunch yesterday, mentioning what she'd seen at the bakery yesterday. Her attention drifted back to their conversation.

"Lily Hayman?" Olyvia repeated. "Your cousin? I remember when the kid couldn't do her own hair."

"I know. So how old does that make us?"

"How humiliating for you," Olyvia whispered, and took another long drink of the raspberry lemonade in front of her. "Lily's getting married and here you sit, pure as the driven—whatever the world that means—snow."

"Wow, Olyvia," Autumn responded. "Thanks. I feel so much better now."

She winced. "Sorry." Brown-eyed Olyvia Madison's blonde hair was short and cut into a crop cut with sharp edges and twisted curls that somehow looked awesome on her. Loyal to the core, Olyvia was humorous, impatient and creative enough to be a successful freelance writer. She also happened to be the mother of the world's cutest one-year-old girl and was married to the town's fire chief, a man who absolutely adored her.

"When is the wedding?" Olyvia asked.

"Two weeks," Autumn told her. "Saturday."

Two blonde eyebrows arched. "That's fast."

"Yes," Autumn agreed, and twirled her straw through the soft drink in front of her. "And honestly, Lily didn't look so hot. A little pasty and green around the gills."

"Hmm. So maybe there's a reason for the hustle and bustle, huh?"

"I don't know," Autumn murmured. "But if Lily is pregnant, then that puts her way ahead of me, doesn't it?"

Olyvia shook her head and smiled. "This is a contest, then?"

"Of course not." Autumn sighed and leaned back in her chair. "It's just that she is my last youngest single female family member, other than myself,

that is. I used to baby sit the brat and now she's starting out her life while I—"

"Make very wicked tasting crepes?"

"Exactly."

"Well, you know how much I love to say 'I told you so,'" Olyvia said. "But I won't this time. All I will say is it's past time you did something about your lack of social life, Autumn. You know darn well that most men avoid virgins like the plague. They figure virgins are too romantic. Too willing to build a picket fence around a man."

"Hmm."

So to find Mr. Right—if he existed—she needed to be rid of the whole virgin thing. Surely, an experienced woman would have better luck.

From the back of the café, an old jukebox blasted out county tunes. Along one wall was a row of booths with scarred, red vinyl seats. Each table held the customary condiment setup.

She and Olyvia sat at a table on the far side of the room, hidden by the shadows and practically covered by the silk vines of trailing ivy plants hanging from pots overhead. A few regulars were sitting on stools at the bar while couples occupied the booths and snuggled in close together.

Autumn sighed, tore her gaze away from the most amorous couple in the bunch and looked seriously at her friend. "What I have to do then is become an ex-virgin."

"Haven't I been saying that for the last four years?"

"You said no, 'I told you so's.'"

"My bad." Olyvia held up a hand as if taking an oath and swore solemnly, "I will never again point out to you that you took so long coming to this conclusion that the single, unattached men in Canton are almost nonexistent. Still, you're better off looking around here. There's no telling what kind of man you'd find in the city."

Autumn had to smile. If there was one thing in her life she could count on, it was Olyvia being absolutely honest with her. Even when she didn't want to hear it. "Well, I feel better."

“You should,” Olyvia stated as she finished off her drink. “You’ll feel even better once you get past this little roadblock.”

“Little?”

“Okay, not so little, But we’ll find you a man. You wait and see. I mean, it’s not as if you’re an old maid or something. Not yet anyway.”

Autumn shivered. There was a horrible thought. She got an instant mental image of herself, fifty years from now, living alone except for the dozen cats crawling all over her doily-covered furniture. Nope. That’s not the life she wanted. She wanted a family. She wanted love. And it was high time she went out and started looking for it.

“I can do this, right?”

“Without a doubt.”

But before Autumn could relax, Olyvia asked, “What’s your time limit on this?”

“Time limit?”

Olyvia nodded. “I know you, Autumn. If given half a chance, you’ll talk yourself out of it. If we don’t set a time frame on this, you won’t ever get started. You’ll end up sitting back and waiting for Mr. Right again.”

“Do you really think there *is* a Mr. Right?” Autumn asked softly. She’d always believed there was someone for everyone. The older she got, though, the less she believed.

“Yes,” Olyvia responded after a couple of minutes passed. “I do.” The soft smile on her face forced a tiny pang of—not jealousy, because Autumn would never begrudge her best friend the happiness she’d found with Geoffrey—but maybe a little envy.

“How is your Mr. Right, anyway?”

Olyvia grinned. “Wonderful. He’s watching the baby.” She checked her watch, then grimaced “And I’d better get down there and relieve him so he can take care of his errands. But before I go...your time limit?”

“How do I know how long it will take?”

Olyvia shook her head, clear amusement on her face. “Just as I thought. How about two months?”

Autumn thought about it. Could she really do this? Set herself out to convince some guy into helping her rid herself of what she'd come to think of as the biggest bane of her existence? And if she didn't do it? Then what? Start looking for cats to adopt? Not an option.

"Okay. Two months."

"Atta girl." Olyvia smiled. "Before you know it, you'll be living happily ever after, Autumn. You wait and see."

A clock chimed, ending Autumn's thoughts about yesterday's conversation with Olyvia and bringing her back to the moment at hand. Just then, a timer went off, indicating that her blueberry bars were ready. Hurrying through the swinging door into the kitchen, she snatched up an oven mitt, pulled open the oven door and pulled out the tray of dessert.

She smiled as she set them on the cooling tray, then in a smooth, practiced motion, slid a pan of lemon bars into the over. As the scent of warm blueberries filled the room, Autumn leaned back against the mixing counter and looked around the room.

Small but efficient, her little kitchen was outfitted with the very best equipment she could afford. She'd made a name for herself in Canton over the last few years. Her crepes were so popular, people came from other nearby cities to enjoy them. Her business was thriving, she had a great little home just a few blocks away from the crepe shop and a mother and two sisters she adored. All that was missing was a family of her own.

And that was an insistent, gnawing ache in the bottom of her heart. She'd always thought there would be time. During college, she'd been too focused on graduating to do much dating. And after graduation, the art of making the best crepes. Then she'd concentrated on opening her business. And once the shop was open, it had taken every moment of her time to get it up and running and make it successful.

Now that it was, she had time to notice what she was missing. The years had swept by so quickly, she hadn't realized that most of the women she'd grown up with were married and had children already. And her biological clock—man, she hated that phrase—raced on. Her time was running out. She didn't want to be forty and just starting her family. Yes, it worked for a



lot of women, she knew that. It just wasn't what she wanted or expected her life to be.

As much as she loved being Aunt Autumn to her sisters' two little girls, it just wasn't enough. And if she was going to change the situation, she had to do something about it now.

There was one bright spot in all this. Everyone from miles around would be invited to Lily Hayman's wedding. Surely, she'd be able to find at least one single, available male there.

\* \* \* \*

"For goodness sake, Autumn, when was the last time you had your nails done?"

Autumn snatched her hand free of her sister's and examined her less than perfect nails. "I've been busy. You know, working?"

"Nobody's that busy," Delany snapped. She grabbed Autumn's hand again and, frowning, began to file.

"What is up with your hair?" Sasha stared at Autumn in the mirror, her expression reflecting a horrified fascination. "Have you been hacking at it with scissors again?"

Autumn flinched and lifted her free hand to defensively smooth down the rough edges of her so-called hairdo. "I don't think the word *hacking* is an appropriate description."

"As a beautician, I respectfully have to disagree because that is exactly what you did to your hair."

Her sisters. Autumn sighed and looked at them. Petite and pretty, the two of them looked like models. Delaney and Sasha, at twenty-five and twenty-three respectively, had married their high school sweethearts and were blissfully happy. Autumn didn't begrudge either of them. But as their older sister, she wouldn't mind having a little bliss herself.

Pretty, confident and popular, her younger sisters had had the men of Canton eating out of their hands since kindergarten. Now, Autumn had never had any problem with self-confidence, either, but she'd always been

more comfortable playing a sport rather than standing on the sidelines shaking pom-poms. And while her sisters used charm to sway opinion, Autumn was more likely to argue a point until her opponent was simply too worn down to care anymore. One of the major reasons she'd been voted captain of the speech and debate team in high school.

So why was she here in the small shop connected to Delaney's home, putting herself through this? *Okay*, Autumn told herself, *maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all*. She'd thought that the fastest, easiest way to whip herself into shape was to go to her sisters for help. But was the torture worth the end result?

"I can't believe you're finally letting me do your hair."

"Just don't get crazy," Autumn warned.

Sasha snorted a laugh. "Don't worry. I promise not to show you what a real *style* should look like."

"Funny, brat."

"I try."

"I think we'll do acrylic nails on you," Delaney chimed it, clearly disgusted. "Your own are horrendous and too far gone to be saved."

Autumn shot her a look. "Why not just chop my hands off?"

"I just ought to. They're so chapped and ragged, it's a disgrace."

Okay, help was one thing. Sitting here being humiliated was another. Pushing herself up, Autumn muttered. "That's it. I'm out of here."

Sasha held her down and caught her gaze in the mirror. "We promise to stop picking on you, but I'm not letting you out of this shop with your hair like this. People will think I did it and my reputation will be ruined."

"That's not picking?"

"Last dig, I swear."

"Me, too." Delaney's gaze met Autumn's in the mirror. "Stay put, okay? We'll make you so gorgeous you'll outshine the bride."

Autumn eased back down, and as she did, the tension the room dropped away and Sasha chuckled. "That won't be hard. From what I hear, morning sickness may have Lily hurling all the way down the aisle to her groom."

“Our aunt-in-law insists it’s the flu,” Delaney responded. “Yeah, a nine month virus.”

That comment set Delaney off on more local gossip and as her sisters’ voices drifted around her, Autumn closed her eyes and hoped to high heaven she’d recognized herself once her sisters were through with her.

## Chapter Two

Eli King tugged at the dark green necktie that was damn near strangling him and told himself that attending the wedding and wedding reception was for business. In a town the size of Canton, it didn't pay to alienate any of your potential customers. Besides, he couldn't hide away on his ranch. He had Trenton to think about. Whether Eli liked it or not, Trenton would grow up. And Eli didn't want him to be known as the "hermit's son".

Though, God knew, if he had his choice, he'd just as soon stay out on the ranch than come into town and make small talk. But then, that was one of the reasons his ex-wife, Ilana, had divorced him, wasn't it?

*Don't go there*, he silently warned himself. Don't start thinking about Ilana and the mistake that had been their marriage. Hell, wasn't he miserable enough? He took a sip of beer, leaned his shoulder against an overly decorated wall and, to distract himself, looked out over the crowd wandering around the country club's reception room. Almost immediately, his gaze traveled to Autumn Harris. Now, *there* was a distraction.

His gaze swept over her from the top of her perfectly done hair, down to the curves hidden beneath her sexy, little black dress and right to the tips of her heels. When he'd first caught a glimpse of her in the church, he'd had to do a double take. This was a side of Autumn he'd never seen before. He was used to seeing her standing behind her crepe shop counter, giving out free samples of lemon bars to the kids and running her hands through hair that looked as though she'd stuck her hand in an electrical socket.

Tonight, she was different. Eli's hand tightened on the beer bottle, and when he took another drink, he had to force the icy liquid past the hard knot lodged in his throat. Damn, she looked good. Autumn's chestnut-hued skin had a glow to it. Her dark hair was shorter, but still fell past her shoulders, dancing around her face in a mass of loose curls. Her dazzling brown eyes contained more of a sparkle, and her toned legs were displayed to awesome perfection. Who would have guessed that beneath her usual uniform of apron, T-shirt and jeans, she was hiding such an amazing figure?

He watched her as she moved through the crowd, laughing, talking...*drinking*. Her steps a little unsteady, she tended to wobble then catch herself as she moved toward him with the deliberately careful walk of a drunk trying to look sober. Frowning, Eli told himself it was none of his business if Autumn wanted to have a few. Yet, as she walked near him, he couldn't resist speaking to her.

"Room tilting?" he asked as she came closer.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn stopped dead in her tracks, lifted her chin and squinted to get a good look at the man that had just spoken to her. She blinked and tried to clear her vision. But it was no use. Eli King definitely had not one, but *two* gorgeous faces. And the harder she tried to see him clearly, the blurrier he got. At last, she gave up. Maybe she shouldn't have had that last daiquiri, she thought as a flush of heat swept through her.

"Hi, Eli." She released a pent up breath. "And no, it's not tilting. Swaying a little, maybe. Narrowing her eyes, she looked him up and down. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"The whole town's here."

"Yeah," she said, shifting her gaze to let it slide across the crowd. Just as her sisters had predicted, the bride was a lovely shade of green. Lily's new groom lavished attention on her while her mother told everyone who would stand still long enough to listen about the virulent flu her poor daughter had caught.

Except for the delicious daiquiris, the night, as far as Autumn was concerned, had been a bust. She hadn't found anyone willing to help her get rid of her virginity, so to speak. Still, the reception wasn't over yet.

Her gaze slid back to Eli. Even blurry, he was too handsome for his own good. His rugged jaw and blue eyes really were fantasy material. And though she preferred him in his jeans and boots, a suit jacket looked pretty good on him, too. Good enough that she was willing to give it a shot. Leaning in toward him, she smiled and batted her eyelashes.

“You have something in your eyes?”

“No,” she retorted, and reared back to glare at him. “I was flirting.”

“Badly.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Autumn, what’s going on?”

She sighed and reached up to push her hand through her hair until she remembered that Sasha had used hard holding spray. Letting her hand fall to her side again, she mumbled, “Nothing. Absolutely *nothing* is going on.”

And, the way things were looking, she was pretty sure she was headed for that house full of cats.

“If you don’t mind my saying so,” Eli said softly, his voice just carrying over the country music coming from the speakers at the front of the reception hall, “you’re acting a little...strange.”

“Strange?” She put one hand on his chest and shoved. He didn’t bulge. “*I’m* acting strange?” Autumn laughed. “You come to a big party and stand in a corner by yourself and I’m the one acting strange?” She shook her head and instantly regretted the action. “Whoa,” she whispered. Then, when the room righted itself again, she continued. “You know,” she said, taking a deep breath, “you can go to a party, but if you’re not *at* the party, then you might as well not have gone to the party. You know what I mean?”

“Not a clue.”

She huffed out a breath. *Pointless to try to get through him*, she thought. And while she stood here talking to the statue that was Eli King, she was missing opportunities. “Never mind. We are so not commoon—commuti”—she paused to force her tongue to cooperate— “*communicating*.”

His lips twitched into what might have been a smile, but it flashed across his face and disappeared again so quickly, she couldn’t be sure. It *was* a great face, she thought. Heck, even blurry, he looked handsome. “It’s a shame,” she muttered.

“What is?”

Autumn shook her head and waved one hand at him dismissively. “Nothing. Nothing. See you around, Eli.”

\* \* \* \*

She walked away then and his gaze dropped to the curve of her behind. Hell, what man wouldn't? It was a spectacular rear end. But Eli frowned to himself as he wondered what she'd meant by *it's a shame*.

Over the next couple of hours, he watched Autumn laughing, talking with her friends, and a part of him envied how comfortable she was with people. Socializing had never come easily to him and he figured it was too late now to change that. Even if he'd wanted to.

He took a sip of his second beer of the night and realized it had warmed to room temperature. Setting it down on the table in front of him, he forgot about it and focused instead on the tall, dark-haired woman in black.

Strange, but he couldn't seem to stop watching her. Or thinking about her. He could have left the reception an hour ago. Ordinarily, he would have. But for some reason, tonight, he just wasn't ready to leave yet.

K.C. Alfont, Canton's self-described ladies' man moved in on Autumn. When she leaned her head back to look at K.C., Eli fixed his gaze on the elegant line of her throat, but not before he saw K.C.'s gaze was focused a little lower.

\* \* \* \*

"Autumn," someone close by said in a deep voice, "you look amazing."

"Thank you." Actually, even she had to admit that her sisters' handiwork had turned out pretty well. Though she did have to fight the urge to pull down on the hem and up on the neckline. Before tonight, she'd never owned anything that exposed so much skin—except a swimsuit. Turning around to thank whoever it was talking to her, she smiled up at K.C. Alfont and hoped he didn't notice her disappointment.

As the local ladies' man, K.C. considered any single woman between the ages of eighteen and sixty fair game. Getting a compliment from him was as special as seeing a raindrop in a rainstorm. Still, she felt she was in no position to be choosy.

His dark blonde hair was styled just right. His green eyes skimmed over her in appreciation, then slipped past her, as if making sure there was no one more interesting around. A small part of her burned in annoyance, but she tapered it down. Autumn had come to the wedding with one thought in mind: find a suitable man to help her out of celibacy.

And since K.C. seemed to be the only one offering...

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

Before her rational mind could react and tell him to go away, Autumn spoke up. "Sure. Why not?"

She stumbled slightly, but told herself it was because her new shoes hurt her feet. Who on earth decided women should wear high heels like these?

Autumn swayed slightly, but since she was dancing, she hoped no one would notice. Still, she really shouldn't have had that last daiquiri. But she'd needed a little false courage to deal with this entire man hunt situation. Now that she'd actually caught a man's interest, she wasn't at all sure she was pleased about it.

K.C.'s hands seemed to be everywhere. Instead of being excited, Autumn just wanted him to stop it. But she swallowed back the no she wanted to tell him. After all, this had been the plan all along, right? Now wasn't the time to get nervous. Instead, she told herself to get into the spirit of things.

He guided her into a turn around the dance floor, and the crowd surrounding them seemed to blur into a wash of color and motion. Yet, somehow, she managed to spot one pair of blue eyes watching her from across the room.

Eli.

Her heart did a strange little bump and roll as she locked gazes with him. A moment later, that feeling was gone when K.C. whispered, "Let's step outside for some fresh air."

Fresh air. That was probably all she needed. Good idea.

"Okay," she said, and walked beside him, the heavy weight of his arm draped across her shoulders as he led her through the crowd and out the French doors.



Night air rushed over her, cool and sweet, with the scent of the flower gardens just beyond the brick patio. Autumn slipped from underneath K.C.'s arm and immediately felt light and relaxed as she crossed the patio and came to a stop at the stone fountain.

She tipped her head back to look up at the sky full of diamond like stars. A soft breeze drifted over her, tugging at her hair. Caressing her skin and even, she thought wryly, clearing away some of the haze in her brain.

Enough so that when K.C. approached her from behind, she wished she was anywhere but there.

"Did I tell you that you look great tonight?" he asked.

"Probably."

"Well," he whispered, sliding one hand down the length of her bare arm, "just in case I didn't, I'll say it now. Autumn, I had no idea you could look like this."

Well, there was a backhanded compliment if she'd ever heard one. What did she look like usually? "Thanks."

"You're just as sweet as one of your desserts."

She grimaced. Did lines like that really work?

"Now I want to see if you taste as good as you look."

And with that *smooth* come-on, he turned her around and stared down into her eyes with a hunger she'd never seen directed at her before. A deep, dark hole opened up in the pit of her stomach, and for one shining moment, she thought for sure she'd be thoroughly and violently ill.

Then K.C. grabbed her close with all the sensitivity of a starving man reaching for the only food left in the world. Her hands flat against his chest, she tried to hold him off, but with his arms pinning her to him, it was useless. Her mind raced with a speed that surprised her, considering just how wobbly she'd been a moment before. How could she have allowed herself to get into this position?

All of a sudden, a house full of cats was starting to look pretty appealing.

Before she could do anything to stop him, K.C.'s mouth was coming down on hers and all Autumn could think was that she'd never noticed just how wet and thick his lips were. She felt...nothing. No excitement. No

anticipation. Not even fear or anxiety. Just a bad case of revulsion that she was pretty sure she'd have to get over if she ever wanted to lose her "virgin" status.

"Let her go."

A deep voice. Close by.

Autumn's eyes search the dimly lit area for the intruder. A second later, K.C. was pulled away from her and effortlessly tossed to one side. He staggered slightly, regained his footing and glared at the man standing protectively close to Autumn.

"Back off, K.C.," Eli growled.

"Who invited you into this?"

"I didn't have to be invited." Clearly disgusted, Eli added, "Can't you see she's had too much to drink?"

"Eli..." Autumn said, grabbing at his arm.

He shrugged her off, never taking his eyes off of K.C., who didn't look the least bit happy about having his romantic moves interrupted.

"This is between me and Autumn."

"Ordinarily," Eli responded, "I'd agree. Not tonight."

"Who are you?" K.C. demanded. "Her father?"

She felt as though she were trapped in an old movie. Hero and villain were squaring off with the heroine standing on the sidelines, wringing her hands. Well, that was a slight exaggeration since she wasn't the hand wringing sort.

"Okay," Autumn tried again. "Why don't you guys—"

"Be quiet a minute, all right?" Eli said, not even glancing at her.

"Be quiet?" She scowled at him and only got angrier when she noticed he wasn't paying any attention to her at all. "You're telling me to be quiet?"

He finally shot her a quick look. "Just sit down, will you?"

"Look, I don't need you to—"

"It's okay, Autumn. This'll only take a second."

But her protest came a little late as K.C. suddenly charged. Eli stepped to the side, drew his right arm back and landed a solid punch to the other man's jaw. K.C. did a strange, almost ballet like spin and crumpled into the nearby

bush without a sound. Astonished, Autumn looked down at her would-be lover, now sprawled inelegantly in the well tended shrubbery. She noted that music was still playing inside. The crowd was still celebrating. No one but her and the two men involved had any idea of what was going on out here in the shadows.

That was some consolation, she guessed. At least everyone in the town hadn't witnessed this little scene. Regardless, everything was ruined now. Her plan shot, she turned and looked up at the man who had inadvertently kept her a virgin one more night. She'd had to have been blind not to see the flash of satisfaction in Eli's eyes. How very...male of him. Planting one hand in the center of his chest, she gave him a shove and was pleased to see him back up a little.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Clearly confused, Eli just gaped at her for a moment or two before responding, "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm saving you from a jerk."

"Did I ask to be rescued?"

"No, but—"

"Did I look scared? Panicked?"

"No," he admitted, pushing the edges of his jacket back to shove both hands into his pants pockets. A move that should have been illegal even with her blurry vision. The man was too sexy for his own good. "You looked a little disgusted."

"And that meant you should rush in and *save* me?"

When he didn't say anything, Autumn threw both hands in the air and started pacing. Her heels clicked menacingly on the bricks, keeping time with her anger.

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Eli watched her warily, but had to admit that she looked good with the expression of fury marring her face. What she was so mad about, he hadn't a clue. Hell, he'd thought he was doing her a favor. Usually, Autumn was reasonable. Sensible. Tonight, though, she hadn't been acting at all like

herself. When he'd seen K.C. steer her out into the night, he knew the man was about to make a play. And since Eli also knew that Autumn had consumed one too many celebratory drinks, he'd figured she might need assistance peeling K.C.'s hands off her body.

Of course, he hadn't counted on the quick rush of...something that had filled him the minute he spotted K.C. Alfont plastered to Autumn's frame. And he didn't want to explore that feeling at the moment, either. Right now, he was more concerned with staying out of her reach.

"Two hundred dollars," she was saying. "Not including the hair cut and the manicure. I mean, they're my sisters, but they're their jobs, right? They have a right to be paid. Plus, the new shoes, the new dress—and I hate shopping."

A woman? Who hated shopping?

"What are you talking about?" His gaze followed her as she marched back and forth past K.C.'s prone body.

"This." She waved her hands up and down her body, indicating the entire package. "The hair, the nails, the makeup, the dress, these stupid, too expensive shoes that are killing me. Not to mention this purse. It's only big enough to hold my keys and my driver's license. How can they charge fifty bucks for *that*?"

"How the hell should I know, but—"

She cut him off again. "That's not the point though, is it?"

No, the point was that he'd come out here to be a rescuer and she was making him feel like he had scabies. He should have gone with his first instinct. To mind is own business. What was it his father used to say? Oh, yes. "*No good deed goes unpunished.*" He could almost hear the old man laughing at him.

He folded his arms across his chest, bit down on the anger bubbling just below the surface and said, "Why don't you tell me what the point is, exactly?"

"Fine."

She stopped right in front of him, tilted her head back to look into his eyes and wobbled unsteadily. She hardly blinked when he moved quickly to grab hold of her upper arms to steady her.

"The point is," she said. "I had a plan. A perfectly good plan and you've ruined it." She half turned, looked over her shoulder to where K.C. was just stirring and pushing himself out of the shrubs.

Eli followed her gaze. "K.C. was your plan?"

"Certainly a big part of it," she retorted, frowning, before turning back to Eli. A drooping, dark curl fell across her forehead and she blew out a deep breath, sending it out of her eyes.

Her eyes danced with impatience, frustration and anger. She made a hell of a picture. It was damn near enough to make Eli's mouth water. Which worried him enough to let her go and take a long step backward.

"Okay, fine. K.C. is waking up. I'll just get out of here and you can go back to your...plan."

K.C. muttered under his breath, rubbed his jaw and slowly climbed out of the bushes. Once he was on his feet again, he gave Eli a hot glare, avoided looking at Autumn, and headed back toward the reception. His steps were steady, but the greenery stuck in his hair spoiled his attempt at dignity.

When they were alone on the patio again, Autumn threw her hands up and let them slap down against her sides again. "See? Ruined. Now I'll have to find someone else."

She exhaled heavily as she walked past him and started down the brick walkway that ringed the reception hall. Faux antique lampposts lined the path, giving off small puddles of light into the shadows. Autumn walked unevenly, wobbling from one side of the bricks to the other.

Eli caught up to her quickly, which was no surprise. She was moving slowly, carefully, and limping painfully.

"These shoes are killing me," she complained just before she kicked first her left shoe, then the right, into the ivy lining the walkway. She sighed in satisfaction and started moving again, leaving the hated shoes behind. Eli chuckled as he collected her shoes before falling into step beside her again. How this had happened, Eli had no idea. All he'd done was try to do the

right thing. Help her out of a bad situation. And now he was stuck in a situation that made her little scene with K.C. Alfont look like a picnic. He had to wonder if this night could get any more interesting.

### Chapter Three

Eli kept a wary eye on Autumn as she moved farther away from the wedding reception still in full swing just several feet away from them. Her steps still wobbly on the brick walkway, even without the heels, she seemed to sway through the puddles of light dropped by the tall lamps lining the path. The night air was thick with the scent of flowers, and the dance music from inside came soft and muted like a delicate backdrop. Autumn kept muttering under her breath, and though he couldn't make out what she was saying, the tone of her voice told him it was probably just as well.

Shaking his head, he followed her, tucking her shoes into the pockets of his jacket. She probably wouldn't thank him, but he figured the best thing he could do now was to get her into his car and take her home.

Then, she stopped suddenly, turned, and before he could react, she slammed into his chest. Staggering slightly, she lifted her chin, looked into his eyes and blinked as if trying to bring him into focus. He knew the feeling. It was as if he was seeing her for the first time. Her soulful eyes were dreamy and her skin looked so soft and smooth in the dim light it was a struggle not to touch it. A slight breeze kicked in and ruffled her hair like a lover's caress. For one brief moment, Eli thought about pulling her close, slanting his mouth over hers and—

"This is your fault," she said.

He laughed, the romantic image he'd been building shattered. "You drinking too much is my fault?"

"Not that." She waved a hand at him, frowning. "You're not paying attention."

True. He hadn't been paying attention to her words. He'd been too distracted by her curves. "Okay, now I'm listening."

She inhaled deeply, then let her breath out in a rush, ruffling the dark curl hanging over her forehead again. He'd never seen her so...*relaxed*. Usually, Autumn was friendly, but businesslike as she stood behind her counter at the crepe shop. Tonight was a revelation in a lot of ways.

“Oh, I’m so frustrated. It’s not like I’m all that excited about being kissed by K.C. Alfont. Actually, just remembering the feel of his mouth on mine is enough to give me a cold chill. But he had been the only man offering.” She wiped one hand across her forehead, pushing that one drooping curl back into place. As she did, her eyes seemed to clear a little. “What was I thinking?” she muttered.

“Sort of what I was wondering,” he replied.

She looked up at him and blinked a few times as if trying to bring him into focus.

“Okay, fine. K.C. was a mistake.”

“Granted. The question is, why were you about to make it?”

Autumn huffed out a breath. “It’s not like I had a lot of choices, you know.”

Eli shook his head. “I still don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

“What I am talking about is, you ruined the plan.”

“*What* plan?”

“It’s your fault,” she repeated. “You messed it up, so you owe me.”

“I peeled a jerk, who happened to be mauling you, off you.”

“Exactly,” she snapped, and narrowed her gaze on him as she swayed back and forth. “And stand still!”

“I’m not moving.”

“Oh, boy. That can’t be good.” She frowned at him. “Are you laughing at me?”

He held up both hands in mock surrender and shook his head while managing to hide his smile. “Not a chance.”

“You have to promise to help me.”

“Help you what?”

“I’ll tell you after you promise to help.”

“I don’t do blind promises.”

“But you owe me.”

He scowled. “Stop saying that.”

“Then promise.”



Eli looked around. Everyone else was still inside, but he didn't know how long that was going to last. Autumn was still unsteady on her feet and her brown eyes just a little hazy from too many daiquiris. Plus, it seemed as though she was willing to stand there and debate forever. He figured the only way out of this was to promise to do whatever it was she wanted.

Then he could tuck her safely into his car and take her home. Hell, she'd probably forget all about this mess when she sobered up anyway.

"Okay, fine. I promise." Taking her arm, he steered her toward the parking lot again.

She pulled away.

*Stubborn woman*, he thought, and waited for whatever was coming next.

"Oh." She blinked, then smiled. "Well, good then. That's better." She reached out and patted his chest with the flat of her hand. "You are a prince among...among...um...a prince among...princes!"

"That's me. Prince Eli." He took her hand in his and tried not to think about the flash of heat that surged through him with that simple touch. It had been way too long since he'd felt the kind of electrical charge that was even now sizzling along his blood stream. Hell, until that moment, he'd have been willing to bet his libido was nonexistent. But, apparently not. Oh, yeah. Best to get her home, quickly. Best for both of them. She was too intoxicated for him to be thinking what he was thinking. "Now, I'll take you home before you get into more trouble."

"I wasn't *in* trouble," she argued.

"Not what it looked like to me."

"Hey, you think it was easy for me, flirting with everybody in the room?" Autumn pulled her hand free of his and poked him in the chest with the tip of her forefinger. "You think it's easy to pretend to be fascinated by how Bobby Nayer goes muddin' in his truck? Or to act interested when Neal Carroll describes his mountain climbing tale for the third time?" She exhaled heavily. "And that's not even counting the time I had to hear the acceptance speech of our new town sheriff."

"Sounds pretty horrible."

"You have no idea."

“So why do it?”

She shifted her gaze to look out into the darkness. “Because I am twenty-seven years old and my cousin just got married, leaving me as the only single female member of my family.”

“And that means...?”

She turned her disgusted gaze back to his. “It means that unless I make some changes, I’m looking at old-maid hood.”

“Are you crazy?” Eli took a good, hard look at her. Every one of her curves was outlined to perfection. Her brown eyes were flashing into the dim light tossed out by the lamps overhead and her dark hair had a luster to it that made his fingers itch to glide through it.

“Crazy? Probably,” she said on a heavy sigh. “But it is *so* much worse. I am the last of a dying breed. A quagga. A dodo. A dinosaur. A...what else is extinct?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m a virgin.”

“A *virgin*?” Well, she had his attention now. He took an instinctive step backwards, as if trying to keep a safe amount of distance between them.

“Say it a little louder. I don’t think the folks inside quite caught it.” Then she laughed, but there was no humor in the sound as she studied his expression. “Ah, and there’s the ‘look’. Honesly—honestly...don’t splay...play poker. You wouldn’t win.” She paused, shaking her head, then grimaced. “All of you guys react to a virgin like a mosquito to repellant.” She turned her back on him and started off down the walkway toward the parking lot again, mumbling the entire way. “That is so like a man. Say the word *virgin* and he scatters out of the way as if a bullet’s aimed at his heart.”

“I didn’t scatter.”

“Ha!”

Eli followed after her and, when he caught up, he grabbed her upper arm and spun her around to look at him. Then he reached up, shoved one hand through his hair and tried to concentrate. But it wasn’t easy. He hadn’t guessed there *were* any virgins over the age of twenty. “You caught me by surprise, Autumn.”

“Yeah,” she said sullenly, lifting her gaze to his. “It’s a real icebreaker.” Sucking in a gulp of air, she continued. “Anyway, the point is, I was trying to find someone to help me with my...current status.”

“K.C.?” he asked, surprise coloring his tone. “K.C.’s the guy you picked?”

Instead of answering his question, she asked one of her own. “I look pretty good, right?”

His gaze swept her up and down before settling back on her face again. “Oh, definitely.”

“I’m reasonably intelligent.”

“I thought so until a few minutes ago.”

She shot him a tight, un-amused smile. “So getting rid of my...*issue* should be fairly easy, right?”

He wasn’t so sure about that. Speaking for himself, he wasn’t about to get too close to a virgin. For her, sex would take on more meaning than it should. It would evolve into white picket fences and family dinners and babies and—he closed a mental door on his thoughts. No way was he going to get wrapped up in this. Autumn was a nice enough woman and, God knew, she filled out a little black dress better than anyone he’d ever seen before, but he just wasn’t the man for her.

For anyone.

“Autumn—”

“You said you’d help.”

Panic reared its ugly head. “I promised to help,” he clarified. “No to—” He stopped talking and stared at her for a long minute.

But she wasn’t listening. Stepping up close to him, she fisted both of her hands on his lapels and went up on her toes until she was almost looking directly into his eyes. “I don’t want to be an old maid. I don’t want a bunch of cats. I want babies. I want family. I—”

Even in the dim light, he saw her face lose a little color and her eyes go wide and round. “Are you okay?”

“Oh,” she said softly, letting him go and lifting one hand to cover her mouth.

“I am *so* far from okay.”

\* \* \* \*

Autumn's stomach rolled uneasily and she swallowed hard, fighting for control. *Deep breaths*, she told herself and tried to put that thought into action. But it didn't seem to be helping. Her head was swimming and her stomach pitched and dived as if it was a small boat in the middle of rough seas. "Oh, man" she mumbled, concentrating on the misery sliding through her body.

"Maybe I should just take you home."

"Yes. Very good idea."

With his warm hand cupping her elbow, she focused on the heat of his skin to fight against the chills sweeping through her. Tipping her face back into the breeze, she pulled in several deep breaths and told herself silently that nausea was just mind over matter. Mind over matter. Mind over—

"Oh my God."

She pulled away from Eli, leaned into the bushes and was thoroughly, violently ill. Her brain raced, pointing out all the ways she'd managed to humiliate herself on this one glorious night.

She'd flirted shamelessly—and badly. She'd allowed K.C. Alfont, of all people, to kiss her. And, to put a cap on the evening, she was throwing up all the contents in her stomach in front of Eli King. Oh, yeah. This had gone well. She might as well go buy her starter cat.

Her big night of seduction had turned into a tale of what not to do when trying to lose your virginity. But as the spasms of sickness slowly passed, Autumn became aware of cool, dry hand on her forehead and the sound of Eli's soft, soothing voice. As embarrassing as this moment was, she was glad he was there. The only thing worse than being sick in front of someone was being sick all alone.

Straightening up, she inhaled deeply and noticed that the haze in her brain was completely gone. It had been replaced by a pounding bass drum, but at least she could think and see again. Eli handed her a handkerchief. As she took it, she smiled. "Thanks. I didn't think anyone carried these anymore."

He shrugged. "Just an old-fashioned guy, I guess."

And, apparently, a nice enough guy to completely avoid mentioning her most recent humiliation.

"So," he said. "You still want that ride home?"

"Yes. Thanks."

\* \* \* \*

On the short ride to Autumn's place, Eli studied her. With most of the alcohol out of her system, he was guessing she was beginning to regret telling him all about the whole virgin thing. And frankly, he'd be just as happy to forget about it himself. As it was, he'd been doing too much thinking about Autumn now that he'd seen her out of her jeans and in something he couldn't help imagining getting her out of.

Damn.

His fists tightened around the steering wheel and he told himself to just keep his mind on the road. To not think about the swell of her breasts above the low cut neckline of that dress. And, while he was at it, he really should keep the image of her legs off his brain. And just to be on the safe side, he figured he'd start forgetting about the curve of her rear and the soft shine of her hair and—

Oh, hell.

He turned the car onto her street and barely glanced at the well kept lawns and picture perfect houses as he drove down to the end of the block. Pulling into her driveway, he put the car into park, cut the engine and turned in his seat to look at her.

Damn. Even in the shadows, she was way too attractive for his peace of mind.

"Thanks," she said, turning her head to look at him.

"Want me to arrange to get your car back tonight?"

"No," she replied, opening the car door and stepping out. "I can walk to the shop tomorrow and then pick up my car later."

He got out of the car and walked up the driveway just a few steps behind her. She'd left the front porch light on and a soft, golden glow streamed from the glass shade covering it. He spotted some sort of flower trailing from a series of hanging pots and a shot porch swing that was lined with comfy-looking cushions.

Sort of made him curious as to what the inside of her house looked like. But it wasn't likely he'd be finding out. She might not want to think about what she'd said when the daiquiris were doing the thinking for her, but he remembered it all. She wanted family. Babies. Love.

And that was enough to convince him to keep his distance.

Autumn opened her front door and more light spilled into the darkness like a warm, golden path lay out to welcome him. This could be serious trouble.

"I'm going to make me some strong coffee," Autumn said, looking over her shoulder. "Would you like a cup?"

*Say no*, his brain screamed. One last attempt of rational thinking echoed over and over through his brain, and for some unknown reason, Eli vetoed it. "Sure."

He followed her inside and she shut the door behind him. Eli pushed aside the feeling of being a prison inmate hearing a cell door slam closed.

Autumn walked past him and headed down a short hallway. Eli stayed right behind her, and when she hit a switch, he blinked at the bright light that ricocheted off the kitchen's walls. A cherry wood pedestal table surrounded by four high-backed chairs sat in front of a bay window. Plants lined the window sills, and the gleaming countertops boasted an assortment of top-of-the-line appliances.

She moved around the room in her stocking feet as Eli watched her. Every movement so smooth, no motion was wasted. This was a woman who spent a lot of time in her kitchen. She seemed far more at home here than she had at the wedding reception.

Something they had in common.

When she had the coffee brewing, she turned around to face him. "I'm just going to go freshen up. Have a seat. I'll be back in no time."

As she left the room, Eli stared at the table and chairs and beyond the shining window panes into the darkness outside. A cozy setup, he thought, and told himself again he should go home. After all, Trenton was at home with a babysitter and he had an early day waiting for him tomorrow. But, for some reason, he wasn't ready to leave yet. He told himself he was only sticking around to make sure she was all right.

But even he was having trouble believing that.

"Sorry I made you miss the reception," Autumn stated from the other room.

"No problem," he responded. "I'm not really much of a party guy."

"You don't say."

He smiled to himself and took a seat at the table. A few minutes later, Autumn returned to the kitchen. She'd changed into a pair of cotton shorts and a short-sleeved, yellow T-shirt that clung to her body with the same tempting allure that black dress had displayed. Her legs looked long and lean. Her bare feet were decorated with a silver toe ring on her right foot and red polish on her toenails.

And Eli knew he was getting in deep here every passing minute.

The coffee pot hissed and steamed, sounding like an elderly school teacher shushing the students. Autumn pulled two large mugs out of a cabinet and poured them each a cup of coffee.

"You take it black, right?"

He arched a brow. "Impressive."

Autumn smiled, sat down opposite him and pushed one hand through hair that now looked soft and untamed.

"Hey, a good businesswoman remembers how her customers like their coffee." She took a sip, closed her eyes and said, "Let's see, you prefer the crepe with white chocolate mousse, strawberries and the berry sauce. While Trenton likes the honey and peanut butter crepe topped with powdered sugar. He also enjoys a sugar cookie to hold him over on occasion. You come in every Friday afternoon when you pick him up from school."

She stopped talking and he didn't know whether to be further impressed or a little irritated that he'd become such a creature of habit that a shop owner could set her watch by him. When had that happened?

"So," Autumn was saying, and Eli listened up. He'd learned earlier that it was important to stay completely alert when she was talking. "You've seen me at my worst tonight, that's for certain."

"Autumn," he started, fingering the handle of his coffee cup, "why don't we just forget about everything that happened and—"

"Absolutely not."

"What?"

"You heard me," Autumn stated, leaning back in her chair to give him a slow smile that damn near set fire to his insides. "You promised to help and I'm holding you to it."



## Chapter Four

He shifted uneasily in his chair. Now that he knew just what she was looking for, he was a little more wary than usual. There wasn't a chance in hell he was going to get involved with a virgin looking to explore sex. Down that path lay, well, all sorts of things he wasn't interested in.

"Exactly what kind of *help* are we talking about here?" he asked, determinedly keeping his gaze locked with hers. Despite the fact that her brown eyes looked soft and tempting, it was still safer than letting his gaze drift over that magnificent body she'd managed to hide until tonight.

Autumn laughed, the sound filling the quiet room and settling over him like a warm promise.

"Jeez, relax, Eli." She lifted her cup and took a long sip of the fragrant coffee. "You look like a man who's just been stood up against a wall, given a blindfold and asked for his last words."

"No, I don't." He was better at hiding his emotions than *that*, wasn't he?

"Right." Autumn shook her head, and he refused to notice how luminous her hair was. Besides, she was talking. Again.

"It's not like I want *you* to do the deed personally."

In fact, she sounded pretty damned appalled at the idea. "Well," he retorted, pretty certain he'd just been insulted. "That's good."

Autumn got up, walked to the cookie jar and filled a plate with a half dozen or so cookies. Carrying them back to the table, she set them down in front of him, took one for herself and sat down again.

Eli stared at the plate. Oatmeal, sugar, peanut butter. If he *was* looking for a wife...which he wasn't...he'd still avoid Autumn. Being married to a woman who could bake like this could put more weight than desired on a guy.

"I mean, everyone knows you're not interested in women."

He froze, stunned. "Pardon me?"

She laughed again. "Sorry. That came out wrong. I just meant that you're not interested in commitment. I mean, ever since Ilana left, you've practically had 'off limits' tattooed on your forehead."

Everything inside him went cold and still. It took every ounce of his self-control not to crush the cookie he held into a pile of crumbs. He wasn't going to get drawn into a discussion about his ex-wife. Not with anyone. And apparently, Autumn could see that fact in his expression as well.

"Oops," she murmured, then took another drink of coffee. Cradling the cup in her hands, she lifted her gaze to his and, wincing, said, "sorry about that."

"No problem."

"Yeah, so I see. Look, I didn't mean to mention the *I* word."

He willed his entire body to relax. Willed his muscles to unclench. Willed his apparently clear-as-glass expression to shift into one of complete ambivalence. "I meant what I said. No problem. Ilana's in the past."

He was the first to admit that, since Ilana had packed up and left three years ago, he hadn't exactly been a social person. He preferred life on the ranch. There, all he had to deal with were the animals, the price of feed and the upkeep of the land. And, of course, Trent. His brain fuzzed out a little as he thought of his son. Six years old and the one good thing he and Ilana had managed to create together.

He could understand how a woman could get tired of marriage, of ranch life...hell, with *him*. What he'd never be able to comprehend is how a woman could walk away from her own child without a backward glance. But then, Ilana had never waned to be a mother, had she? And when she'd left, she'd told him flat out that he could have sole custody.

Which worked out fine as far as Eli was concerned. One day, he'd have to find a way to explain to Trenton just why his mother had chosen to abandon him. But until then, the two of them were a team and he'd protect his child with everything he had. And if that meant steering clear of women until his son was eighteen, then that was a small price to pay. He didn't want a string of women going in and out of Trenton's life. He wanted his son to have stability. Security. But most of all, he didn't want his son heartbroken because he'd become attached to Daddy's girlfriend only to have that woman disappear from their world.

Nope. And if that made him a hermit, then he'd just have to live with it. Still, just because he wasn't looking for a relationship, that didn't make him *dead*.

"Uh-huh. If she's the past, why does just the mention of her name freeze you over?" Autumn looked at him for a long, slow minute. He could almost feel the seconds ticking by as he stared into those brown eyes of hers. A part of his mind wondered why he'd never noticed before just how mesmerizing her eyes were.

*Focus*, he told himself again.

"I just don't like to be reminded, that's all."

She turned her coffee cup idly. "Trenton's a fairly big reminder, don't you think?"

"That's different. Trenton is...*Trent*."

Autumn nodded slowly. "He is a sweetheart."

He relaxed a little. "Yes, Trent is."

One second ticked past, then two, then three, while they stared at each other across the kitchen table. With the darkness crouching just beyond the window, and the silence hovering in the room, they sat together in the warm, cozy kitchen and it felt...*intimate*, somehow.

\* \* \* \*

"Anyway," Autumn said, a bit louder than necessary as she forced herself to concentrate on what this was all about, "back to the subject at hand. The point is, you're not looking for a wife, so you're safe."

One corner of his mouth curved upward. "Just what every man wants to hear."

"At least you can relax knowing you're out of the running."

"But every other man in town is fair game?"

"Hey, a girl's gotta plan ahead," Autumn replied, ignoring the insulting tone of his voice. "I have to find the right candidate to help me out."

"In Canton?"

She frowned to herself. "True, the options are a little limited, but I'm sure I can make this work. I know the men here. I don't know anyone in the surrounding towns and cities. And I'm not the kind of woman who can stroll into a bar and pick up a stranger. That would just be too...it's just not me."

She exhaled softly and picked up her coffee cup again. "Besides, my mother's been reading the singles ads and assures me that there are *lots* of nice men in Canton, as well as Tyler."

"Singles ads? You?"

He sounded sincerely surprised by that idea. Autumn felt a little better. "Thanks for that," she said, shooting him a quick smile. "But my mother's more eager to find me a man than I am. The woman's just dying for more grandchildren."

"You have sisters," he pointed out.

"Yes, but Delaney and Sasha have done their part already. I'm the hold out." Disgusted, she leaned back in her chair, folded her arms beneath her breasts and propped her bare feet up on the chair closest to her. "I swear, this entire virtue thing has gotten way out of hand. It's become a liability instead of an asset."

"You could just keep the whole virgin thing a secret."

"Thought about that," she admitted, shaking her head again. "But it's no good. I think guys have radar about this sort of thing. They zone right in on a virgin and then steer a wide path around her." She shot him a knowing look.

"Point made," he murmured.

"So, since you owe me one for breaking up my little plan earlier..."

"*Plan*? You call that—"

"And"—she raised her voice to talk over him—"since you are personally out of the running, I think it's only fair that you help me find 'the guy.'"

"Now I'm a matchmaker?"

"More of a trapper."

"I think this is against the rules for a member of the male gender."

She grinned. "I won't tell if you don't."

"Trust me," he murmured. "I'm not telling."

“Good. Then, between the two of use, we should be able to find the right guy.” She tried not to laugh at his horrified expression. “Then we have a deal?” She held out one hand across the table.

He looked as though he thought about making one last stab at getting out of this. But then he looked into her eyes again and she knew she had him.. Eli took her hand in his and muttered “Deal” before quickly releasing her again. But the warmth stayed with her and, judging Eli’s expression, he’d felt it as well.

\* \* \* \*

“So, what happened with K.C.?”

It was late afternoon the day after the reception and business was pretty slow. Considering it was Sunday, she wasn’t really surprised. Autumn had had only six customers since noon, so she took a seat behind the counter, balanced the phone receiver on her shoulder and answered Olyvia’s question. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

There was a long, thoughtful silence before her best friend said, “But you left with him. And you never came back.”

“Yeah, well,” Autumn mumbled, checking off a list of grocery supplies as she talked, “there was a slight hitch in the plan.”

“What kind of hitch?”

“Eli showed up out of nowhere and sent K.C. sprawling into the shrubs.”

“Eli King?”

“The one and only.”

“Ooh. Now this sounds interesting.”

“Not really.” Although sitting with Eli at her kitchen table last night had been...nice. In the last few years they’d hardly talked at all, except for the few words they exchanged over her counter. And maybe it had been the daiquiris talking, but he’d seemed so...different last night. More approachable. More...desirable. Jeez. What was wrong with her?

“Oh, come on, let an old married woman enjoy her fantasies. Gorgeous Eli King coming to the rescue—he did come to the rescue, right?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m guessing K.C.’s not real fond of him today.”

“Well, good. I mean, K.C. Alfont isn’t exactly the sort of man you want to get involved with.”

“I know, but—”

“No buts. You deserve better, Autumn.”

True. Not that K.C. was gargoyle or anything, but for goodness sake. Did she really want to give up her long-held virginity to a man who wouldn’t even notice? Funny how an idea could change in one evening. Just yesterday, she’d been ready to do almost anything to leave chastity behind. Today, she wanted a little...more.

Behind her, the bell attached to the front door jangled out a welcome and announced a customer’s arrival.

“Someone’s here,” she told Olyvia. “Gotta go.”

“Okay, but I demand up-to-the-minute reports from this point on.”

“Be careful what you ask for,” Autumn responded, and hung up the phone, smiling. Standing up, she turned around to greet...an empty store. Frowning, she moved around the counter, and as soon as she did, she spotted her customer.

“Well, hi,” she said. “I didn’t see you.”

Trenton King smiled at her and Autumn’s heart melted. “That’s ‘cause I’m still really little.”

“I guess you are,” Autumn stated, nodding. “So what can I do for you today, Mr. King?”

The little boy giggled and held out his closed left fist. When he opened it, he revealed a crumpled up one dollar bill.

“Daddy says I can have two cookies.”

“He did, did he?” Autumn said thoughtfully, and let her gaze slide past the child to the wide front window and the street beyond. Eli stood just outside, and for a second, Autumn noticed her heartbeat quicken. Which was weird. After all, she’d known Eli for years, and until last night, she never thought of him as more than Trenton’s dad and a pretty nice guy. The seven

year age difference between the two of them had kept them from socializing in the same circle during their younger years.

Right now none of that seemed to matter. She studied him, taking in those long legs of his, looking delectable in his worn jeans. His scuffed boots, crossed at the ankle, looked...sexy. The worn, long sleeved green shirt he wore only made his already broad chest look wider, more muscular. And his blue eyes as he watched her through the window seemed deeper, more mysterious, than she remembered.

Her stomach pitched suddenly and Autumn pulled in a long, steadying breath in a futile attempt to get a grip on her wildly raging hormones.

*This is insane*, she told herself. Eli wasn't interested in her. Or anyone. He wasn't going to be the man to help her though her "problem." So there was absolutely no point indulging in what could probably be staggeringly wonderful fantasies.

"Miss Autumn..."

She shook her head, but didn't manage to dislodge any of the fantasies. Determined, though, she looked back at Trent. *Good. Focus there.* On a sweet face with freckles dotting a tiny nose. On curly and unruly dark hair and a wide grin that displayed two dimpled cheeks. On hazel eyes that were so beguiling like his father's...

*Cut it out, Autumn.*

"Two cookies. Sugar, right?" she asked unnecessarily as she walked behind the counter and filled the order. Like every other child Autumn had ever known, Trenton had particular likes and dislikes with sugar cookies being high on the approved list.

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled to herself at the polite and grown up sounding child, then walked back to Trenton and handed him a small, white bag. "Here you go, sweetie."

"Thank you."

"Shall we see if your daddy wants a cookie, too?"

Trenton gave her a solemn look. "Oh, he doesn't. I heard him tell Mr. Max he wasn't gonna eat sugar anymore."

“Is that so?” Autumn looked from the little boy to the man still standing safely outside the shop. Telling his foreman that he was swearing off sugar, was he? And apparently, he figured if he didn’t actually step inside the crepe shop, he’d be safely out of reach. Did he really think she would let him off the hook that easily?

“Let’s go talk to your daddy and see if we can’t change his mind.” Autumn took Trent’s small hand in hers and kept hold of it while she pushed through the door and stepped onto the sidewalk.

Eli straightened up instantly, coming out of the lazy lean against a light pole like a man ready to bolt. Late afternoon sunshine spilled down on the street from a cloudless blue sky, and all around them, the town was bustling.

“Hello, Autumn.”

“Eli.”

“Miss Autumn says you should have a cookie,” Trenton stated as he looked from one adult to the other.

“Swearing off sugar, huh?”

Eli frowned. “Just cutting back.”

“Sugar in general, or just the sugar sold inside of my establishment?”

“Autumn,” he said. “I just figured that after you slept it off—” He broke off, glanced at his son and tried again. “After a good night’s sleep, you’d see that this entire idea is insane and want to forget about it.”

“Well, you figured wrong.”

“Clearly.”

“So,” Autumn continued, gently running one hand across the top of Trent’s head. “I was thinking I’d come out to the ranch tonight and we could make some plans.”

He squinted into the sunlight and scraped one hand across his face. “You’re not going to let go of this at all, are you?”

“Not a chance,” she responded.

He exhaled heavily and muttered, “Fine. Tonight.”

“Are you gonna come over and bring cookies, Miss Autumn?”

Autumn looked down at the little boy and smiled. “How about I come over early and you and I can make cookies together?”



“Oh, you don’t have to—” Eli started to say.

“Yes,” Trenton crowed, his small voice undermining his father’s protest.

“Excellent,” Autumn said, lifting her gaze to meet Eli’s. “Then I’ll see you in an hour or two, okay?”

He just stared at her a long minute before caving in. “I’m outnumbered. Guess we’ll see you at the ranch in a while.”

“Can’t wait,” she assured him.

As Eli took his son’s hand and headed toward their car, Autumn watched them the entire way, picking up bits and pieces of Trent’s chatter. She tried telling herself that going to Eli’s home was no big deal. But her heartbeat quickened at the thought and her body suddenly felt tight and uncomfortable. She figured her hormones were fighting it out with her brain. She just didn’t know which was going to win.

## Chapter Five

“And can we make some with cinnamon sugar on ‘em?”

“We sure can,” Autumn replied, and wiped a splotch of flour off the tip of Trent’s nose.

“This is fun, Autumn,” the little boy commented, and slapped his small hands down onto the dough. “Daddy doesn’t let me cook ‘cause I’m too small.”

*Crap.* Autumn inwardly cringed a bit. Maybe she should have checked this out with Eli first. On the other hand, he wasn’t there and she was. So, as long as they weren’t cooking over an open fire on the linoleum, she didn’t really see a problem. Although, she thought, glancing down at the worn floor...maybe an open fire wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

“Well, we’ll just have to tell him how wonderful of a job you did, won’t we?”

Trenton gave her a grin filled with absolute delight, and Autumn figured that reward would be worth any hassle she had to face later with Eli.

And speaking of Eli, where the heck was he? Autumn had already been at the ranch for over an hour and there was still no sign of him. Peggy Nayar, the ranch foreman’s wife, had been here watching Trent when Autumn had arrived. At a little over eight months pregnant, the woman had only been too happy to turn Trenton’s care over to Autumn so she could go home and lie down.

Left to their own devices, Autumn and Trent had played two board games, colored pictures and then loaded the cars onto his favorite race track and took them for a spin. When the race was over, the child took Autumn on a tour of the house, and she was surprised to see that, except for Trent’s room, which was every little boy’s fantasy bedroom, the ranch home was very plainly decorated.

For Trent, there were dark blue walls, a racecar bed, bookcases stuffed with the classics along with dozens of nighttime storybooks. Not to mention enough figurines and toy trucks to populate a toy store. But the rest of the house was simply furnished with no little touches that added warmth. The

family room held a couple of comfortable-looking couches and one worn recliner facing a huge, open hearth. The instant she saw it, Autumn's brain started whirling with ideas to cozy up the big space. She'd like to be turned loose on the house with a little imagination and a few gallons of paint.

But it was the kitchen that really called out to her. It was a terrific room with lots of potential. But the off white walls and plain pine cabinets practically screamed for attention. In her mind's eye, she saw what it could look like and her mouth nearly watered with her desire to do something about it. Still, it wasn't her business, was it? Eli hadn't invited her in to decorate his house.

He hadn't *invited* her at all. She'd practically forced herself on him.

"Are the cookies done yet?"

"Hmm?" Autumn dragged her mind back to the present and looked at Trent. "Oh. The cookies. Let's check, okay?"

The little boy hopped down from his stool and hurried to the oven door.

"Don't touch it now. It's hot."

Trent practically bounced up and down, but he clasped his tiny hands together and held on tight, as if to keep from reaching for the cookies.

Smiling, Autumn picked up a hot pad, opened the oven door and was instantly greeted by a wave of heat and the glorious scent of sugar cookies. "Done," she announced, and pulled the tray out. In a few seconds, she had the cookies scooped up and onto a cooking tray, the next batch loaded, and the oven door shut again.

Trent breathed deep and then looked at Autumn. "Can we have one?"

Any reasonable adult would no doubt say, *Of course not. You have to wait until after dinner so you won't spoil your appetite.* Autumn's own mother was a big believer in the no snack before dinner theory. But Autumn wasn't about to look into those big, hazel eyes and say no. She would make him a sandwich after he finished the cookie and while they waited for the other cookies to bake.

"Sure we can," she said instead. "Nothing better than gooey, warm cookies."

Trent sucked in a gulp of air and held it in while Autumn picked up the tray and held it out to the little boy. "They're hot, so be careful."

"I will." He plucked a nice, fat one from the rack and waited until Autumn pick up one for herself, then set the rack back on the counter, before biting into it.

Grinning, he mumbled, "S' good."

"It certainly is," Autumn replied, smiling at the glint of pride in his eyes. Poor little thing. No mom to share these little adventures with. And a father who, though loving, was obviously a late worker. Yes, Trent did have Peggy during the day, but since the foreman's wife was really centered on her coming child, she didn't have the attention to give Trenton. Autumn felt a small twinge in her heart as she smiled and spoke softly. "You're a good baker."

"I am, huh?" The little boy wiped his free hand on the apron that was tied around his waist three times and hung almost to his feet. "I can tell Daddy I'm a good cook, can't I?"

"I'm sure he'll be very impressed," Autumn assured him, and made a mental note to make sure Eli was suitably proud of Trent's accomplishment.

"Can we make some more?"

Autumn laughed and stood up, brushing one hand across the boy's forehead, lifting strands of runaway dark hair. "Let's finish these, okay?"

"Kay," Trenton agreed, and climbed the stool again to take his place beside the cooking island. Carefully, just as Autumn had shown him, the little boy scooped out spoonful after spoonful of cookie dough and gently dropped them onto another cookie sheet.

Autumn kept one eye on the child and one eye on the kitchen window. Outside, sunlight lessened. Across the ranch yard, she could see lamplight glinting in Max and Peggy's windows. She was used to looking out her own windows and seeing streetlamps and cars passing along the road. Here, on the edges of town, darkness was more complete. More...*dark*.

Walking across the kitchen, she opened the back door and let the cool evening breeze drift past her. Except for the sound of Trent singing to himself under his breath, the silence was splendid. Autumn would have

thought this much quiet would be unnerving. Instead, she found it...relaxing. There was a sense of peacefulness about the entire place, the silent house and the wide openness surrounding it, that seemed almost magical.

She glanced at her watch and wondered again where Eli was and just how long he was going to stall before coming home.

\* \* \* \*

Eli stayed out on the ranch until it was too damn dark to get anything else done. Max, his foreman, had called it a day more than an hour ago, heading back to the small house on the ranch that he shared with his pregnant wife. But then, Max was eager to get home. He didn't have a woman on a mission waiting for him.

The first few stars winked into existence and glittered against a deep purple sky. He pulled off his hat, raked his fingers through his hair and told himself that he had to go home sometime. It wasn't just Autumn sitting in his house waiting. Trenton would be wondering where he was pretty soon.

He climbed into the truck, slammed the door and fired up the engine. He'd stalled as long as he could. If he stayed out here much later, he'd need a sleeping bag. Besides, why would he let Autumn keep him away from his own house? Throwing the truck into gear, he turned on the headlights and headed toward home. The ruts in the road rattled the truck and shook the rocks in his head loose.

"Idiot," he mumbled, and braced his left arm on the window ledge. "It's just Autumn Harris. You've seen her at least a couple of times a week for years. Now, all of a sudden, you can't be in the same room with her?"

He slapped his hand against the steering wheel and made a sharp left turn into the drive leading to the house. Gravel crunched beneath the tires and ground out a familiar welcome. As he shut off the engine and climbed out of the truck, he told himself again that there was no reason to be wary of Autumn. She'd made it plain enough that he wasn't in the running for the task she needed done. And that was just fine with him.

He snatched his hat off, crumpled the brim in one tight fist and stopped dead outside the kitchen window. Inside, two dark heads were bent together. Autumn and Trent, side by side at the cooking island, were laughing together and making cookies.

At that moment, Trent lifted his head, looked into Autumn's eyes and damn near *beamed*. His little face was lit from within. Delight sparkled in his son's eyes and the dimples in Trent's cheeks had never looked deeper. There was only one word to describe the expression on his little boy's face. *Adoration*. Clearly, Trent had found his hero in Autumn.

But before he could wonder if that was a good thing or a bad thing, Trent spotted him and whooped out a welcome. He clambered off the kitchen stool and Eli headed for the door. His long legs couldn't carry him as fast as an excited little boy could move. In seconds, Trent had the door open and was jumping at Eli, arms wide.

Eli scooped him up, swung Trent around in a tight circle, then propped his forearm beneath his bottom to support Trent as he clung to him like a burr. Trent's small arms wrapped around his neck and hugged tight. And just as it did every night, Eli's heart melted. He held his entire world in his arms, and he never forgot to thank God for blessing him with his son. Trent was everything to him.

"Daddy, I *cooked*!" Trent pulled his head back to look at him and gave him a smile that always turned him into a soft lump of clay that Trent could push and shove around any way he wanted to.

"You did, huh?"

He nodded so fiercely his hair swayed wildly. "I made cookies." Trent turned his head to look at the woman just stepping around the island. "Autumn helped, but I did it and everything."

Before he could speak, Autumn's voice cut across his son's words.

"Trenton told me that he's not allowed to cook, but I thought that just this once wouldn't be so bad and that you'd understand and—"

Eli held up one hand to cut the stream of conversation off. It sounded as though she was warning him not to be mad. As though she thought he might come down on Trent for a decision an adult had made. Did she really think

he was that big of a jerk? Besides, even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to maintain anger while looking into Trent's happy face. He was just so proud of his accomplishment.

"Do you want one, Dad?"

Eli tore his gaze from Autumn to look into the eyes so much like his own. "Absolutely." Eli lifted Trent off his hips, set him on his feet and gave his backside a pat. "Go pick me a good one, okay?"

"I'll get you the best one of all," he promised, and practically raced over to the cooling rack.

While Trent was busy, Autumn sidled up to him. "Thanks for not spoiling his good time by being mad."

"I'm not a monster."

"Never, said you were," she countered quickly. "But Trenton told me you don't want him cooking and—"

He hung his hat on the rack just inside the door, then shoved both hands into his jeans pockets before saying, "That's because Peggy's not much of a cook. She almost burned down the kitchen once when she forgot and left a pan on the stove."

"Oh-oh."

"Exactly."

"Okay then, so you won't mind if Trent and I do a little baking from time to time?"

*From time to time?* So then this wasn't a one time only visit? He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "You figuring on being here a lot, are you?"

"Well, at least until we solve my current situation," she replied, half turning to keep an eye on Trent, who was examining each and every cookie. "How long do you figure that will take?"

How long to find a man worthy of Autumn Harris? He was just beginning to suspect that it might be an impossible task.

Then Trent was back, carrying two cookies. He handed one each to the adults. "Taste it, Dad."

Autumn lifted hers and took a small, dainty bite of the sugar cookie. Eli watched her mouth and felt tortured as she licked cinnamon sugar off her bottom lip with a long, slow sweep of her tongue.

“Aren’t you hungry, Dad?” Trent asked.

“I sure am,” Eli replied tightly.

But not for cookies.

Autumn gave him a knowing look and a quick smile, then turned and walked across the kitchen. His gaze dropped to the sway of her behind, and he wondered if jeans that tight should be illegal. To distract himself, he shoved the cookie in his mouth and chewed with a vengeance. Trent was delighted. But Eli was still hungry—and there weren’t enough cinnamon sugar cookies in the world to ease the ache building inside him.

\* \* \* \*

For the next two weeks, Autumn spent nearly as much time at the ranch as she did at the crepe shop. She was still up early to get the shop ready, but nearly every day she left in the late afternoon to make the drive out to the King ranch. And, each time she did, she caught herself leaving the shop in the hands of her trusty assistant, Valorie. Heck, if she kept this up, she’d have to bring Valorie every day. Heck, if she kept this up, she’d have to bring Valorie on full time instead of the part-time hours her assistant normally kept.

But Autumn couldn’t seem to help herself. Sure, it had all started with the idea of Eli helping her find a man. But it was turning into so much more than that. She really looked forward to spending time with Trenton. The little boy touched corners of Autumn’s heart she hadn’t even known were lonely. The child was so hungry for a mother’s love and attention that he soaked up whatever affection she gave him and then handed it back ten times over.

Eli, though, was a different story. Autumn leaned her forearms on the tall, whitewashed rail fence surrounding a corral. In the center of the wide ring, Eli stood, holding a long leather leash in one hand. On the other end of



the leash, a beautiful horse cantered around the edges of the circle, tossing its head as if trying to shake him.

But Eli kept up a steady stream of soothing words as he worked the animal. Most of it was nonsense, but the rhythm of his speech and the deep rumble of his voice combined to nearly hypnotize the horse...and Autumn. Her gaze locked on him, she followed him as he turned in a slow circle. His faded blue work shirt was worn and sweat-stained. His jeans were covered in dirt and grime. His boots were filthy, and the hat he wore was tilted low over his eyes, shading them to the point where she couldn't even see them. But then, she didn't have to. She knew only too well the power of that direct stare.

Hadn't she been dreaming about those eyes of his for nearly a week? Her mouth went dry and her stomach swirled with nerves and anticipation, and with something tight and dark and hot that made every cell in her body sit up and cry out for mercy.

It was torture, pure and simple. But it was also a torture she willingly put herself through every afternoon. It had become a routine. Something she looked forward to. Spending this time with Eli, watching him work the animals with a sure and steady hand was—okay, exciting.

She shifted her gaze to take in the ranch yard and the wide open spaces beyond. It was just so beautiful out here. She couldn't imagine being able to wake up every morning and have this be the first thing you saw. Being away from town felt energizing. The lack of people and noise gave way to the time for day dreams. And that thought brought her back to Eli. Her favorite daydream.

"Okay, that's enough for today," Eli called out, and Autumn blinked, dismissing those late night fantasies as the product of a *way* overworked imagination. She willed her nerves into submission and watched as Eli tossed the leather leash to Max, then turned and headed toward her.

"Beautiful horse," she said when she was certain her voice would work.

"Stubborn, too," Eli pointed out, and, grinning, tugged leather gloves off his hands. "It's going to take me forever to convince that mare to wear a saddle and bridle."

He sounded disgusted, but Autumn wasn't fooled. She'd spotted the gleam of admiration in his eyes as he watched the horse being led back to the stable. Laughing, she said, "You love it."

Eli looked at her with clear surprise. "Yeah. I guess I do." Pulling his hat off, he ran one hand through his hair, then leaned an elbow on the top rung of the fence. "Boarding and training horses are the fun part of living on the ranch."

"And what's the part you don't love?"

He glanced away briefly before locking his gaze with hers. "Not a damn thing. I love being out here. I like everything about living on the ranch. I don't plan on moving. *Ever*."

Autumn had the distinct impression that there was a message in that last statement. But since she hadn't a clue what that might be, she took what he'd said at face value. "I don't blame you."

"Huh?"

She glanced at him, then turned her face into the wind and stared out beyond the corral and the ranch yard. Off in the distance, wildflowers spread out in neat, orderly rows like soldiers lined up for inspection. Overhead, the sky was a deep, vivid blue with a handful of marshmallow clouds scuttling across its surface.

"I said, I don't blame you," she repeated. "It's beautiful here. And so quiet."

"Yeah."

"I mean," she went on, "I know Canton's a small town, but, still, sometimes the noise and all the people get to me."

"Uh-huh."

Reacting to the tone of his voice, she turned her head to look at him. "You don't believe me?"

"Let's just say I've heard that one before."

"Is that right?" she asked. "From who?"

"Ilana." He bit off the word and his mouth looked as if he'd tasted something bitter.

Autumn's stomach jittered and she told herself she should let it go. Heck, the look in his eyes told her he clearly didn't want to talk about it. But there was something else there, too. Some echo of disappointment. Some lasting shred of hurt that tugged at her and wouldn't allow her to keep quiet.

"What didn't she like?"

He inhaled deeply, slowly, and shifted his gaze from her to stare out over the ranch. "Asking me what she did like would take less time."

"Okay," she replied. "Consider it asked."

Slowly, he turned his head until he was looking at her again. "Nothing. Not the quiet, not the solitude, not Trent—and at the end, not me, either."

"She was an idiot."

He shrugged, but Autumn wasn't fooled. Old pain was still too close to the surface here. "So was I," he said. "I thought desire was a good start for a marriage." He turned his gaze directly on her and Autumn read regret shining clearly in those captivating blue depths. "I let my hormones guide me once. I won't do it again."

"Nobody's asking you to," she reminded him.

Though that wasn't truly accurate. Since her own hormones were singing, she wouldn't mind a bit if his did a quick jig or two.

"You seem to like it out here," he said, and the abrupt change of subject startled her for an instant.

But she went with it and saw relief take over his features. "I do. It's absolutely gorgeous. And the ranch house is so big. The whole place feels big, though. Wide open—you know, where wild animals roam kind of feel."

He laughed briefly and Autumn relished the deep rumble of sound.

"No wild animals. Just horses, a few wildflowers—"

"It's enough," she interrupted, and let her gaze wander briefly again before looking back at him. "It's a great place to raise kids."

Oh-oh. There went that thundercloud chasing across his face again.

"That was the plan," he admitted. "But things don't always work out like you think they will."

He voice had dropped so low that she barely heard the last few words he uttered. It must have cost him to talk about his ex-wife. A part of Autumn

wanted to go find Ilana and give her a good, swift kick. But since she couldn't very well do that, she settled for changing the subject one more time. The instant she did, she saw relief flood his expression.

"Well, you'll just have to do a better job of finding me a man than you did in finding yourself a wife."

"Shouldn't be too hard," he mumbled.

"Good." Resting her chin on her forearms, she looked at him though wide, innocent eyes. "I've been thinking of a few candidates. What about Floyd Osborn?"

He stiffened and looked at her as though she should be committed. "Are you insane? He's old enough to be your father."

Autumn hid an inward smile and congratulated herself on striking a nerve. "Experienced."

"Too old."

"Then he'd probably consider me a sweet, young thing," she pointed out, thoroughly enjoying herself now. "That's a definite plus."

"You're twenty-seven. Not exactly ready for Medicare."

"Hey, age is in the eye of the beholder."

"Floyd is a clerk at the gas station."

Okay, this wasn't really fair. Autumn was getting way too big a kick out of teasing him. She was no more interested in Floyd Osborn than she was in running a male naked down main street. "A steady job," she responded. "People with cars will always need gas."

"And the fact that he has a daughter the same age as you?"

"We can truly be friends, which will strengthen our step-mother, step-daughter relationship."

Eli stared at her for a long minute until he finally noticed the gleam in her eyes, and then he bit back a laugh that seemed to struggle to escape anyway. "You're yanking my chain."

Her eyebrows lifted and one corner of her mouth twitched. "Not yet. Would you like me to?"

## Chapter Six

He was pretty certain his heart stopped for a second. Images filled his brain, racing through his mind at warp speed. He had a feeling she knew it, too. She chewed at her bottom lip and, with every tug, he felt a matching tug somewhere deep inside him.

Eli shifted uncomfortably, scowled a bit and refused to take the bait. Instead, he asked, a bit harsher than he'd planned to, "What are you doing here?"

The slight smile on her face faded slowly. "Do you mean existentially speaking or literally *here*?"

"Literally, thanks," he ground out.

"Our bargain," she reminded him.

That *damn* bargain. Talk about making a deal with the Devil. He hadn't had a moment of peace since agreeing to this whole thing. "You know, that's not really working out so well."

"Only because every man I suggest, you shoot down."

True. Damn it. *He'd* noticed that, as well, but he'd been sort of hoping she hadn't. It's not that he didn't want to help her find some guy—or maybe it was. He couldn't be certain anymore. All he knew was that, whenever she suggested one of the men in town, he had a ready reason why she should stay the hell away from the guy.

Too fat.

Too old.

Too poor.

Too young.

Drank too much.

Hell, it was ridiculous. Most of the men they'd talked about had been Eli's friends for years. He'd never had a problem with any of them. Until it came time to set Autumn up with one of them.

For some reason or other, he just didn't like the idea of her being with...*hell, admit it. Anyone.* Which made for a big problem. Because he wasn't going to be sucked into trouble by his hormones again.

When he'd first met Ilana, his body had gone on high alert and all he could think about was having her. Then, once he *had her*, everything had gone down in flames. There was no way he was going to let his body do the thinking for him again.

So why the heck didn't he find Autumn a nice guy and get her out of his hair? His mind? His dreams? Pushing away from the fence, he took a step away from her, as if that extra foot of space between them would make all the difference. Then, he looked at her again.

"You're right."

"I am?"

"Absolutely."

"You have no idea just how much a woman loves hearing a man say that," she said, "but in the interest of clarity, I'm right about *what*, exactly?"

"About me shooting down your suggestions."

She nodded slowly. "Ah, okay. So you're in favor of Floyd, then?"

He shot her a quick look. "No. He *is* too old for you. For goodness sake, Autumn, you're looking for a man. Not a father figure."

"Okay," she said with a little shrug that caused the rounded neckline of her T-shirt to slide off her left shoulder. Eli's gaze locked on that patch of soft, dark skin and he wondered if it felt as smooth as it looked. He fisted his hands to keep from reaching for her to find out. "So, who'd you have in mind?"

He racked his brain, trying to come up with somebody he hadn't already dismissed. And just when he figured he was going to come up empty, a name occurred to him.

"Xander," he blurted, grateful for the inspiration. "Xander Redden."

Autumn frowned slightly. "The fireman?"

"Why not?" Eli countered, forcing himself to push the idea. "He's relatively new in town. Probably doesn't know too many people yet."

She stared at him and, for one long moment, he lost himself in those brown eyes of hers. But then he remembered that Autumn wasn't for him. He reminded himself that the past few weeks didn't mean anything. She'd been coming out here to have him help her find someone *else*. The fact that

he'd gotten used to having her around meant nothing. The fact that she and Trent had become the best of friends—well, that did worry him. Sooner or later, Autumn would stop hanging around out here so much—and for the sake of his sanity, it had better be sooner—and then Trent would be hurt, missing his friend.

*But just think,* he told himself, *how much worse Trent would be hurt if he thought he had a shot at getting a brand new mother only to be let down.*

Nope. It was definitely better this way. Better for everyone. Especially for Xander Redden, the lucky bastard.

"You know what?" Autumn said after a long minute of strained silence. "You're right. Xander is new in town. Who better for me to try my wiles on?"

She stepped back from the fence, an unreadable expression on her face. But all Eli could see were her eyes. Eyes that suddenly looked huge and innocent and...*disappointed?*

"Autumn..." Eli started, but a second later, he was interrupted, and it was just as well since he didn't know what the hell he'd been about to say.

"Autumn!" Trent's voice floated out of the house, and a half second later, his son came sprinting into the yard.

Autumn broke eye contact with Eli and turned to look at the little boy eagerly racing toward her. "What is it, sweetie?"

"I finished my picture," Trent called out, nearly breathless with excitement. He skidded to a stop beside Autumn, grabbed her hand and started tugging her toward the house. "You hafta see. I made it for you. Special."

"Well, I can't wait to see it, then," Autumn told him and scooped the child up to prop him on one hip. Gently, she smoothed Trent's fly away dark curls away from his face. Then, without looking back at him, Autumn lifted one hand in a salute. "See you around, Eli. I have to check out my special picture."

"Yeah, Dad," Trent repeated with a smile, watching Eli from over Autumn's shoulder. "It's very special."

Eli took a step after them, then stopped himself. His gaze locked on the two of them, and for a second, he felt like the outsider. Autumn and his son had somehow become a team in the last couple of weeks. They were drawing a circle of warmth around each other and it was all Eli could do to keep from stepping into the center of it.

And before he could forget all of his hard-won lessons, he turned his back on the house and walked, alone, to the cold, dark barn.

\* \* \* \*

The shop was super busy.

Both Autumn and her part-time employee, Valorie, were racing around, filling orders, pouring coffee and making change. Outside on the sidewalks, people were hustling through their shopping chores, stopping to chat with old friends and *First Monday Trade Day* was in full swing. But at Autumn's, there was no time for chatting. And she was grateful. As long as she kept busy, she didn't have to think about last night.

*Stupid*, she told herself, and sliced up another steaming pan of cherry bars. She made quick, deft cuts, moving on instinct as her brain rattled noisily in her head.

“...yanking my chain.”

“Not yet. Would you like me to?”

Oh, God. She'd made a fool of herself.

Why in the world was she even *trying* to flirt with Eli? She wasn't supposed to be developing feelings for Eli King. He was just the means to an end. Her little helper. Her Man Friday.

She stopped slicing for a second and, in that blink of time, saw, again, Eli's reaction to her teasing. If she'd been blind, she would still have seen the *go away* look in his eyes. And what had she done? Kept talking, that's what. Tell him he had lousy taste in wives.

“Good going, Autumn. That was very thoughtful of you.”

Grumbling, she finished slicing the cherry bars, set the knife down and reached for a spatula. “You're an idiot, Autumn,” she mumbled, then shifted



to one side and used the spatula to scoop up the rolls and set them on a paper-doily-covered platter.

“Valorie,” she called. When the young woman poked her head around the door, she said. “Here are the bars.”

“Good,” Valorie said, stepping into the room to take the tray. “The natives are getting restless.”

“Ooh,” Olyvia said as she, too, stepped into the kitchen, “I’d better grab one of these before the salivating hordes get them all.” She snatched a cherry bar off the top of the plate and grinned as Valorie disappeared back into the main room.

“Hi,” Autumn said, then looked for the stroller Olyvia usually had with her. “Where’s the baby?”

“With Yolanda Turton out front. She wanted to see the baby and I wanted to see you.” Licking cherry filling off her fingers, Olyvia walked across the kitchen, leaned one hip against the counter and stared at her best friend. “So, Geoff tells me that you’ve got a date with the new fireman tomorrow night.”

Autumn began measuring out the ingredients for a new batch of crepe mix. They were almost out. Not to mention, she needed a serious distraction from her racing thoughts.

Xander Redden.

The guy Eli had thrown at her like a steak tossed to a guard dog to distract the animal long enough so you could escape. Ah, yes. So romantic.

“News travels fast, I see.”

“Could have been faster,” Olyvia pointed out, then took a bite of the cherry bar. “I mean, I would have thought my very best friend would tell me herself when she’s got a hot date. But noooo...I have to hear it from my husband.”

“Geoff’s got a big mouth.”

“Yeah, I know. One of the reasons I love him. Can’t keep a secret, so I find out everything.” She walked around the kitchen island, grabbed a coffee mug and poured herself a cup. “Except, of course, why said best friend didn’t call me.”

Autumn winced. True. She'd been letting a lot of things slide the last couple of weeks. Her business. Her friends. Her family. All to spend time with a man who so clearly wasn't interested in her. *Idiot*. "Sorry," she said lamely. "I meant to call, but I've been busy and—"

"Yes, you have been very busy," Olyvia interrupted around another bite of cherry bar. "Busy hanging out at Eli King's place."

"There's that news bulletin again," Autumn muttered. Honestly, it was impossible to keep things quiet in Canton. Everyone knew everyone else's business and felt justified in spreading that knowledge everywhere they went. But then again, she'd been spending so much time at Eli's place, it was a wonder her mother hadn't had wedding invitations printed up.

"Just what's been going on out there, anyway?" Olyvia asked. Then, she gasped and nearly choked. After the resulting coughing fit ended, she asked breathlessly, "You didn't—you haven't—not with Eli King?"

"No." Autumn's denial was too disgusted and flat to be taken for a lie. "I'm still in the ranks of virgins-this-old-should-be-quarantined category."

"Oh." She took a sip of coffee. "Well, that's disappointing."

Autumn stopped stirring, and looked over her shoulder. "You're disappointed?"

Olyvia laughed. "Hey, I'm an old married woman. I have to live vicariously through *somebody*."

"Well, you won't find much excitement through me, believe me."

Olyvia stepped closer to Autumn, still clutching her coffee cup and roll. "Autumn, what's going on? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Autumn stalled. Checking the consistency of the crepe batter to make sure it was right, she took a lot longer than she normally did. The last thing she wanted to do was admit, even to Olyvia, that she was getting hung up on a man she knew darn well was a dead end. Heck, she didn't want to admit that to *herself*.

"There *is* something."

Before Autumn could give in to the inquisition and blurt out the truth, a high-pitched wail rose up from the front room. Tilting her head to the side, Autumn smiled. "That sounds like Wendi."

“Yes, it does. I’d better go rescue Yolanda. Have to take the baby over to Geoff’s mom’s this morning anyway.” She headed for the swinging door, but before she left, she turned and looked back over her shoulder. “But I still want to know what’s going on with you. And I want to hear about tonight’s date. So call me, okay?”

As her friend left, Autumn nodded. “I’ll be sure to tell you everything. As soon as I figure it out myself.”

\* \* \* \*

Eli wandered through his darkened house, trying not to think about what Autumn was doing. Or who she was doing it *with*.

With Trent asleep and the house so quiet it was driving him nuts, he had no distractions to keep his mind from drifting straight to the one woman it shouldn’t be drifting to. She would be out on her date with the fireman by now, he thought, stopping in front of the wide front windows.

He looked past his reflection in the glass to the darkness beyond and the images his brain insisted on creating. With no trouble at all, he saw her, in that little black dress she’d worn to the wedding reception. The one that clung to her every curve and made a man’s mouth water at the thought of peeling it off her body. He imagined it clearly, seeing the fireman leaning across a dinner table, smiling into Autumn’s eyes. Eli could picture Xander stroking her hand with a lingering touch. He watched as Autumn smiled at a man who wasn’t *him* and felt his insides tighten into a hard knot he thought might choke him.

Virgin.

She was a lamb being tossed to the wolves.

What if the fireman got grabby as K.C. Alfont had the night of the wedding? What if Autumn said no and the guy didn’t listen? What if she needed his help and he was all the way out here on the ranch?

“That does it,” he muttered, and marched to the telephone on a table beside the couch. As he hit speed dial and waited for the call to connect, he

noticed the small vase of flowers and traced the tip of one finger along a fragile petal.

Flowers.

That was Autumn's doing.

In the past few weeks, he'd noticed little changes in his house. She brought fresh flowers and dotted the place with them in vases and jars and drinking glasses. She'd bought a few throw pillows to soften the lines of the old leather sofas in the family room. She'd hung curtains and rearranged framed pictures on the wall. She'd brought two new toy trucks for Trent and had lately taken to making dinner for the three of them. Her touch was everywhere. She permeated the house. There was no escaping her, even when she wasn't here. Her memory danced in his brain and he heard the echoes of her laughter playing over and over again in his mind.

His hand tightened on the receiver when someone picked up the other end and said, "Hello?"

"Max, it's me," Eli ground out tightly. "Can you come over here and sit with Trent for a little while? I have to make a run to town."

\* \* \* \*

Xander Redden was a very nice man. Attractive, too. So why was it, Autumn wondered, halfway through their date, that there were no bells ringing in her mind? No slow date sizzle in her blood? No pitch and swirl in the pit of her stomach? She sat across the table from Xander and half listened as he told her about the fireman's academy training program. She nodded in all the right places and gave him an encouraging smile, but the truth of the matter was, she was so not interested. Okay, maybe she wasn't looking to marry Xander. But was a little excitement too much to ask?

What she really wanted to do was go home, put her pajamas on and watch an old movie. Or better yet, go to Eli's house, take her pajamas *off* and—she put the mental brakes on that train of thought.

“So,” Xander was saying, “when Geoff offered me the job in Canton, I grabbed it.” He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. “Because I think the secret to being a good fireman is...”

She tuned him out again and wondered what Eli was doing right at that moment. Did he miss her? Was he wondering how the date was going?

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Eli was sitting in his truck outside Autumn’s home. His gaze locked on the front window and he saw two people through the haze of the curtains. Blurred images, but enough to tell him that Autumn had invited her date inside.

Eli’s hands curled around the steering wheel and squeezed. He should have stayed home. He had no business sitting out here watching her like some damned stalker or something. Autumn meant nothing to him. Hell, he’d practically forced her into this date with the new fireman. So, he had no one to blame but himself.

But who was talking about blame, here?

Not him.

He was fine.

Just fine.

And firing up the engine, he peeled away from the curb and drove home. Alone.

## Chapter Seven

“But he’s so cute,” Olyvia said, looking up at Autumn as though she was certifiable.

“And boring,” Autumn said with a sigh as she slumped down onto Olyvia’s chocolate-colored couch. Just thinking about her date last night made her tired. Not that he was a bad guy, but even if it was just about sex, then she’d like to go out with a guy who had the ability to heat her blood with a single look.

And that wasn’t Xander Redden. “All night, all he did was tell me about the academy, how he won the fitness award and that he was top in his class, about how fast he can put out a fire—”

“Really? Hmm...”

Autumn laughed. “Stop it.”

“Well you do have a ‘fire’ that needs to be put out,” Olyvia told her.

“The point is, there was just no...”

“Spark?”

“Exactly,” Autumn exhaled softly.

“And, suddenly, you’re requiring sparks. I guess you’re not a one night stand kind of woman?”

“Well, duh.” Autumn shifted uneasily on the couch and let her gaze slide around the room. Cozy, comfortable, Olyvia’s house was cluttered, lived in. There were fingerprints on the windows, books stacked on tables and specks of dust on just about everything. Martha Stewart, Olyvia wasn’t. But as she told anyone who’d listen, she’d have plenty of time to clean house, but her daughter would only be a baby for a little while.

The absolutely perfect Wendi, twelve months old and growing like...well, okay, a weed, crawled across the toy-strewn floor, gurgling and muttering to herself. Autumn’s gaze locked on the little sweetheart and her insides ached. The way things were going, she might never have her own children. And the thought of that just made her heartsick.

“Hello?” Olyvia prompted. “You were saying...”

She glanced at her friend. "I was saying that your daughter gets more gorgeous every day."

Olyvia practically beamed. "She does, doesn't she?"

But she wasn't distracted for long. Olyvia had a streak of pit bull in her. When she latched on to something, it was impossible to get her to let it go. "So have you got a spark-worthy someone in mind?"

"Sort of."

"And would this sort of guy be a handsome rancher with a six-year-old son?"

Autumn's gaze jerked to her friend. "What are you, psychic?"

"Oh, yeah, just call me Olyvia the Omniscient." Laughing, she propped her feet up on the coffee table. "Honestly, Autumn, you've been spending nearly every waking minute with the man for the last few weeks. Who the heck else would it be?"

"For sanity's sake?" Autumn countered. "Just about anyone else."

"Eli's a nice guy."

"Oh, he's terrific. He just looks at me and backs away as quickly as he can like I have a contagious disease."

"Okay, this tendency to exaggerate is getting a little out of hand."

"Is not," Autumn responded, recalling just how fast Eli had tossed Xander Redden at her. "He does everything he can to keep me at arm's length."

Olyvia sat forward and grinned. "If you're at arm's length, sweetie, he can still reach you."

"Easy for you to say. Geoff melts into a puddle whenever he looks at you."

"Sweetie, up the temperature and every man will eventually dissolve."

Autumn laughed at the thought, though, even as she did, she remembered flashes of heat dazzling Eli's eyes when he looked at her. She recalled standing close beside him and feeling his tension mount until he would stomp off to go somewhere...anywhere, else. Autumn smiled to herself and wondered what her next step would be. If she could make him hot enough...maybe even Eli could melt.

\* \* \* \*

The late afternoon sun baked the earth and seemed to simmer on Eli's bare back. Heat rippled through him, fueling the fires within that had been raging since the night before. He never should have gone into town. Never should have driven past Autumn's house. Never should have tortured himself by imagining her with the fireman.

Because, all night long, his mind had taunted him, drawing up image after image of Autumn being kissed and held and touched by someone who wasn't *him*. His grip tightened on the hammer in his right fist. He slammed it against the nail head with enough strength to push it right through the fence plank and out the other side. His right arm protested at the contact, and for one brief second, it took his mind off what he shouldn't be thinking about anyway. Small consolation.

When he heard a car pull into the drive, something in the pit of his stomach skittered at the familiar sound of the engine. Eli turned slowly, warily, as if he turned too quickly, that car might disappear. Then he'd be in real trouble. When your fantasies took on solid shape and sound, it was padded room time.

The car door opened and Autumn climbed out. Sunlight danced on the edges of her hair, making the carelessly tousled mass shine. She looked right at him, as if her gaze had been magnetically drawn to his. Even from across the distance separating them, Eli felt the solid punch of those chocolate eyes hit him hard and leave him breathless.

She came around the front of the car, all slow moves and a smile, and his gaze swept over her as if he was a blind man who was suddenly given the power to see. He noticed everything about her. A scoop-neck, pale pink tank top displayed enough skin on her chest, shoulders and arms to tantalize him. The hem of the darn thing stopped short above the waistband of her khaki capris, giving him a peek at her belly button and sliver of smooth flesh that made him want to see more. He sucked in a gulp of air, choked it down, and kept looking. She wore sandals that displayed that toe ring of hers, and his



mouth went dry as he watched the gentle sway of her hips with each slow, deliberate step toward him.

She didn't stop until she came to the corral fence. Then, she rested her forearms on the top rail, inching the hem of that shirt up a bit more. Eli closed his eyes, hoped for strength, then opened them again to stare directly into hers.

"Who's next?" she asked.

"What?" Blood rushed and pumped through his body, thundering in his ears, and he had to force himself to hear her when she repeated her question.

"I said, who's next on your list?"

He cleared his throat, stuck the claw of the hammer through one of his belt loops and walked toward her. Damn if he'd let her know what just looking at her was doing to him. "What list?"

"You know, prospective deflowerers," Autumn said. She tilted her head to one side and asked, "Is that even a word?"

*Who cares?*

"What are you talking about?" He deliberately kept his gaze locked with hers. Way less dangerous than allowing himself another glimpse of dark, smooth skin. She smiled and it sucker punched him.

"Come on, Eli. Xander Redden couldn't have been your best shot."

The knot that had been lodged in the center of his chest since the night before slowly dissolved. "Didn't you like him?"

"Oh, he's definitely nice," she responded, "but when push came to shove—or rather, when touch came to—"

"He *touched* you?"

"That was the idea, wasn't it?" She shifted and ran her finger tips along the edge of the fence rail. "I mean, I can't really lose the whole virgin status unless some touching is involved."

"Right." His gaze slipped and followed the languorous movement of her fingers until he clenched his jaw and had to look away again.

"But it just didn't feel..." She shrugged, and the clingy material of her blouse tightened across her breasts. "You know?"

All he knew for sure was, if he didn't get the hell away from her, damn fast, she wouldn't have to worry about finding somebody to deflower her. She'd be flat on her back in the corral with him right on top of her. The image flashed into his mind and held there, freeze framed.

"Eli?" Autumn said, waving one hand in front of his face.

"Yeah!" He snapped out of it instantly, shook his head, and blew out a rush of air.

"You okay?"

"Just fine," he muttered, and snatched his hat off to stab his fingers through his hair. At least, he would be fine as soon as he could find enough cold water to soak his body in. The Arctic Ocean ought to be big enough.

"Well, you don't look okay. Maybe you've had too much sun today."

If he didn't know any better, he would say she was feigning concern.

"I'm fine," he insisted.

"It's really hot, though," she said on a soft moan, leaning her head back and stroking her neck with the tips of her fingers. "Feels like my skin's on fire."

He inhaled deeply. Slowly. She wasn't much of a flirt, but she was girl enough to bring him to his knees. It was a struggle not to show that he was totally affected by her. If he kept this up, the image that had flashed through his mind earlier was going to come to life.

"I have to get back to work," he said tightly, and turned away, headed back for the far side of the corral.

"Oh, okay then," Autumn replied. "I'll just go on inside and say hi to Trent."

He stopped dead and half turned to look at her over his shoulder. "You're staying?"

"Sure," she said, smiling at him. "We've still got to find me a man, don't we?" Then, she spun around and walked toward the house.

The provocative sway of her hips instantly drew his eyes again. His gaze never left her as she walked and, if she had been made of straw, the heat from his stare would have had her bursting into flames. The only satisfaction

he had was when her knees wobbled. Autumn wasn't as unaffected as she was pretending to be.

So just *who* was torturing *whom* here?

Several hours later, Eli still hadn't figured it out. He stayed outside working as long as he could, but, eventually, he had to give it up and go inside. Rudy was spending more and more time with Peggy, as he should be, Eli thought. Peggy's due date was fast approaching. Unfortunately, that meant more work for him and less time with Trent.

So, he should be grateful that Autumn had come back, right? At least his son was happy and well looked after. What did it really matter in the grand scheme of things that he was slowly going insane?

He stepped into the kitchen, hung his hat on the wall peg and looked around the empty room. A casserole dish, covered with foil, sat on the stove top. Dishes had been washed and put away, but there was a single place setting for him waiting on the table. Apparently, Trent and Autumn had already eaten.

And despite the fact that he'd stayed out late on purpose, he was disappointed to realize he'd missed dinner with them. The clock over the sink read seven-thirty and Eli felt a stab of guilt. Nearly Trent's bedtime and he'd hardly seen him all day. He could take care of that, though. Just grab a quick shower and—

"Eli?"

Autumn's voice sounded out from the family room. He got a grip on his hormones and walked through the doorway and down the hall. "Yeah, I just came in. I'm going to—"

He stopped as he entered the room. Trent lay on one of the couches, cuddled up beneath a blanket. Autumn was sitting right beside him.

Worry and fear surged to life inside him as he crossed the room in a few long strides. Dropping to one knee beside his son, and looked up into Autumn's worried gaze and asked, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and shrugged. "I don't know. He was fine a few minutes ago and now—"

"Dad," Trent's voice came, soft and tired, "I don't feel good."

“What hurts?” he asked, his tone gentle, crooning, as he brushed stray hair off his son’s forehead. “Your tummy?”

“No,” he whined, and cupped one small hand around his neck. “My froat’s sore.”

“Eli, I swear,” Autumn was saying, and he heard the tension in her voice, “up until a few minutes ago, he was fine. We were playing with the toy trucks.” She waved one hand at the abandoned toys lying scattered across the floor.

“Kids can get sick fast,” he mumbled, and spared a quick glance at the dark-haired beauty beside him. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Dad, it hur-u-ur-urts...”

Despite the concern surging through him, Eli could still appreciate how a kid was able to fit four syllables into a one syllable word. “It’s okay, son. Dad will make it all better.”

Trenton closed his eyes and turned onto his side, curling up into a tiny cocoon. Eli bent down, planted a kiss on the top of Trent’s head and stood up, motioning Autumn to follow him as he moved across the room. She did, very reluctantly, judging by her expression, and the way she continually glanced back at the child lying so uncharacteristically still.

“Autumn,” he whispered, and she focused on him. “Look, I don’t want to ask, but I’m filthy. Will you stay with Trent while I take a quick shower? Then I’ll take over caring for him and you can go home.”

She looked at him as if he had two heads. “I’m not going anywhere,” she said after a long minute of stunned silence.

“You don’t have to stay,” he responded tightly. “Trent’s had this before. It’s just a sore throat. I just have to keep his fever down. He’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure he will,” Autumn agreed, folding her arms beneath her breasts and shooting him a look that told him she was going to be stubborn about this. “And I’ll be right here with him to see it for myself.”

“Aut-u-um-umn,” came a low wail from the couch, “read to me...”

Autumn winced slightly and sympathy shone in her eyes as she called back, “I’ll be right there, honey.” Turning back to Eli, she lowered her voice

and added, "Go ahead. Get cleaned up. Have dinner. And get used to me because I'm not leaving him."

Then, before he could argue, or tell her that he could take care of his own child, Autumn was gone, hurrying back to the couch. Picking up Trent's favorite book, she began to read, and the sound of her voice, loving, gentle, calm, filled the room. Eli simply stood in the shadows, watching the two of them. He was still standing there when Trent reached out and Autumn folded that tiny hand in hers.

A pang of something sweet and just a little terrifying ricocheted around the inside of his heart. It had been just Trent and him for so long he wasn't used to sharing the care of his son. But, clearly, his little boy had found something in Autumn that he needed. Responded to. And that worried him. Because, eventually, Autumn would leave, and what would that do to Trent?

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Autumn was a complete wreck. All thoughts of hot seduction were long since banished from her mind and every ounce of her concentration was focused on Trenton. He looked so small, so helpless, lying in his bed, holding on tightly to his favorite stuffed animal. The little boy's cheeks were flushed and his eyes held the glassy sheen of fever.

"Read it again," he whispered, and the scratchy sound of his voice brought a sympathetic ache to Autumn's throat.

"Okay, honey," she said, and drew the child in close, wrapping her arms around him. Trenton nestled his head on her chest, and even through the fabric of her shirt, she felt the heat radiating from the small body pressed close to her.

Worry tugged at her heart and tore at the edges of her mind. But she read the story book one more time, trying to keep Trenton's mind off his misery. And while she read the story, Autumn concentrated on the feel of Trent's slight body curled into hers. Though she hated that the child was sick, Autumn loved feeling needed, loved that the little boy felt comforted by her presence.

“Will I still be sick on Friday?”

Autumn stopped reading and shifted her gaze to the wide-eyed stare looking up at her. “I don’t know, sweetie, why?”

“Cause Zach in my class is having his birthday party and we get to sleep over at his house and everything.”

Trent’s bottom lip quivered and one tear slipped from his eye and rolled down his cheek.

“Aw, honey, don’t cry—”

“Who’s crying?” Eli asked.

Autumn turned to look at the doorway where Eli stood, leaning against the jamb, hands in his jeans pockets, bare feet crossed at the ankle.

*How long has he been standing there?*

“Me, Dad,” Trent said as more tears joined the first one.

Eli smiled softly and pushed away from the door, walking into the room to take a seat across from Autumn next to Trent. “Don’t worry about the party,” he said softly, pressing his palm to Trent’s forehead. “You’ll be well by then.”

“Really?” A half smile curved his mouth.

“Really. Now, why don’t you try to sleep, okay?”

“Kay,” he said, and cuddled closer to Autumn.

Eli watched Trent and shook his head. “Maybe you should lie down?”

“Autumn’s reading to me.”

“Yeah,” Autumn said, smiling. “I’m reading to him.”

One corner of Eli’s mouth curled into a smile that set off fireworks deep inside her. She felt the pop and sizzle of them as they exploded throughout her. Drawing in a long, slow breath, she forced her gaze from his and looked instead at the pages of the book she could hardly see through the haze of desire clouding her vision.

How did he do that? How did he look at her and make her want to rip her clothes off and throw herself at him?

“Mind if I listen, too?” Eli asked, his voice a low rumble of sound that traveled along her spine and settled into an ache deep inside her.

“You can cuddle with Autumn, too, Dad,” Trenton offered.

Autumn sucked in a deep breath. Eli heard her and gave her a look that made her head spin. In a good way.

## Chapter Eight

Trenton was sound asleep and his fever was down. But Autumn still refused to leave. Eli watched her from the tall doorway, and in the soft glow of the racecar night light gleaming in the corner of the room, she looked...too damned good.

He leaned forward, bracing his hands on either side of the doorway, and squeezed until he wouldn't have been surprised to hear the old wood snap in his grip. To indulge himself, he let his gaze slide over her. That fresh-as-a-daisy outfit she'd been wearing when she arrived was now wrinkled and stained with a few drops of children's liquid fever reducing medicine. She'd raked her hands through her hair so often it was a tangled mess, and her eyes looked tired and worried.

Still, desire flashed inside him, even brighter and stronger than it had that afternoon. This was more than a reaction to her good looks, though God knew that was there, too. He was responding to who she was. How she'd cared for Trent. How she'd worried and fretted and read one story time after time until he was pretty certain she knew it by heart.

This desire raging and pulsing inside him was fueled by what he'd seen of her in the last few weeks. It was the flowers in his home. The laughter that had brightened every corner of a home that had grown too dark. The warmth that had invaded his soul no matter how much he tried to fight it.

And he knew there would be no relief from the wanting because he couldn't give her what she was looking for. Couldn't take that sort of risk. If he only had to consider his own happiness, then he might surrender to these feelings. But he had Trent to think about, too. And to protect his son from another possible rejection, he would do anything. Even if it meant denying himself the one woman he wanted more than his next breath.

As if she sensed him watching her, she shifted her gaze to him. When their gazes locked, Eli knew he was in deep trouble. She stood up, bent down and stroked Trent's forehead, then straightened and moved across the room.



Eli stepped aside as she got closer. When she passed him, she brushed against his body and his skin caught fire. That was the only explanation for the sudden explosion of heat that damn near swamped him.

Shaking his head, he gave his sleeping son one last look, then turned and followed Autumn out into the living room. She kept walking until she stood in front of the hearth. On the mantle above the stone fireplace was a line of framed photos. Most were of Trenton, but there were a few others, too.

“Are these your parents?” she asked without turning around.

“Yes,” he said, and stopped a good distance from her. It wouldn’t hurt to keep a little distance between them. “They live in Terrell.”

“I’ve been there a few times. It’s nice there,” she said, and let her fingers trail along the oak mantle, sliding up to the next picture. “And this?”

“My sister,” he said, pushing his hands into jean pockets. “She and her family live in Fort Worth.”

“You’re sort of spread out, aren’t you?”

“I guess so. I’ve never really thought about it.” His family had never really been close. Oh, they visited, called and emailed. But close knit, they weren’t.

“That’s a shame,” she mused, her voice low, thoughtful. “My family drives me insane on occasion, but I can’t imagine not have them nearby.”

“I have Trenton.”

“And he’s enough?”

“He’s everything.”

Finally, Autumn turned to look at him. There were tears in her eyes, and since he hadn’t been expecting it, those tears hit him hard. He took a step toward her, then stopped again, unsure just what to do. Damn it, tears always threw him for a loop.

She used both hands to wipe her cheeks dry, then sniffled and breathed in air like a drowning woman. Shaking her head, she gave him a watery smile and murmured, “Trent is everything to you. I can see that when you’re together.” She drew in another deep, shuddering breath and continued. “I envy you that, you know?”

What was he supposed to say to that? *Thank you.*

But she didn't give him a chance to think of anything to say. Instead, she kept talking, her words rushing from her, tumbling over one another into a long, blurred stream of sound. He listened hard, straining to keep up with the nonstop flow.

"I watched you with Trent and you were so gentle, so good, and you knew exactly what to do and you weren't scared. You weren't worried. I saw your eyes," she said, wagging a finger at him as if accusing him of something bad. "You weren't worried. Concerned, maybe, but not scared. I was so terrified, I didn't know what to do. He got that sore throat in just a few minutes. It came up out of nowhere and..." She shrugged, threw her hands high, then let them slap down to her sides again. "If you hadn't walked in the door when you did, I would have been running out into the dark to find you. I was really scared. I mean, I've been sick and that's no big deal. I can take aspirin and tuck myself into bed. But watching Trent cry and seeing his face flushed and his eyes go all glassy..." She cringed. "It was terrible. I felt so helpless. So dumb. How can you deal with that so easily? How do you watch a kid be perfectly healthy one minute and then sick in the next?"

"Autumn—" Eventually, he had to stop the flow of words. Her tears were running again, coursing down her cheeks in a flood of misplaced guilt.

"Oh my God," she whispered as her voice wound down into a hoarse echo of what it had been. "I have no business wanting a family. Kids of my own. If I react like this, what good would I be to them? I mean what if they fell and cut themselves? Would I faint at the sight of blood? Would I just sit on the floor and cry with them?" She pushed hands through her already untamed hair. "Yeah, I'm the one you want around in a crisis."

"You are."

"What?" Her head snapped up and her gaze shot to his.

Eli looked at her and felt his heart squeeze at the sight of her tear-streaked face and misery-filled eyes. He just couldn't stand it another minute. In three long strides, he was beside her. Grabbing her upper arms in a firm yet gentle grip, he drew her up onto her toes and stared deeply into her eyes.

He felt a tremor race through her body and skip into his. This close, her eyes drew him in even more than they usually did. She chewed at her bottom

lip as tears continued to stream down her face. Her breath came in short bursts.

He squeezed her arms a bit tighter and said again, "You are exactly the person I want to have around in a crisis. All of that stuff you just stated is bull crap." He shook his head. "At least what I caught of that monologue. You talk so damn fast, it's hard to be sure."

A tremulous smile flitted across her mouth and was gone again in an instant. "My mom always said that when I was nervous or upset she couldn't understand a word I said."

"I know what she means," he grumbled teasingly. "But the insanity in all of this is you're blaming yourself because you panicked a little while in an unfamiliar situation."

"Exactly," she said, and tried to inch out of his grasp. But there was no way she was going to squirm away if he didn't want her to. And damn it, he didn't.

"You didn't have a complete meltdown, Autumn. You just panicked a little and then you took care of Trent. You read to him. The same damn story, over and over, until I would have pulled my hair out in frustration." He gave her a small smile and was rewarded with one just like it.

"That's not true," she said, leaning into him. "Trent already told me you read that story every night."

"Wrong," he said on a sigh, enjoying the feel of her body pressed against his too much. "I *recite* it. I learned it by heart several months back."

She laughed. The sound was hesitant, unsure, but it was there, however briefly.

His gaze swept over her face, her hair, and came back to her eyes. So deep. So...innocent. Hell, he never would have believed that in today's times, one could find an *innocent* over the age of sixteen. Yet, here she stood.

In his arms.

His thumbs moved back and forth over her bare arms, and the feel of her skin beneath sent a rush of fire coursing through him. His body tightened and breathing normally became a real issue.

But he wasn't holding her for his own satisfaction, right? He was supposed to be consoling her. He got back to the subject at hand and tried to tell his body to chill out.

"Kids get sick fast, Autumn. But they heal just as quick, most of the time." He shrugged. "And, nine times out of ten, all you can do is stand there and watch over them. Try to make them comfortable."

Her gaze dropped.

He dipped his head to reestablish the connection. "*Read* to them."

She smiled again.

"You did good."

Autumn drew in a long, deep breath of air and blew it out again, ruffling the stray curl draped over her forehead. "If you're being dishonest to make me feel better," she said, "I want you to know you're doing a great job."

His mouth twitched. "I'm not lying."

She studied his features for a long minute, as if trying to read the truth in his expression. What she saw must have convinced her finally because she nodded and whispered, "Thanks."

"No problem." His thumbs moved over her skin again, and this time, she shivered and he felt her reaction kick around inside him. Deliberately, his grip loosened as he told himself to take a step back. That they were too close, standing here in the dimly lit room.

Moonlight streamed through the un-curtained front windows and lay in a silvery pattern on the worn rugs and hardwood floors. The one lamp lit in the room cast a small circle of golden light that came nowhere near them as they stood locked together near the hearth.

"Eli..."she whispered, and her voice seemed to send every damn one of his nerve endings onto red alert.

While he still could, Eli let her go and took a half step backward. Scrubbing one hand across his face, he told himself to ignore her perfume—some delicate, flowery scent—as it surrounded him, filling the air with a power that threatened to bring him to his knees.

“Look,” he said tightly, remembering that there was no future in this, “Trent’s asleep. He’s going to be fine by morning. Maybe you should be headed home.”

“I don’t want to leave just yet,” she said, and took a step closer.

Now, she might have been a virgin, but Eli certainly wasn’t, and he’d seen that determined look on a woman’s face before. She’d made up her mind about something, and he had a feeling that once Autumn had set her course, it would take more than logic to change it.

“Autumn, this isn’t a good idea,” he said, feeling it only fair that he try anyway, despite the low chance of success.

“See,” she said, coming even closer, “that’s where you’re wrong, Eli. I think it’s a great idea.”

And then she was in his arms, pressing her body into his, wrapping her arms around his neck and going up on her toes until their mouths were just a breath apart. Eli’s body went hard and tight. Every muscle, every cell, sizzle and burned. He clenched his jaw and fought against grabbing her. His hands fisted at his sides even as he felt his blood boil.

Her breath dusted his face. Her fingers stroked through his hair and he felt her touch right down to his bones. She shifted a little, rubbing her abdomen against him. She smiled knowingly. “You know, Eli, I think you think it’s a better idea than you think you do.”

He blinked, shook his head and muttered, “*What?*”

“Oh,” she said, running the tip of one finger around the inside collar of his T-shirt. “I think you understand me.”

He shivered and, in self-defense, grabbed her tight, holding her still with his arms locked around her waist and tightening like a vise.

“Oomph.” Her breath sounded as though it was squeezed from her lungs, but it didn’t seem to bother her any.

“Autumn,” Eli said, forcing his voice to work around the huge knot of longing lodged in his throat. “I’m not the one you want.”

She tilted her head to the side and gave him a crooked smile that stabbed right to the heart of him. “How do you know what I want, Eli?”

“Stop saying my name like that,” he grumbled. “I’m not going to do this.”

“Oh, I think you will,” she murmured, and let her fingers trail through his hair.

*Damn it*, he thought. She was way more right than he was.

“Come on, Eli,” she murmured, moving her mouth even closer to his. “Kiss me.”

His left hand swept up her spine. Threading his fingers through her thick hair, he held her still for one long, heart stopping second. Staring down into her brown eyes, he felt himself fall, and the last rational thought that darted through his brain was, *What the hell. What harm can one kiss do?*

“Yes, ma’am,” he mumbled, and took her mouth in a fiery kiss that slammed into both of them with the strength and raw fury of a runaway freight train.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn held on tight and enjoyed this new experience. She’d been on a roller coaster ride of emotions all night. First, making an attempt to seduce Eli, then sitting with Trent through his misery, then here again, in the dark with Eli. Talking to him, watching him, feeling the power of his blue eyes, were all enough to send any healthy woman over the edge.

But seeing him in action as a gentle, loving father had just topped off what she’d felt building inside her for weeks now. Eli King was more man than she’d ever hoped to find. Her body hummed when he was around. She hated leaving him at night and couldn’t wait to see him again the next day. Was that love? She didn’t know. Didn’t want to think about it. At least not now. For now, all she wanted to do was *feel*.

She’d saved herself for years, hoping, praying that the right man would come along. Then, she’d given up hope. Now, here, tonight, she’d found him.

The fact that he wasn't interested in forever or love were issues to worry about tomorrow. Tonight, she wanted his arms around her. She wanted to feel and taste and experience everything she'd been missing all these years.

His mouth opened over hers, his tongue parting her lips, sweeping into her mouth to dazzle her even further. She'd been kissed before, her brain cried out, but her body knew better. She might have been kissed, but she'd never been *kissed*.

And Eli was a man with a real knack for kissing.

She moaned softly as he took more of her, tasting, exploring, delving deep into the heart of her. His breath brushed her cheek, his tongue entwined with hers, tantalizing her, stealing her breath and sending her heartbeat into a rapid tempo that left it shivering and pounding in her ears.

Again and again, he explored her mouth with his while his hands moved up and down her back, along her curves, finding their way along her body, driving the heat surging through her into an inferno. Autumn held on to him, clinging to his broad shoulders as if her life depended on it.

Bright fireworks exploded behind her closed eyes, and the falling sparks seemed to shatter and travel throughout her. Her brain shut down, but that didn't matter. No thought was necessary. She forgot how to breathe and didn't care. Everything else in the room fell away as she stood enclosed in the center of his warm, solid strength. She wanted this kiss to go on infinitely. She craved his touch, his hands on her body, and the fire inside her quickened until she felt flushed from head to toe. Still, she wanted more.

Several heartbeats later, he ended the kiss, dragging his mouth from hers. She struggled for air and rested her head on his chest, trying to get her balance back, comforting herself with the rapid beat of his heart. Standing on her own two feet again, she rocked into him, afraid that if he moved away too quickly, she'd fall flat on her face. Wobbly knees could do that to a person.

Eli drew in a long, deep breath and released it slowly as he rested his chin on top of her head. "Autumn, do us both a huge favor and go home. Now."

"I'm not sure I can walk," she admitted.

"I'll carry you to your car if I need to."

She tilted her head back to look up at him. When she saw the dark swirl of lust gleaming in his eyes, her knees knocked together. “Eli, you don’t want me to leave. I can see it in your eyes.”

“What I want and what I’m going to do are two very different things.”

Disappointment swelled within her. “They don’t have to be.”

“Yes, they do,” he muttered. He let her go, taking a step back that appeared to be as much mental as it was physical. She felt him withdraw, push away from the closeness they’d just shared. Autumn wanted to kick him in both shins. *Hard*. If only her legs would cooperate.

“You can’t just shut down like that.” Shaking her head, she glared at him and tried not to think about the fact that her mouth was still tingling, her pulse still racing.

“If you think this is easy for me, you are insane.”

“Then why are you doing it?” she demanded, fury and frustration coloring her voice.

“Because one of us has to think about the consequences of this.”

“Mmm...” She said on a long, slow inhalation. She placed both hands on her hips, tapped her right foot against the rug beneath her and ground out, “Are you saying you’ll do the thinking for the feeble-minded female who can’t think clearly?”

His jaw tightened, the muscle twitching. “I didn’t say that.”

“Yes you did, Eli.” In a slow, even walk, she made a circle around him, forcing him to turn his head just to keep his eye on her. “You’re so tall and brawny and intelligent and so much more. And you’ve had sex...at least *once*, for certain.”

“Wait just a—”

“So of course you are the more *experienced* and should take charge here, right?”

“I didn’t say I was going to—”

“So, yes, Eli. Fine. I’ll leave, because I’m not really feeling in the mood anymore, anyway, in case you can’t tell that by the way I’m talking and how rapidly my words are starting to come out—”

His features strained, he muttered, “I noticed that, but—”



“But you know what?” Autumn continued, moving close enough to poke her index finger into his chest with a force that even surprised her. But she was on a roll and couldn’t stop. “I promise you are going to regret this, Eli.” She stepped even closer to him, keeping her gaze locked with his, then, her voice low and husky with barely restrained need, she whispered, “When you are lying in your bed alone tonight, I want you to remember that you were the one who sent me home.” She trailed her fingers down the front of his shirt, then fisted her hands in the fabric, tugging his head down to hers. “You’ll miss me, Eli. You know you will.”

Then, she kissed him, hard, slanting her mouth over his and putting everything she felt into the last kiss she would share with him. *Tonight.*

She felt him give in, surrender to the moment, and when his hands touched her back, she let him go and moved a safe distance out of his reach. It was a small consolation that he looked shell-shocked.

“You’re right, Eli. This is finished for tonight,” she rasped, holding tight to the little dignity she had left. Lifting her head higher, she met his gaze coolly. “But only for tonight.”

Then, with her insides churning like the inside of a washing machine and her brain reeling, she left him standing in the living room and didn’t look back.

## Chapter Nine

“You’ve got to bait the hook, set it and reel him in.” Autumn’s mother glanced at her briefly, then turned her gaze back to the quilt project on her lap.

“Exactly,” Delaney chimed in, and wiped her baby’s drool covered chin.

“Seriously, Autumn,” Sasha piped up, lifting her daughter up to her shoulder to be burped. “How have you managed to live this long without knowing the game of dating?”

Autumn’s gaze shifted from one member of her family to the next. Her mom, Cynthia, sat in a comfortable recliner with sunlight beaming over her shoulder and onto the material cascading off her lap to pool at her feet. Sasha and Delaney were both preoccupied with their children, but clearly still had plenty of time to give Autumn the advice they were so sure she desperately needed.

The house where she’d grown up hadn’t changed much over the years. It had newer furniture and the carpet had been replaced. The absence of her father was still felt a year after his passing. But basically, it was still the same comfortable, ranch style home. Where she came every couple of weeks to be harassed over lunch whether she needed it or not.

For the last hour, the topic at hand was her relationship—or rather, lack of—with Eli King. Apparently, the entire town was talking about her and Eli. Not so surprising, really. There wasn’t a lot going on in Canton, so having a new piece of gossip was almost enough reason to throw a party. With her spending as much time with Eli as she had in the past few weeks, it was no wonder the rumors were swirling.

“Who says you have to play games?” Autumn asked to no one in particular.

Her sisters and mother muffled their laughter around coughs.

Grinding her teeth, Autumn defended her position. “Kids play games. Adults should be honest with each other and get on with it.”

“So says the unattached sister,” Delaney mumbled.

“Words of wisdom from the last virgin in Canton,” Sasha muttered and rolled her eyes before congratulating her little girl on burping.

Autumn gritted her teeth, but before she could come back with her own sarcastic response, another voice interrupted.

“You girls cut it out,” their mother said, and Autumn focused her gaze on the woman with softly graying hair. “Autumn, dear, what works for one person doesn’t necessarily work for all.” Pulling a stitch tight, she laid the needle and patchwork down and rested her hands in her lap. Smiling, she continued. “You’ve always been honest and straight to the point. No sense in trying to change now.”

“Thank you, Mom,” she said, giving her sisters a pithy look.

“But,” Cynthia continued quickly, drawing Autumn’s gaze back to hers. “Honesty definitely isn’t always the easiest way when dealing with a man.”

“Hallelujah,” Sasha murmured.

Their mother ignored her and focused on Autumn. “Don’t pay them any mind, honey. What I’m trying to get at is it won’t be easy, but if you want Eli, then you have to figure out how to convince him of that in your own way.” She leaned forward, bracing her elbows on her knees, and smiled at her. “I know you, Autumn. When you love, you love with everything you have. If this is really love, then go for it, sweetie. Find your own way to go about it and do what you think is best.”

Tears stung the back of Autumn’s eyes as she looked into her mother’s warm gaze. It was good, she thought, to have a place where you were known so well. Where, no matter what, you belonged and someone understood.

“Seriously, Autumn, all you have to do is make up your mind and then convince him that his mind is made up, too,” Sasha added, grinning at her from across the room.

Why did that sound so much easier than it was probably going to be?

“Oh!” Delaney exclaimed. “Look. Look.” She pointed at her little girl. The twelve-month-old had pulled herself to her feet. While the women in the room held their collective breaths, tiny hands clutched the fabric of the sofa cushion. And with her proud family looking on, little Megan took a few steps.

When she dropped onto her well-padded bottom, her overjoyed mother scooped her up, cheering for Megan's accomplishment. Autumn sat on the floor, watching her sisters and her mother congratulate the little girl. Tears filled her eyes, and she felt a raw, open flood of love rush through her so thick, so powerful, it nearly choked her.

*Family.*

That's what mattered most to her. That's what she wanted. And she knew just what she had to do to get it.

\* \* \* \*

Things were almost back to normal. At least that's what Eli kept telling himself. He hadn't seen Autumn in almost four days. Not since she'd set his body aflame and then walked out of his house to let him incinerate alone.

"It's for the best," he said, throwing Trent's sleeping bag and race car decorated overnight case into the back of the car. Autumn had apparently accepted that whatever there was between them just wasn't going to go any further.

"Hey, Eli!"

His head jerked up and he squinted into the beaming afternoon sunlight to watch Max approach. "What's up?"

Max shook his head and motioned his thumb toward his own house at the other end of the ranch yard. "Are you coming right back here from town?"

"Yeah. I shouldn't be gone for more than an hour."

"Perfect. On your way back, will you stop and pick up some chocolate for Peggy?"

Eli chuckled under his breath. "Thought she was craving milkshakes?"

"Last week," Max said on a sigh. "This week, it's chocolate."

"Sure, I'll pick up some. Does she have a preference?"

"Just grab one of everything they have. She will probably end up eating them all."

Eli laughed. "Consider it done."

“Thanks,” Max said, turning to head for the barn. I owe you one.”

“No problem,” Eli said, remembering all too well what it was like to deal with a pregnant wife.

Of course, Ilana had pretty much resented the entire situation. She’d complained for nine long months. She’d hated the changes in her body. Despised the baby. Most especially, though, she’d hated *him* for creating the child to begin with. And as long and miserable as that pregnancy had been, none of it had mattered the minute the nurse handed his new son to him. Eli could still see Trent’s tiny, red face, screaming his head off. It was still a moment he thought was miraculous. Hell, he’d just about had *sucker* tattooed on his forehead from the instant he took his first look at his son. He’d always wanted two or three kids, maybe even four, if Ilana had been willing. He smiled at the thought of the ranch full of the sound of laughter and squeals. But, an instant later, that smile disappeared as he reminded himself that Trenton would be his one and only child. And that saddened him. Eli hadn’t counted on living the rest of his life alone.

He wanted a wife. A big family. But he’d messed it all up so badly, so completely, that he figured he’d had his shot and blown it. Now he couldn’t afford to go out and try to find happiness. He wouldn’t let Trent care about someone else only to be abandoned again. His son had to be his number one priority. Now was Trent’s time. And he’d do everything he could to make sure his little boy was happy.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn had a plan. She even pulled out all the stops. Making Delaney and Sasha go shopping with her, she’d picked out lingerie that was so salacious she was half shocked it hadn’t incinerated the bag she’d carried it home in. With her hair and nails done, she felt pretty and pampered...and ready to go to war with Eli.

She only wished her nerves were steadier. Her stomach churned with what felt like thousands of butterflies, and her mouth and throat were so dry

she couldn't swallow. Taking a deep ,calming breath, she murmured encouragement to herself. "Come on, Autumn. You can do this."

She placed her hand flat against her chest and picked up the rapid beat of her heart. Okay, she needed to calm down. The plan definitely wouldn't work if she passed out before she got started. She looked through her windshield at the ranch house, sitting dark and silent at the end of the driveway. A single light in the living room told her exactly where Eli was in the big house—and her pulse began to race even faster. He was alone. Tonight was Trent's big birthday party combined with the sleepover.

Autumn swallowed again and again and tried to regulate her breathing. She drove her car down the driveway, guided by the beams from her headlights. The familiar sound of gravel crunching beneath her tires felt...welcoming. Parking the car, she grabbed her purse and climbed out, closing the door behind her.

She glanced in the direction of Max and Peggy's home. And was relieved to see several lights on, plus the flickering of a television set. That meant there would probably be no interruptions from the duo. Now all she needed was a huge boost to find the nerve to carry out the plan.

The front door opened and a slice of yellow light penetrated through the darkness, silhouetting Eli standing in the doorway. He looked enormous. Tall, broad shouldered and exactly what she wanted.

"Autumn?" he stated, and his voice, though low in pitch, carried easily in the quiet she'd learned to appreciate out here on the ranch.

"Hi."

He stepped out onto the porch and the light fell on him. With his features half in shadow, he looked mysterious, untouchable. A part of Autumn wanted to just say , "I've changed my mind," and go home, but she'd come too far to back out now. Besides, that tiny, fearful voice in the back of her mind was easy to ignore buried beneath her racing pulse.

"I am surprised to see you out here again," he said, and folded both arms across his chest.

She stepped around to the front of her car and stepped carefully on the gravel as she felt her heels wobble unsteadily. The cool night air slipped up beneath

the hem of the knee-length linen coat she wore cinched around her waist and sent a shiver up her spine. But she was pretty certain it wasn't only the night air making her tingle.

"We need to talk," she murmured, stepping up onto the porch to stand alongside him. The stilettos almost made her tall enough to look him in the eye. Autumn noticed that despite the lack of warmth and welcome, there was a flash of...something in his eyes that gave her the courage to take the next step.

Drawing in a deep breath, she moved past him into the living room. A few take-out containers sat on the coffee table. The smell of fried chicken filled the air, and Autumn smiled to herself as she looked around the big room. It was homey and familiar and about to become the site of her attempt at seduction.

"If you're here to talk about what happened the other night—" he started.

"No," she responded, interrupting him as she dropped her purse on to the table and turned to face him. "I'm here to talk about what's going to happen tonight."

\* \* \* \*

Eli kept his distance. It didn't do him any good. Just seeing her here was enough to stir up every ounce of the lust he'd spent the last four days trying to ignore. Her dark hair was softly curled and fell around her face in a wild, tangled mass. Her brown eyes looked dark, smoky and dangerous as hell. She was wearing those strappy heels that looked so good on her it was hard not to continue to stare. And even her tan, linen coat looked sexy belted tightly around her waist, emphasizing the flair of her curvaceous hips.

He paused. *A coat?* It was definitely cool out this evening, but not cold enough to wear a coat. *Not the major issue at hand*, he told himself. The main thing he needed to focus on was getting Autumn out of the house before—

Her hands dropped to the knotted belt at her wait and he watched as she pulled it. Clearly, she planned on staying a while. He couldn't allow that if he wanted to remain sane.

"What are you doing, Autumn?"

"Getting comfortable for our discussion."

"Getting comfortable?" he questioned, and before he could figure out what she meant, Autumn shrugged out of the coat to let it fall to the floor.

Eli's heart skipped several beats.

Under her simple linen coat, she was wearing the most amazing combination of silk and lace he'd ever seen. A pale, pink-colored silk caressed her body, skimming along her skin, hugging her curves before ending in a short skirt that just covered the tops of her thighs. Slender straps smoothed across her shoulders and across her breasts. The silk gave way to a fragile lace that managed to both hide and display her breasts. Her legs looked long and toned. His hands ached to touch her, explore every inch of her.

Reaching out blindly, he slammed the front door closed and wished he had curtains to close as well.

*"Holy hell."*

"Do you like it?" she asked, and Eli thought that had to be the dumbest question he'd ever heard.

He drew in a deep breath through gritted teeth and finally lifted his gaze to hers. "Like it? Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"Excellent." Her mouth, that desirable mouth, curled up into a soft smile that let Eli know she was completely aware of the effect she was having on him.

She did a slow, lazy turn in a tight circle, giving him enough time to appreciate her from all the angles. And damn it to hell, if she didn't look astonishing from every angle. His body stiffened. His blood pumped furiously and his heartbeat sped up until he was certain it would beat right out of his chest.

"I was hoping you'd like it. Sort of makes up for standing here shivering."



“Autumn—”

She met his stare and tilted her head to one side to look at him. “You’re not going to try to make me leave, are you, Eli?”

“Would you if I did?” he muttered.

“No. I wouldn’t. Not a chance.” She stepped a little closer to him and damned if he couldn’t convince himself to move back.

Her scent reached him first. That delicate mix of flowers he would know in pitch black darkness and be able to find her by following it.

Oh man, he was in trouble.

“But you could warm me up a little. I’m freezing.”

“Warm?” A strained, harsh laugh made its way from deep within his throat. “Autumn, if you’re not careful, you’re going to end up in the middle of an inferno.”

Her eyes flashed and her lips parted in a sensual smile that fed the flames licking at his insides. Eli knew he was fighting a lost cause. There was just no way he could let her go. No way could he survive the rest of this night without touching her. No way he could last another second without having her.

“That’s why I’m here, Eli,” she whispered, and stepped close enough to skim her hands up his chest.

Heat surged within him. Her hands went up, wrapped around his neck, and her fingers threaded through his hair. A low rumble of need and want erupted inside him and Eli fought to keep it under control. To keep from losing himself.

“I want you,” she murmured. “I want you to make love to me, Eli.”

“Autumn, this is insane.”

She nodded, never letting her gaze leave his. “You’re right. It is, has been from the beginning.”

“I’m not the man you need.”

“But you’re exactly the man I want.”

He sucked in a gulp of air and released it in a rush of frustration. Grabbing her around the waist, he slid his fingers along her silk and lace clad body and felt her tremble at his touch. She stretched upward and planted a

quick kiss at the left corner of his mouth, and he felt himself weaken even further. He'd been fighting this for weeks. Lust had become a constant companion, and frustration, a way of life. Well, damn it, he could only take so much.

"Autumn, are you positive about this?"

She laughed and he watched her eyes sparkle with pleasure. "Are you serious? I dressed up in the most provocative outfit I have ever worn in my life, drove out to your home, stripped in your living room and you're asking me if I'm *certain*? For goodness sake, Eli, I'm practically attacking you."

His mouth quirked into a half smile. She had a point. Autumn kissed him then, long and hard and deep, and when it was finally over, she tilted her head back to look at him. "Well, Eli?"

Shaking his head, he told himself that, by tomorrow, he'd probably be able to think of thousands of reasons why he shouldn't be doing this. But tonight, he couldn't even think of one.

Still holding her at the waist, he shifted his grip, swept her up into his arms, and when she laughed in delight, he told himself not to think beyond tonight. To enjoy this time with Autumn, take this as the gift it was and not question it. When she wrapped her arms around his neck, he stalked out of the living room and through the house to his bedroom.

## Chapter Ten

The butterflies in Autumn's stomach that had been fluttering all day took flight. Mouth and throat dry, nerves stressed to the breaking point, she clung to Eli as he moved quickly through the dark house. Outside his bedroom, he stopped, reached for the knob and pushed the door open with so much force it slammed against the wall behind her.

Moonlight drifted into the room through the open curtain and spread across the wide bed, extending a pale invitation. The handmade quilt covering the mattress looked soft, welcoming. He carried her to the bed and stopped beside it. Looking down at her, he asked again, "You're sure about this?"

Autumn trailed the palm of her hand down his chest and undid one of his shirt buttons. "I told you, I'm very sure. No doubt in my mind. This is what I want. You're what I want. Right now. With me. On that bed. Yes, I'm certain. I definitely—"

He grinned at her and her heart gave a hard thump. "I get it," he murmured, and still holding her, bent down and reached with one hand to throw the quilt to the foot of the bed. "You're sure."

"Oh, yes."

"Good," he responded, and knelt on the bed so he could stretch her out across the mattress. "Because I couldn't handle it if you changed your mind or regretted anything we do tonight."

"I won't. I promise," she told him. The butterflies in her stomach were in full flight mode. Every inch of her skin tingled. Felt alive. One look from him and she felt the fire inside her erupt into a volcano of pulsing need and hunger that she'd never expected to be so strong. And soon, *very soon*, she'd be leaving her virginity behind. She'd take the huge step she'd been waiting so long for. And best of all, it would be Eli to give her her first experience.

His hand slipped beneath the hem of her slinky nightie and stroked her bare skin and—

"Eli, my purse!"

"What?" His fingers froze over her abdomen.

“I need my purse. I left it in the living room—”

“Plan on going somewhere?” he asked lazily, dragging his fingertips across her stomach.

She inhaled sharply, released the breath slowly, and shivered as she responded, “No. It’s just—I didn’t want to buy what we needed here in Canton because you know the people in this town, and everyone would be talking and they’d all put two and two together to figure out what I was doing...I mean what we are doing, so I stopped at a store in Tyler this afternoon and picked up—”

“You’re babbling,” he pointed out, and she heard the smile in his voice.

“I’m doing good to be able to talk,” she retorted, and sucked in a deep breath of air as his fingertips trailed along the edge of her panties.

“Then don’t,” he whispered, lowering his head to take her mouth in a series of brief, tantalizing, nibbling kisses. “Don’t speak. Just relax. Just—”

“Hmm, I like that,” she stated in a low voice, and wondered if he heard her over the roar of her blood rushing through her veins.

“That’s good,” he responded, “so do I.”

Another taste. Another nibble. Another chaste kiss that left her craving, desiring more. His mouth trailed along the line of her jaw and down her throat. She felt his lips, his teeth, his tongue, drawing a path of fire across her skin. Her brain slowed down.

She needed to tell him something. Started to tell him about the purchase she made at the store...*wow*...and that she had some...*oh, my*... Breathe. She needed to breathe. Silently, Autumn reminded herself to draw in air, but there was just so much swirling around in her brain right now, she was afraid that order was going to rank low on her list of priorities.

“So silky,” he murmured, and his breath dusted warmth against her skin.

“Eli...” *Focus*...she told herself. “In my purse...”

He rose up, peered down at her and smiled. “What could possibly be so important about your purse?”

Her vision was blurry. Trying to steady his image before her felt like an impossible task. She inhaled deeply and made herself think. When she found

her voice again, she managed to say, "Protection. There are condoms in my purse."

That slow, easy smile of his deepened as he shook his head. "You are a wonderful surprise, you know that?"

A flutter of something amazing wafted through her. "I am?"

"Yes," he responded softly, letting his gaze drift over her and following that path with his fingertips. He barely touched her, caressing her so gently it was as if a feather trailed across her skin. Slivers of expectation unfurled throughout her body. Her blood went to a slow simmer and a deep, throbbing ache settle low in her body, making it difficult for Autumn not to writhe and twitch beneath him. Eli was definitely giving her more than she'd anticipated and she couldn't wait for more.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn's eager response fed Eli's desire until he could barely see her through the haze of need and want that nearly blinded him. His heart slammed against his rib cage and breathing was almost impossible. He felt tight and hard and ready to show Autumn what it was supposed to be like. But he had to control his own hunger. Had to slow things down. Had to make sure he took his time.

It'd had been years since he'd been with a virgin. And had been a virgin, himself. Be he'd learned plenty over the years and was determined to make sure that Autumn's first time was a hell of a lot more memorable than his had been.

The condoms could wait, though he was grateful she'd thought of them. Especially since he didn't have his own stash. He hadn't exactly been a sociable person the last couple of years.

But none of that mattered now. The only thing on his mind was Autumn. How best to show her the pleasures she had yet to experience. How to push her to high enough of a pinnacle that she wouldn't mind the fall.

Sliding his hands beneath the hem of her sexy nightie, Eli relished the feel of her soft, smooth skin beneath his palms. Her curves were generous,

and he followed every line until he knew her body by touch and she was writhing beneath him.

“I want to touch you, too,” she said, and Eli had to smile.

He wanted her hands on him as much as she did, so he stood up and quickly stripped, taking his clothes and boots off and tossing them into a corner of the room. He watched her watching him and saw her eyes widen.

When he lay down beside her again, she reached up and ran her hands across his chest, skimming her fingers through the short, dark hair and dragging her nails against his skin until he was pretty certain she’d branded him. He gritted his teeth, sucked in air like a drowning man and fought for control. It was a hard-won battle.

Finally, when he couldn’t take another second of her gentle torture, he took her hands in one of his and pinned them above her head on the mattress. She arched her back and her breasts pushed against their lace prison. Her nipples hardened and Eli’s mouth watered.

Using his free hand, he eased the hem of her nightie high until her breasts lay bare in the moonlight. Autumn twisted slightly, moving into him, and her breath came in short, hard gasps. She trembled, and he felt the shudder of her moment course through him as well, touching the dark and lonely heart of him.

He lowered his head.

She inhaled deeply and held her breath.

He took first one nipple, then the next into his mouth and Autumn groaned aloud, arching into him, pushing herself at him as if afraid he would stop. But there was no chance of that.

“Perfection,” he whispered, and ran the tip of his tongue across the dark, rigid tip of her breast.

“Eli...oh, my...*Eli*.”

He smiled against her flesh. So to keep Autumn from talking, he tasted her again, pulling her nipple deep into his mouth, suckling her, teasing her with the edges of his teeth, driving her into a frenzy of need that had her bucking beneath him in a futile attempt to ease the ache within.

“So good,” she whispered. “It feels good...so good.”

His own body tightened as she moved into him again and again, seeking something she'd never known before. He felt her frustration and shared it. He wanted to be inside her, pushing himself home, deep into her warmth. He wanted to claim her for his own.

"Eli, I want—I need—"

"I know, sweetheart," he murmured, lifting his mouth just long enough to shift and taste her other breast. She rocked and moved beneath him again. She tried to tug her hands free of his grip, but he held her tighter. He didn't want her touching him now. If she did, he'd lose the little control he had.

While he tasted her breasts, he slid his free hand down the length of her body. Hooking his fingers beneath the edge of her panties, he pushed them down, over her hips, and when she lifted herself off the bed, he scooped them down and off her legs. Then slowly, teasingly, he ran his hand up the length of her leg, up her calf, past her knee and up along the inside of her thigh. She responded frantically, eagerly to his touch.

Twisting her head from side to side on the mattress, she swallowed hard, licked her lips and gave up trying to escape his firm hold on her wrists.

"Please," she whispered, her voice indicating an ache that echoed inside him. "Please, I need..."

"I know what you need and you shall have it," he responded, rising up to look into her eyes. His fingertips found her hot, damp and ready. Her body jerked at his first intimate touch and a stuttering moan slipped past her lips.

"Oh my...Eli."

"Just relax, sweetheart," he urged, bending his head to kiss her cheeks, her mouth. "Relax. Let it come. Go with it."

"But...I...can't...breathe..."

The corners of his mouth curved upward. "For this, you don't need to. Just enjoy the ride."

Her eyes darkened as she twisted beneath him. Planting her feet on the bed, she lifted her hips, welcoming him deeper, faster. He forgot about everything else except trying to push her over the edge.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn forgot about trying to breathe. All she wanted to think about was what was happening to other parts of her body. She'd never know this frantic, wild sense of anticipation. Nothing in her past experience had prepared her for the sheer, raw power of sex. Her ability to think clearly ceased. Thoughts raced through her mind so quickly she couldn't have focused on one if she tried. His fingers, magnificent fingers, touched her, dipping into her body with a steady rhythm that pounded and pulsed deep within her. His thumb brushed against an unbelievably sensitive spot and Autumn nearly screamed. Or would have, if she'd had enough air.

Eli was inundating her with overwhelming sensations. His kiss. His touch. His body pressed to hers. He pushed her higher and higher, and when she thought she couldn't take anymore, he pushed her over the edge and her body erupted into a startling burst of pleasure that roared through her in a rush of satisfaction so intense, so deep, her only choice was to give into it.

"Beautiful," he whispered huskily close to her ear. "Absolutely beautiful. I'll be right back."

Autumn couldn't move. Couldn't see.

*Open your eyes, Autumn.*

She did and peered up at the ceiling. It was spinning. No, *she* was spinning.

"Eli?" She was pretty certain she said the words aloud, but her hearing seemed faulty as well.

"I'm right here," he said a few heartbeats later, and she felt the mattress dip as he rejoined her on the bed.

"Where did you go?"

"To get your purse."

Her eyes widened and she turned her head to look at him. One dark brow arched and his mouth curled into that half grin she'd come to adore. Instantly, her body awoke again. She wouldn't have thought it possible, but she was ready for more.

"I want you inside me, Eli," she said, and watched his jaw clench and the muscle twitch. "I want to feel you in me."



He slid one hand through her hair, pushing it back from her face, and his thumb traced a slow pattern on her cheek. "You are driving me insane, Autumn."

She smiled. "With passion?"

He grinned. "Definitely, along with a good dose of lust and desire."

"Good," she whispered, and rolled onto her side so she could wrap her arms around his neck and draw his head to hers for a kiss. She slanted her mouth over his and slid her tongue past his parted lips. She took his breath and was grateful for it considering she'd been struggling for her own the instant he touched her tonight. She smoothed her hands over his bare back, loving the feel of his hard, muscled flesh. She pressed her body close, pushing her breasts against his chest, and then moved, rubbing her sensitized nipples until tendrils of new arousal surged through her.

Eli took all she offered, then gave it back to her. His hands roamed over her, learning every valley, exploring every curve. For her, he couldn't touch her enough. And finally, her desperation seemed to transfer to him. He pulled away from her long enough to pick up one of the condoms she'd brought with her and put it on.

Then, he laid her back on the mattress and knelt between her upraised thighs, spread open for him. He looked down at her and touched her gently, softly, and felt her quiver from head to toe. He moved then, covering her body with his, pushing himself into her damp heat, claiming her as she'd craved for him to.

Autumn dug her fingers into his muscled upper arms and held on as she stared up into his sensual blue eyes. She felt him enter her. Inch by marvelous inch. Slowly, deliberately, he pushed deeper. She shifted her hips, trying to accommodate him, trying to ease his way, trying to soothe the ache building all over again inside her.

Then, he paused for a moment and in one smooth, long stroke, entered her completely. A quick flash of pain traveled through her, but disappeared quickly. Autumn winced, then shifted her hips again and reveled in the amazing sensation of actually being intimately joined with Eli. Having him a part of her.

“Are you okay?”

“I am much better than okay,” she managed to say around the hard lump in her throat.

Lifting herself from the bed, she kissed him. And when he followed her back down, she gave him everything she had to give. His hips established a rhythm that was slow, sure and solid. She moved with him, aching to feel that explosion of power within her again. This time, as it built to a crescendo inside her, she knew what was coming and didn’t fight it. Wasn’t afraid of it. Didn’t hold back.

She gave herself over to the feelings. To him. This was what she’d longed for, been waiting for. Electricity zipped through her veins. Anticipation rose up inside her. She held her breath when the first tremor swelled inside her. She held her breath as the pleasurable sensations stole through her with a lack of tameness she hadn’t known existed.

“Eli!” she yelled, and her voice seemed to echo throughout the room.

“That’s it. Come for me, Autumn,” he murmured, raising up on one elbow and capturing her gaze with his. “Come with me, Autumn.”

She moaned as he pushed her higher still, and when her body surrendered, he gave himself up to his own release. He shouted her name and she clung to him as she was swept away by a pleasure so intense all she could do was hang on for the ride.

## Chapter Eleven

“Oh, my.” Autumn’s voice sounded rough even to her. But she was truly amazed she managed to get those words out. Unfortunately, it didn’t come close to describing what she felt.

“Right back at you,” Eli whispered, and rolled to one side of her before lying there, wheezing for air like a dying man.

Autumn looked up at the ceiling and waited for the lights before her eyes to stop flashing. “I know,” she began, “that I have no prior experience. But I think that was pretty amazing.”

He chuckled around gasping breaths. “I have to agree with you.”

“You know, I never thought I’d hear myself ask a question like this. I’m going to sound harebrained, like one of those cheesy movie actresses, but I can’t not ask because I really want to know and how will I know if I don’t ask? So it’s not really dumb if you think about it and—”

Eli held up one hand. “Autumn, what is it?”

“Was it good for you?”

He gave her a look that told her plainly he thought she was certifiable to have to ask. And that one incredulous glance did more for her than anything he could say. Still, it was nice to hear the words.

“It was more than good.” He kept staring at her as if seeing her for the first time. “As you said, amazing.”

He reached out and brushed one hand lightly down the length of her body and Autumn’s skin tingled expectantly. Her breath hitched and a now familiar throbbing desire began to grow deep within her. “Oh, yes,” she murmured, and shifted beneath his touch, silently encouraging him.

Eli smiled knowingly. “Is something wrong?”

Autumn sucked in a deep breath, then released it. “I just had no idea I could go from having no idea what it was like to be intimate with a man to wanting him inside me as often as possible.”

He groaned. “Do you have any idea what it does to me when you make statements like that?”

She laughed. "I assume the same thing that it does to me when you touch me like you do."

"You are something else," he groaned as he pulled her close and then maneuvered her until she was lying on top of him, stretched out, chest to chest, hip to hip, skin to skin. His hand stroked down her back and over the curve of her bottom.

Autumn closed her eyes as his fingers kneaded her tender flesh. Beneath her, she felt his body stirring to life again. Instantly, she felt a rush of heat so strong she was certain the ends of her hair began to smolder. "Oh, no."

"No, as in you don't want to do this?" he teased.

She cupped his face between the palms of her hands and looked him in the eye. "Of course not," she said softly.

Then, she lowered her head and kissed him. Mouths meshed, tongues explored and savored, joined in a rhythm designed to stir their bodies to life. Autumn move atop him, straddling him, and as their kiss deepened, she skimmed her hands down across his chest, loving the feel of his firm, strong body.

She loved the timbre of his voice. His heartfelt laugh. She loved his tenderness with Trent. The strength he'd exhibited in rebuilding his life after Ilana. She loved his sense of responsibility and humor. She loved the way he touched her.

She loved him.

That notion hit her with an unexpected wave of clarity just as his hands skimmed down her body once more to explore her intimately. Breaking their kiss, she rose up on her knees and watched him watching her. She saw his blue eyes darken with passion and desire, his breath hitch as she gave into the surge of female power that swept through her. She shifted her hips and heard him gasp, squeezing his eyes shut as if struggling for control. It was a lost cause when she reached for another condom. With his help, the old one disappeared and, after a few tries, she had a new one on him.

The next time she moved her hips, she lifted them high enough to take his body into hers again. Slowly, proudly, she lowered herself onto his length,

taking him deep within her. He filled her, reaching into the deep, empty parts of her heart and soul that she'd once thought would always be left wanting. Her breasts ached for his touch. She longed to tell him how she felt, ached to hear the words he probably never would say. Autumn moved in an easy, rocking motion that set off sparks of pleasure inside her. She felt the wondrous blasts of sensation rippling inside, and even while her brain focused on the pleasure, she tried to memorize it all, to put it down permanently in her mind. Because she never wanted to forget this moment, the second when she'd realized her love for Eli and celebrated that newfound feeling by taking him deeper inside her body than she'd ever thought possible.

\* \* \* \*

Eli stroked his hands up and down her body, tweaking her nipples until she arched into his touch, demanding more. In the gleam of the moonlight, her hair shimmered, her skin appeared even more perfect, and when she moved again, she looked like a goddess. His blood heated, his body ached and his brain shut down.

All he could think about was tasting her, touching her, feeling her. He wanted her back flat on the mattress with him on top of her. He wanted to part her legs and taste her essence. He wanted it all. And he wanted it with Autumn.

He'd thought that tonight, he would be the instructor. But instead, she'd taught him just how much he still had to learn. He'd never felt this way before. Never experienced this...connection with any other woman. And now was not the time to try to figure it all out.

Dropping one hand to the spot where their bodies were joined, he rubbed her most sensitive spot with a delicate touch that had her gasping with pleasure. Her body tightened around him, squeezing him hard and sure in a warm, velvety grip. And when he couldn't take it another minute, he flipped her onto her back and stared down into her wide, surprised eyes.

"Eli—"

“Autumn,” he murmured with a tense smile, “do us both a favor and don’t talk.”

“Okay,” she said, and lifted her legs to lock them high around his hips. She pulled him against her, moving with his rocking hips, holding onto him, digging her short nails into his back. He felt it all, relished it all. And when the first tremor started inside her, he gave himself up to the same pleasure and, with one long thrust, pushed both of them over the edge into oblivion.

\* \* \* \*

An hour or several later—who could be sure?—Autumn stumbled from the bedroom into the kitchen. She needed something to drink. And maybe food. She’d never felt so energized and so exhausted and so...sore in her life. Sex was probably the best exercise in the world. She wondered why no one ever mentioned *that* in all of those videos and books.

She shivered and pulled the edges of Eli’s shirt tighter around her body. She’d found it discarded on the floor with the rest of his clothing and, since Eli was still sleep, she’d helped herself. Autumn stubbed her toe as she crossed the hall and did a little half dance as she waited for her toe to stop throbbing.

“That’s what you get for not turning the light on,” she mumbled as she rounded a corner into the still brightly lit living room. She continued toward the kitchen and flicked the light on to prevent anymore mishaps. She headed right for the refrigerator and pulled the door open. It was well stocked considering a man did all the shopping. *And what a fine man*, she thought as she reached for a slice of pizza and a bottle of water.

Shutting the refrigerator, she carried her prize to the kitchen table and sat down. She reached for a napkin, then uncapped the bottle of water and took a long, satisfying drink. Her body was still tingling and her brain was still trying to figure out what to do about the entire “I love Eli” situation when the back door flew open. Hand to her throat, Autumn surged to her feet just as Max shouted, “Eli!”

“Oh, *God*...” her voice trailed off into an embarrassed silence. She was naked under a shirt that barely came to the top of her thighs. Oh, for goodness sake. Why on earth did embarrassing things always seem to happen to her?

A second later, Max spotted her. Snatching his hat off, he looked her up and down, then quickly averted his gaze and lowered his head. “Sorry, Autumn. I um...didn’t know you were here and I...”

Why in the world was *he* embarrassed? At least *he* was properly dressed!

“What the hell’s all the yelling about?” Eli grumbled as he rushed into the kitchen. Bare-chested, he’d taken the time to pull on a pair of jeans, but they were unbuttoned and he was barefoot. His dark hair was ruffled from Autumn’s fingers and he looked...well, she thought, he looked like he’d just been doing a horizontal tango with her.

Could this get any better?

Max looked at Eli and rubbed one hand over his face. “I apologize for interrupting you and—uh, I just wanted to tell you that Peggy’s in labor and we’re headed to the hospital. Probably won’t be here in the morning.”

Eli’s gaze traveled from Max to Autumn and back again. Slapping the other man on the back, he said, “That’s great news, Max. Give Peggy a good luck hug and kiss for me.”

“I will,” Max responded, and deliberately kept his gaze from Autumn as he turned and headed back to the door. Before he stepped outside, he said, “Good night, Autumn.”

Once the back door was closed and they were alone again, Autumn glanced at him. “Well, that was interesting.”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “You know, even if he hadn’t seen you tonight, he would have definitely spotted you car first thing in the morning. He’d have known you spent the night.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “But he wouldn’t have a mental picture of me in your shirt.” She fumbled with a button. “And speaking of which, you really ought to invest in a robe.”

“Why?” he asked, and moved toward her slowly. “From this viewpoint, my shirt looks really good on you.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes,” he assured her. When he stopped directly in front of her, his hands dropped to the first button on the shirt. He made quick work of it, then the rest of them before he pushed the edges wide and cupped her breasts in his palms.

“Oh, boy,” Autumn whispered, and leaned into his hands, loving the feel of his fingers on her nipples. The light, teasing touch. The gentle tug and pull on her flesh that brought a wild response to completely unrelated parts of her body.

“You came downstairs for a snack, huh?” he asked, glancing at the now forgotten slice of pizza on the table.

“Mmm-hmm...”

“Me too,” he murmured, and before she could figure out what he was up to, he’d picked her up and sat her on the edge of the table.

“Eli...” Her heart skipped several beats, then began to race until she thought it just might burst from her chest. As he lowered himself to his knees in front of her, she struggled to breathe. *What is he...?* She fought for self-control. Resisted the urge to keep from reaching for him. “Eli what are you—”

“I told you,” he said, and gently parted her legs, “I’m hungry, too.”

A strangled gasp escaped her as he bent and took her with his mouth. Incredible sensations pooled at her center and then sent long, winding spirals of need rushing throughout her body. Air stuttered in and out of her lungs. She couldn’t look away. She watched him as he bestowed the most intimate kiss upon her. She saw him taste her, savor her, and felt herself being swept into a fresh wave of passion.

Autumn clutched at the edge of the old, wooden table. She rocked gently into him and nearly fell over when she felt his tongue slide across her hot flesh and dip into the heart of her. Too much, she thought. Too much and at the same time not nearly enough. *Don’t stop*, she pleaded silently. She moaned frantically as he lifted her legs and rested them on his shoulders. His arms encircled her bottom and held her firmly in place while his mouth took her places she’d never realized existed.



And this time, when she went over the edge, she wasn't thinking rationally enough to keep her mouth shut. This time, when she yelled his name, it changed everything.

"Eli," she cried out, "I love you."

\* \* \* \*

Several minutes later, the words were still lingering in the air. They couldn't be ignored. Eli helped her down from the table, then turned and strolled across the room, trying to think of something to say that wouldn't hurt Autumn. But there wasn't anything he could do not to make this less painful.

"Autumn," he said as he trained his gaze on one of the windows and the darkened yard beyond. "I warned you before—I'm not the man you need."

He heard her approach, her bare feet barely making a sound on the linoleum. She stood behind him, and he saw her reflection in the window glass. Her eyes were wide and overly bright. He prayed desperately that it wasn't the beginning of tears he was seeing.

Damn it. He'd blown it good this time. He never should have given into the lust seizing him. He should have sent her home when she'd showed up on his front porch looking like every man's fantasy. But to do that, he would have had to be a saint. And there was no mistaking him for a saint.

She placed her hand on his arm, and the warmth of her fingers seemed to touch something deep inside him. It had been a long time since he'd felt anything that having her touch him so completely was a danger that shook him even as it tempted him.

"Relax, Eli," she said with a smile and leaned her forehead against his bare shoulder. "I didn't ask you for your hand in marriage."

"I don't want to hurt you, Autumn," he said tightly, and knew he was about to do just that. "But you're making too much of this. It was sex. Amazing sex, but sex. Lust. Not love."

She didn't respond to his declaration so he kept talking. For the first time in several weeks, she was quiet. And that almost unnerved him. Turning

around to face her, he forced himself to look down into her eyes. No tears were there. He stifled a sigh of relief. "You're a virgin and—"

"*Was* a virgin," she interjected.

"Exactly. You're emotional. I mean, I'm your first, so you're making more out of this than you should."

Autumn grasped the edges of the shirt and pulled them together. It couldn't have been easy for her to look regal in his long-sleeved shirt. But she managed.

"Don't start treating me like I'm an idiot, Eli, or I'm really going to get ticked off."

That, he didn't need. "Fine. What I'm trying to say, Autumn, is I like you. Hell, I really like you."

"Wow, when you say it like that, I feel giddy all over. I can hardly contain myself."

He ignored her sarcasm and attempted to explain in another way. "Autumn, you are a hell of a woman. I'm real fond of you. I enjoy spending time with you." He clasped her shoulders and held her in a firm grip that somehow kept him from drawing her closer and wrapping his arms around her. "But love is just not an option."

\* \* \* \*

Autumn stared up at him, saw the regret in his eyes and felt something inside her break. Disappointment swept through her in a strong tidal wave of emotion. For some insane reason, she'd thought that once she'd said the words, he'd be able to admit that there was more here than desire. But, clearly, he was determined to ignore the very real hum of electricity arcing between them.

Well, okay then. But she refused to have him feel sorry for her. She didn't want his sympathy. She wanted his love. And if she couldn't get that, then she wouldn't let him know how much it hurt. Sure, she usually believed in honesty. But there were times when even the most honest person had to tell a lie.

Drawing in a deep breath, she blew it out again, met his gaze and told the biggest fabrication of her life. "It's okay, Eli. It's not like I want anything from you." She reached out and placed a hand on his cheek. Her heart was breaking, but her voice was clear. "I love you, but I'll get over it."

He flinched as though she'd physically struck him, blinked, and shifted uneasily. It made her feel better to know that he wasn't as unaffected as he pretended to be. And she took the opening he'd given her.

"But please know you were a big help. Now that I'm not a virgin anymore, I'm positive I'll be able to find someone else."

Did his eyes narrow, or was it her imagination?

She stretched upward and gave him a brief, hard kiss that practically burned her mouth. "I'm sure that once I make it known that I am single and *available*, my social life will pick up. I'll move on rather quickly, you'll see." Oh, man, being untruthful was becoming easier for her. That wasn't a good sign at all.

Autumn was astonished that he believed anything coming out of her mouth right now. Did he really think she could respond to him the way she had and then go to someone else? She'd never get over his touch. Never forget the otherworldly experience she'd found in his arms. And she couldn't even imagine letting anyone else touch her in the magical way he had. But in this case, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

"Single and available?" he asked tightly, and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Yes. That's what I am, aren't I? I mean, since there can be nothing between us," she said, and shoved one hand through her hair as she kept talking. "But don't sweat it. We both knew this was temporary. I guess I'll have to find my own man this time, because it's probably not a good idea for you and me to keep spending all the time that we do together. I know—"

"You're rambling," he growled, and tugged her closer.

Pressed flat against him, she relished the hard, solid strength of him and hoped desperately that it wouldn't be for the last time.

His gaze swept over her features. "If we were in a different time and place—"

"I know. I know," she interrupted. "However, I'm not Ilana. I wouldn't dare do the things she has done to hurt you."

"I know you're not Ilana," he snapped. "But I never thought Ilana would turn out to be the woman she became either. I thought things would work out between us, and it didn't. I'm at a point now where I can't risk Trent's happiness."

Damn his ex-wife, Autumn thought. The woman was long gone, but her residual energy lingered. She hurt Eli so badly he was willing to lock his heart away forever rather than take a chance.

"I'm not asking you to."

"You're asking for something."

Yes, she was. She was asking for commitment. Asking for his heart, but he wasn't willing or ready to give it. So she settled for something that she could have. "Another kiss?" she said. "A goodbye kiss?"

"Autumn—"

"Hush up, Eli, and kiss me."

He stared at her silently for another moment, then his mouth came down on hers and she gave herself over to the pleasure of the moment. And when he carried her back down the hall to the bedroom, she tried not to dwell on the fact that it was probably for the last time.

The rest of the night they came together in a wild rush of pleasure, desire, want and need. When it was over, Autumn waited for Eli's breath to even out before slipping out of bed, leaving him to wake alone.

And so would she.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn preoccupied herself with cookies. Well, with making them anyway. For the first time in her life, she found it hard to eat. Her appetite suppressed. The past week had gone by so slowly it was all she could do not to groan several times throughout the day. As each day passed, she told herself it would get easier. She would forget Eli.

No problem.

That was an easy task. Just as easy as forgetting how to breathe.

The shop kept her busy during the day, but at night, alone in her home, she felt surrounded by memories. Her body ached for Eli's touch and she caught herself straining to hear the familiar rumble of his truck coming down the street. She thought about ringing him, but she drew the line at being desperate and pathetic.

She refused to become a whiny, needy female. She'd survived twenty-seven years without a man and she could do it again. "Yet again," she mumbled as she removed another cookie sheet of chocolate chip cookies from the oven. "It's easy enough to live without something you never had. But once you've had it, you definitely miss it."

"Talking to yourself again?"

She glanced at the swinging door and gave Olyvia a half smile as she entered the kitchen.

"Hey."

"Well now, there's a greeting that would make a person actually think they'd been missed. I feel all warm and toasty."

"Toast?" Autumn asked, and pointed to a plate across the room. "It's over there."

Olyvia stuck her tongue out as she pulled out a chair and dragged it over to the counter where Autumn was busy slicing a cooled tray of lemon bars.

"Have mercy, it's hot in here. Olyvia tugged at the collar of her shirt.

"Oven," Autumn murmured. Her tank top and shorts helped beat the heat inside the kitchen, but in some ways, she found the heat relaxing.

"You've been hiding from me," Olyvia accused.

"Not hiding," Autumn responded. "Just busy working."

"You didn't let me know how your plan of seduction went with Eli last week."

Autumn lifted her head to meet her friend's gaze.

"Oh," Olyvia replied sympathetically. "Not good, huh?"

"Actually, it was"—Autumn paused, holding the knife above the bars—"earth shaking."

"Great news. The mission is accomplished."

“Definitely accomplished,” Autumn said. “Several times.”

“Oh.” Envy was clear in Olyvia’s voice.

“Everything was wonderful.” Autumn exhaled heavily. “Until I informed him that I love him.”

“Oh-oh.”

“That sums it up perfectly.”

Being a wonderfully true friend, Olyvia offered the perfect response. “He’s an idiot.”

“You will get no disagreement from me,” Autumn stated and finished her slicing. Then, picking up the spatula, she placed them on a cooling rack with practiced ease. “But he’s my idiot.”

“You’ll get no disagreement here either,” Olyvia said, and reached for one of the still warm lemon bars. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m letting him miss what he no longer has.”

“How’s that going?”

“I miss *him*,” she retorted. “Does that count?”

Olyvia pinched off a small piece of the bar and put it in her mouth as she pondered the question. When she finished chewing, she finally spoke. “It’s probably safe to say that if you’re missing him, then he’s missing you.”

*Not very reassuring*, she thought as she turned and focused her attention on the cookie sheet. He didn’t miss her enough to come to the shop. She hadn’t seen him or Trent in the past week.

Autumn stiffened her spine, turned around and looked at her friend. “Love’s not for the weak, is it?”

Olyvia shook her head. “No. But it’s worth it, if you hang in there.”

“I don’t know, Liv.” Autumn took a seat across from the other woman. Resting her elbows on the counter, she let the coolness seeped into her skin and she prayed it would cool the inferno still burning inside her. “I finally found love. Unfortunately, I found it with a man who doesn’t want me.”

A hard thing to admit. Her sisters were very upset at Eli, her mother was scrolling the singles ads again and her customers were whispering whenever she walked into the front of the shop. Everyone in Canton was talking about her and Eli.

And despite all of it, she didn't care. All she knew was that her business wasn't as much fun if she couldn't share everything about her day with Eli. Her afternoons dragged on endlessly because she could go to the ranch and help Eli exercise his horses. Her evenings were sad because she wasn't reading bedtime stories to Trent, tucking him in or getting sweet good night kisses.

But the nights were the worst. Alone in the dark, she drowned in memories of that one night with Eli. She relived every touch, every caress, every kiss. What it felt like to reach her hand out to find him right there. She recalled his heartbeat throughout the night, his arms closing around her and his body sliding deep into the recess of hers.

Olyvia suddenly blurred and Autumn blinked rapidly to keep the threatening tears at bay. "He makes me furious, Liv," Autumn whispered sadly. "We could have had it all, if he'd just been willing to take the risk."

## Chapter Twelve

The longest week of Eli's life dragged by at a pace that a tortoise could move faster than. His mood was dark, and anyone with common sense would have avoided him. But Max, still soaring high from the birth of his daughter, was clearly oblivious to the warning signs.

"I'm telling you, Eli, my daughter is as cute as a button and she has my appetite so she eats everything in sight."

"Great," Eli mumbled, concentrating on the fence post, putting all his weight into it as he leaned against it. The bad one had to come out before he could replace, and it looked as though he would be doing all the work around here himself today. He looked at Max. The other man was leaning against the pole he was supposed to be removing, ankles crossed, arms folded over his chest and a stupid smile on his face.

Interestingly enough, Eli had never really noticed just how agitating someone else's happiness could be.

"Peggy did a good job," Max continued, a wistful note to his voice. "You should have seen her. No screams. No tears. But there was a woman down the hall doing enough yelling for her and Peggy combined. At one point, I thought she would bring down the hospital."

Eli stifled a groan. He remembered Trent's birth distinctly, as well. Ilana had been that woman screaming. She'd called him every name in the book and then some. She'd screamed at the nurses and the doctor and then hadn't even been interested in Trent when he was finally born.

Maybe it would have been better for him and Ilana if the "accidental" pregnancy hadn't happened. But he'd never regret Trent. And, in many ways, Trent's birth had straightened out several things with Ilana as well. The woman had revealed her true self and then done him the favor of disappearing from his life.

And he and his son had been just fine on their own. Until Autumn. Eli's brain instantly conjured her laughing image and he scowled in response. Damn it. He'd been happy. Okay, content was more like it. And then she'd



come along and made him look forward to spending time with her. Hearing her. Touching her.

She'd brought flowers into his home, a light into his heart. And damn it...he hadn't *asked* her to.

"Peggy was wonderful," Max repeated, seeming to still be under the magical spell of the miracle of his daughter's birth.

Drawn in by the sense of awe in his foreman's voice, Eli found himself picturing what it might have been like if Autumn had been Trent's mother. He couldn't imagine her screaming and cursing at him while in the midst of labor. He couldn't ever imagine Autumn turning her back on her child.

He stopped, trying to dislodge the fence post, and let his mind drift further. He pictured images of Autumn, pregnant with his child. Autumn holding Trent's hand and laughing. The three of them cuddled together on the living room couch. And then his brain went into hyper drive and apparently decided that, if torturing him was the object of this hallucination, then it ought to give it one hundred percent.

As if he had traveled several years into the future, he clearly saw three kids running free with a litter of puppies. In his mind, the ranch house was lit up brightly and the sounds of laughter traveled throughout it.

Then the images disappeared just as quickly as they'd come and he was back in the field, struggling to pull up a fence post, listening to Max blabber. His temper flared quickly, suddenly, and he scowled at the other man.

"Are you going to help me with these fence posts or just stand there holding up that one you're leaning against?"

"Sorry." Max pulled his work gloves out of his pocket, then took up a position on the other side of the post and started working. But while he worked, Max stepped into the line of fire and didn't even know it. "I haven't seen Autumn around in while," he stated. "Is everything okay with the two of you?"

Eli shot him a look that should have incinerated him. "Everything is just fine. Now, are we going to work or should we go ahead and take lunch so we can talk some more?"

“Point taken, boss.” Max dropped his head, but not before Eli saw the flash of agitation in his friend’s eyes.

Wonderful. Now not only was Autumn no longer a part of his life, but if this kept up, he wouldn’t have any friends left, either. Yep, this new arrangement was working out just fine.

\* \* \* \*

“These cookies are nasty, Dad,” Trent complained, and dropped the cinnamon sugar cookie he’d only taken one bite of back into the bag sitting next to him in the back seat.

“You like those cookies. They’re your favorite,” Eli countered.

“Autumn’s are way better.”

*Yeah, they are*, Eli silently agreed. He’d driven Trent to a bakery across town instead of to Autumn’s crepe shop, but it just wasn’t the same. It had been almost two weeks now since he’d seen Autumn, and Eli tried hard to convince himself that it was for the best. To make the situation a little easier, he avoided her like the plague. But little good it did. He could stay away from Autumn, not see her, but her presence continued to be felt. She’d infiltrated every part of his world. Her adoration for his son. The paintings and colorings she’d done with Trent. Hell, even her scent lingered in his home, in his bedroom.

“Autumn says she’ll help make cookies for the bake sale.”

“What?” Eli forced his brain back into gear and focused his attention on his son.

Trenton exhaled deeply, then looked at the cookies and frowned before looking at Eli again. “Autumn says she will help me—”

“I understand that part,” he interrupted, wanting to catch his son before he launched into a long, drawn out explanation. “When did you see Autumn?”

“Two days ago,” he said, and licked sugar off his fingertips.

“Two days ago?”

“Uh-huh.”

Frowning, Eli asked, "Where did you see her?"

"At school. She comes at snack time, or sometimes it's lunch."

Autumn went to Trent's school? "How long has she been coming to your school?"

"Since she stopped coming to the house." He smiled as he made the statement. "I like Autumn, Dad. She's really nice."

Eli just stared at his son for a minute. How long had Autumn been meeting Trent at school? Better yet, why had no one told *him*? The little arrangement was over. She was no longer a virgin, so the very reason they'd been spending so much time together no longer existed. Autumn hadn't been to the ranch in two long weeks. He'd been avoiding her and he was pretty certain she'd been doing the same. But, clearly, she hadn't cut off her relationship with Trent.

Something warm and light and a lot like hope rose up inside him. At the same exact moment, he had to face the fact that he'd been a complete and utter jerk to her. He'd cut Autumn deep. There was no denying that. Turned his back on what had happened between them because he'd convinced himself it was the only way to keep Trent from being rejected again. But Autumn, it seemed, had her own way of taking care of Trent. And that meant maintaining a connection that Eli had been set on not existing in the first place.

"Dad," his son began in a small voice filled with puzzlement, "why doesn't Autumn come to the ranch anymore?"

Hell. How did he answer that one? He could try the truth. Probably not. He was willing to admit he'd screwed up, but not to his son. Not now, anyway. So, how could he explain this?

"Well, the shop had picked up business and Autumn's really busy so—"

"Did you ask her to come visit us?" Trent interrupted, and pinned him with a stare that demanded an answer.

"No, son," he murmured. "I didn't."

"Why not?" he asked, and wiped his mouth, leaving a trail of sticky sugar from his mouth halfway up his cheek.

Excellent question. Why hadn't he, indeed?

“Autumn won’t come visit us if you don’t ask her to,” he pointed out as though the notion should be obvious.

“You know, you’re right, son,” he replied. If he had taken Autumn’s declaration of love and offered his own in return, would things have turned out different? Would she have really taken a chance on him and Trent?

Deep down, he knew the answer to that question without even thinking about it. Without a doubt, she would have. Autumn wasn’t Ilana. Autumn was intelligent, generous, funny, and already cared for Trenton as though he were her own child. And she’d shown *him* more love in the past several weeks than he’d known in his entire life.

A knot formed deep in his chest, and he was sorely tempted to kick himself in the butt for being such an idiot. He’d messed up. Big time. He’d been so intent on protecting himself and using Trent as an excuse for hiding from a relationship that he’d probably missed his chance at *real* love. The forever kind. And there was no one to blame but himself.

Damn it to hell and back. He’d failed at love before and been scarred enough to convince him to avoid it at all cost. But, somehow, the sneaky emotion found him again anyway—he’d just been too afraid to take a chance. He was more afraid than he’d ever been in his entire life. For this time, the idea of losing what he might have had was much worse. The feelings he had for Autumn were so much more deeper than anything he’d ever experienced before.

Mumbling under his breath, he turned the key in the ignition. “Is your seatbelt fastened, Trent?” he asked.

“Yes. Are we going to get cookies from Autumn?” Trent asked hopefully as he settled back into his car seat.

“No,” Eli responded, and watched his son’s face fall. Reaching into the back seat, he gave his son’s knee a reassuring pat. “*I’m* going to go see Autumn. *You’re* going home.” This was something he had to do on his own. Though it was probably certain he stood a better chance of winning Autumn back if he had Trenton with him, he quickly pushed the idea to the back of his mind. He and Trent were a package deal. Still, he wanted to know that she was saying yes to *him*. Not his child. He knew without a doubt she loved

Trent. Her actions every time she interacted with his son—whether he knew about it or not—proved it.

Now he just had to find out if she still *loved* him enough to give whatever it was between them another shot.

“Are you gonna ask her to come stay with us, Dad?”

Ask.

Bribe.

Debate.

Beg.

Whatever it took to get her back is what he would do, he told himself, and steered the car onto the road that would lead them back to the ranch.

\* \* \* \*

Autumn glanced around at her customers, then shifted her gaze to the wide front window that opened onto main street. Sunshine danced across the ground, promising a hot summer.

The streets were crowded for it not to be *First Monday Trade Day* weekend. Business was booming, yet all she wanted to do was leave Valorie in charge and head out to the ranch. She placed her elbows on the counter while images of watching Eli working with his horses appeared in her mind. The fantasy was so vivid, she could almost smell the fresh flowers, hear the wind brushing by, and feel the sun on her face. Imaginary Eli turned and bestowed a blinding smile upon her that sent jolts of heat roaring through her blood stream.

“Why hello there, Autumn,” a deep voice murmured from close by.

She jerked out of her lovely daydream to find K.C. Alfont standing near. His gaze swept over her with clear and open interest. It was all Autumn could do not to cross her arms to cover herself.

“Good afternoon, K.C. How can I help you today?” She fought a shudder at the lecherous gleam in his eyes.

“Well, since you asked,” K.C. responded as he leaned over the top of the dessert glass display case and gave her a look she was willing to bet he

thought made him look suave. She struggled not to roll her eyes. If only he knew.

“I can think of a few ways you could help me.”

Autumn urged the corners of her mouth upward into what she hoped was a smile. Her intent was to hurry him out of the shop. Since the fiasco with Eli, she just didn’t feel like flirting anymore.

\* \* \* \*

Eli stood outside Autumn’s crepe shop and practiced for the hundredth time in the last thirty minutes exactly what he wanted to say to Autumn. That was assuming she’d even take the time to listen to what he had to say.

He released a pent up breath and shook his head. Why was he rehearsing? What he needed to do was wing it. Go with his gut. He grasped the doorknob to enter the shop, but quickly froze when he saw K.C. lean toward Autumn and leer at her openly. A chorus of warning bells went off in Eli’s brain. If he didn’t put up a fight for what he wanted right *now*, he’d spend the rest of his life regretting it.

Eli looked on as K.C. tried to use one of his patented moves on Autumn, and anger and frustration rose to the surface within him.

*Autumn was his future.*

If he couldn’t convince her that he did love her, then he was going to have to deal with seeing her with another man. A man who would know her secrets, share her dreams. A man who would have the right to hold her, love her.

A man who wasn’t him if he didn’t get his act together. Yanking the door open, Eli stepped inside. Ignoring the roomful of customers sitting at the tables, he stormed up to the counter.

Autumn’s gaze jerked to his, but she kept whatever emotions she felt hidden. And that bothered him. Still, just looking into her captivating brown eyes was enough to make him certain that he was doing the right thing. He had to win her back. But there was something else to deal with first.

Eli placed a firm hand on K.C.'s shoulder. When the other man turned his head, an expression of wariness quickly appeared. Eli's jaws clenched. "Take a hike, K.C."

"What?" The man drew away and took a step back. "You can't tell me to take a walk. This is Autumn's shop and I'm a paying customer."

Other people in the crepe shop began to look at them. Eli could feel their stares, but didn't care. He was on a mission.

"Autumn is the only person that can tell me to leave."

Both men turned to stare at Autumn.

She looked at Eli. "Take a hike, K.C."

With severe disgust, K.C. slapped a palm down on the counter, did a sharp about face and stalked out. In the short silence that followed K.C.'s exit, Eli kept his gaze locked on Autumn as he walked around the counter, straight up to her, and cupped her face between his palms. He kissed her long, hard and deep. He put every ounce of emotion he felt into the kiss.

When customers began to applaud, he ended the kiss, but ignored the crowd. He only had eyes for Autumn. Still cupping her face between his palms, he touched his forehead to hers. "I need to talk to you."

He felt her sway slightly, followed by a quick shiver. What he didn't know was why. Then again, he was a little unsteady himself. He'd just strode into her shop and kissed her in front of everyone. Thinking about it all made him shaky, but he had to get himself together. This would be one of the most important conversations of his life. He had to get Autumn to understand that he'd missed her. That he wanted her and so much more.

Relief traveled through him when she gave a slight nod before pulling away. She inhaled deeply, rubbing her fingers across her lips as she exhaled.

"Okay. Talk."

Eli shot a brief look in the direction of the customers who were listening intently. "Can we go somewhere private?"

\* \* \* \*

*Private.* Did he really not know the entire town knew what had been going on between them? She glanced at the customers watching the two of them with open interest, then back at Eli. Whatever he felt he needed to say to her, he could say here in front of everyone. “No.”

“No.”

Someone out in the crowd chuckled.

Autumn shook her head and stuck to her original decision. “I don’t have long. Today has been very busy. So, if you have something to say to me, just say it.”

Eli rubbed one hand behind his neck, then dragged it down the side of his face. “You aren’t going to make this easy for me, are you?”

“If it comes to you too easily, you won’t appreciate it, Eli,” she responded.

“Okay. Whatever you say.” He inclined his head toward their audience. “If you need them to hear me say what I’m about to, then so be it.”

“Fine with me,” she replied, keeping her gaze locked with his.

“I was wrong,” he started.

“You were? About what?”

“Hell, anything you can name,” he grumbled.

“No, Eli,” she stated softly, tilting her head to the side, studying him carefully. “You should tell me.”

“You’re right.” He laughed, void of humor, shook his head and scraped his hand down the side of his face again. “As usual. Like you were right about everything else.”

She smiled. The small sparkle of hope that had come to life the instant he entered the shop exploded within her. “I like what you have to say so far.”

“I’m not finished,” he promised, and reached out to her. His hands encircled her upper arms, his fingers pressing into her skin, driving spirals of heat deep into the core of her soul. “I finally came to a very logical conclusion, Autumn,” he stated, his voice dropping lower and lower to the husky tone that had tormented her during her dreams. “I need you in my life.”



Autumn swallowed hard and bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep herself from talking. Now was not the time to ramble. She just had to listen and hope he said what she needed to hear.

“Anything that happened before you doesn’t matter. Everything in my life is better with you in it. *I’m better* with you.”

He began to rub his hands up and down her arms, creating a powerful connection between them that reached deep within her and latched on.

“*I love* you, Autumn.”

Her breath hitched, lodging in her throat, leaving her to wonder if she’d ever be able to breathe again while she savored the words she’d longed to hear.

“I didn’t want to—didn’t expect to.” He shook his head and tightened his grip as if he expected her to run. Something he didn’t have to worry about. For if he let her go, she was likely to collapse.

“But I do, Autumn. It’s there, it’s real and it’s more than I ever thought I would feel again.”

Holding her tongue was getting harder and harder. But she needed to hear one more thing from him to determine where they would go from here, so she kept quiet.

“I want to marry you, Autumn. Marry me and build a family with me. Become Trent’s mother and help me give him sisters and brothers.”

Autumn’s knees buckled and she released a deep breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding. Suddenly, she felt light—and not because she was on the verge of fainting either. Everything looked so much brighter. She could picture the happily-ever-after future she’d always wanted. She looked up into those since blue eyes of his, and for the first time, she saw the love he spoke of reflected there. But there was still one thing she had to know.

“Before I give you my answer, I need to know one thing, Eli. What made you change your mind?”

He broke eye contact with her, looked at the people watching them, then shifted her to one side so that his back was to their audience and only he could see her face.

“I realized something very important but very simple.”

“What?”

“I was running because of fear. I was afraid to love.”

He released what sounded like a pent up breath, as if admitting that had been difficult for him. But he continued talking. “I was scared to believe again. To take a risk again. And then today I realized that, if I don’t take the chance, I’ll lose you.” He drew her into his embrace and held her tightly. When she tilted her head back to meet his gaze, he whispered, “And living without you is just not an option. It isn’t something I want to do.”

“Eli, you know—”

He smiled at her. “Hold on a second. I know it has been a struggle for you not to say anything for the past several minutes. But give me a few more seconds so I can do this right, okay?”

Autumn snapped her mouth shut as tears began to slide down her cheeks, and nodded.

“I really do love you, Autumn,” he started, and she could see it in his eyes. “Will you marry me?”

When he didn’t continue, she spoke again. “Am I allowed to talk now?”

“Hmm, well it depends on what you are going to say?”

“I’m going to say yes, Eli.”

That heart stopping grin of his appeared and her heart skipped a few beats. “Then you can talk, Autumn.”

“Yes, Eli. I will marry you.”

His arms tightened around her as he lifted her off her feet. “I think that’s the shortest response I’ve ever heard from you.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and brushed a soft kiss against his lips. Then, smiling, she continued, “Well, try not to get used to it, because I have to be honest and say, it almost killed me to not say anything this long when I have so much to ask you and to tell you—like how’s Trent and would he like to be our ring bearer and—”

Eli chuckled. “You’re rambling, Autumn.”

“Then distract me, Eli. Give me something else to do—to think—”

Eli swooped in and captured her mouth with his, doing just that.

The End

## *About the Author*

Stephanie Morris resides in Fort Worth, Texas. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, traveling, dancing, cooking, and spending time with her friends and family. In Stephanie's opinion, there is nothing like curling up with a good book that you can't put down, and she is addicted to writing them. Stephanie can be contacted through her website [www.stephaniemorris.webs.com](http://www.stephaniemorris.webs.com) or via email at [authorstephaniemorris@gmail.com](mailto:authorstephaniemorris@gmail.com).