



Five Alarm Neighbor  
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## Five Alarm Neighbor

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### **Five Alarm Neighbor**

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### Dedication

To J.T. and B.L. The two women, who keep my writing in line, give me a nudge when I'm headed in the wrong direction, and are always there to lend an ear or a shoulder when I need it. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

# Five Alarm Neighbor

## Chapter One

*Steve Sheldon.*

Gracie Terrence stared through her windshield at the man who starred in every torrid late-night fantasy she'd had in the past two years. Tight ass always in blue jeans that fit like a glove. Rock-hard chest. Biceps that could squeeze the stuffing out of her. He sat on the porch of their duplex in one of her wrought iron chairs, his feet propped on the wooden railing.

Even with the car windows up, she could hear the steady *thump thump* of the music blaring from his side of the house. Another firemen party, she figured. Almost weekly he had a night of loud music and even louder men at his place.

She didn't mind the parties in the summer when they hung out in the backyard. Inevitably their shirts came off, their sweaty, muscled bodies flexing in the sunlight as they played kamikaze volleyball. But these winter parties royally pissed her off. Especially when she had a stack of midterm papers to grade before returning to school by seven-fifteen the next morning.

She hadn't left work until nearly nine tonight. Her body lacked food and her head still pounded after hours of forcing herself to read page after page of adolescent bullshit on the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*. She gripped the steering wheel with her chilled hands and bonked her forehead against her fists. The pizza sitting on the passenger seat in its cardboard box was undoubtedly cold and congealed by now.

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Gracie drew in a calming breath. She'd simply ask Steve to turn down the music. She'd let him know she needed some sleep, and feeling the bass vibrations from his half of the house was not going to help her accomplish that.

The porch light illuminated him as he raised a bottle to his mouth. As he tossed back a swig of beer, she focused on the strong column of his throat. *Steve*. Her pussy tingled at the thought of seeing him, speaking to him, hearing that deep voice. She squeezed her thighs together, making the sensation last a second longer. She'd wanted him since the day he moved in two years ago.

And then there was the memory of what she'd glimpsed for a few precious moments last summer, a sight burned into her brain so deep it would never leave—the sight of him magnificently naked.

She'd returned early from a teacher's conference and had caught him playing in the backyard. Stretched out on a lawn lounger only a few feet from her kitchen window, he'd been...

Sitting there, inside her car, the memory pulled a moan from her throat. She ground her ass against the seat, reached between her legs and pressed her fingers against the seam at the crotch of her jeans. She tilted her hips upward and rubbed her clit the same way she'd done that afternoon as she'd watched him slowly, tenderly stroke his engorged cock. It had been long and thick, curved ever so slightly at the tip, perfect for hitting the right spot every time.

She'd watched as he'd pumped himself, saw his speed increase. As his face had tilted back into the sunlight, his eyes shut, and his features became a portrait of pure animal heat, she'd shoved her jeans to the floor and sunk her fingers inside herself, coming with a force that shocked her to the core.

But then, after that mind-blowing orgasm, when Gracie's gaze had returned to him, hoping to catch sight of him coming, wanting to throw open the back door and pounce on him, to milk him dry with her mouth...

Gracie pushed her head against the car's headrest, pressing her hand against her pussy and stifling a frustrated growl. She brought the picture back. Not of the woman who'd draped herself over Steve that day

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and rode him as if he were a wild bronco, but of the look in his blazing blue eyes as he stared through the kitchen window at *her*.

He'd seen her.

He'd watched her come.

And even as his hands gripped another woman's hips, his dick pumping into her, he'd watched Gracie. Damn, he'd been so hot. Daring her to look away. Never in her life had she been so scandalized. Or so turned on.

She'd wanted to join them, to walk out there and straddle his face and make him eat her while he fucked the other woman. But the good girl schoolteacher inside her wouldn't let her move. Never had she had such lascivious thoughts.

He'd licked his lips as if he knew what she was thinking. A slow flicker of his tongue. She'd felt it then as surely as if he'd touched her clit with a hot, wet, deep lick.

She wanted to feel it now. Spreading her legs as far as she could in the confined space behind the steering wheel, she shoved her hand into her jeans. Her breathing sped up, heat rushed to her face, to her limbs, even though the temperature outside was in the low teens. She jammed her fingers inside her pussy, and pressed her other hand against the steering wheel. The red haze began to move into her periphery.

"Yes," she moaned, remembering how he'd raised an eyebrow at her, taunting her to come again.

Then he'd mouthed two words. Words that had sent her hand back to her clit. "Suck me."

The woman had climbed off him, went to her knees at the side of his chair, and took him in her mouth. God, he was so huge, and she took every inch of him. His balls were puckered and round, ready to release their load, and yet his gaze never left Gracie.

He'd slid one hand up his rippled abdomen to his dark, pebbled nipple and squeezed, as his other hand did the same to the woman's tit. Gracie had mimicked the action and squeezed her own hard nipple through her silk camisole.

His eyelids had drooped ever so slightly as he thrust his hips, his cock disappearing into the woman's mouth again and again.

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Then he'd come with an animal growl she heard even through the closed window. And yet he'd watched her until she'd climaxed again.

The thought sent Gracie over the edge as she threw her head against the seatback and came with a whimpered cry, rubbing her clit until every last bit of the orgasm had drained through her.

"Damn him," she whispered into the dark car. "Damn you, Steve Sheldon."

She gasped for breath even as the chill of the cold night settled against her heated skin.

The blonde bombshell with Steve that day had been Erin Rinehart. His fiancée. And even though Gracie knew he was engaged, and even though they'd never once made mention of that steamy afternoon, she wanted him to fuck her more than she ever wanted anything else in her life.

But with his wedding just weeks away, that was as far from a possibility as the next Great American Novelist winding up in Gracie's freshman English class.

I'm not a home wrecker, Gracie thought with disgust as she pulled her hand from her underwear. Even if she lusted for him, she wasn't one to have an affair with a taken man. She'd never survive the guilt.

Watching them, being a third party to their intimate afternoon, had been as close to the line as she dared step.

With a heated flush to her face, she wondered, once they were married, if there'd be many afternoons in the back yard.

Jeez, I'm a sick woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steve sat in the poorly padded chair freezing his ass off. Inside the house, his crew laughed, listened to obnoxiously loud rock n' roll and got shit-faced on cheap beer and even cheaper bourbon.

They deserved it tonight, he thought as he took a swig of his smuggled Corona. So what if he saved the best for himself? The guys didn't care what they drank as long as they could forget about the half

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dozen fire calls they'd been on today. It never failed. The colder winter got, the busier they were.

Gracie's electric blue, two-seater sports car pulled into her side of the driveway. That damn car was a deathtrap. How many times had he and his crew pried victims out of those tin cans? The one time he'd tried to say anything to her about it, she'd informed him that she was an adult, and therefore could pick her own forms of transportation.

The imp.

He chuckled and settled deeper into the chair. Gracie Terrence was something else, all right. One hot babe with a quick-as-a-whip mind.

Now that he was a free man, and he'd gotten over the fact that Erin had left him for a guy with a safer job, he wondered if it was time to play a little. What could it hurt, right? There was the convenience of living next door to her. He'd never seen a man spend the night at her place in the two years he'd lived here, and he knew for a fact that she wasn't a prude.

Steve chuckled to himself as he took another long swallow from the bottle. Oh, no, not little schoolteacher Gracie. She was no prude. Just the memory of that day last August had his cock stiffening in his jeans.

To this day, the memory of that afternoon aroused him. He'd been deep inside Erin when he'd glanced up and saw his cute neighbor staring at him through her kitchen window. He was taken aback for a moment, wondered whether he should grab Erin and haul her ass inside, but then sweet little Gracie had yanked down her jeans and touched herself. At that point, there was nothing to do but to hang on for the ride. And a sweet ride it was.

It was one of the last days he'd enjoyed fucking Erin, he realized. Perhaps that was when things started to go bad between them. Maybe that was why he felt relief rather than despair that she'd called off the wedding.

Even so, the reason she left still hurt. She'd said that no matter how great the sex was, she couldn't commit herself to a man who might be killed or worse, maimed, on the job.

Hell, it would have been kinder if she'd just told him the sex sucked. His job was his life. Nothing he could do about that. He loved being a firefighter, and risking his life was just part and parcel of the job.



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So, that was it for him and long-term women. From now on he was going it single. But that didn't mean celibate. No reason he couldn't get his rocks off with his ultra-sexy redheaded neighbor.

Even looking at her was a treat, which was why he was freezing his ass off on his front porch waiting for her to come home. But what the hell was she doing? She'd been sitting in the car for a good ten minutes. She was probably pissed about the guys again and trying to decide how hard to blast him. Her temper went well with the red hair and flashing green eyes.

Just a few weeks ago she'd come barging into his house after midnight, curly hair a wild mass around her head, bitching him out for the loud music when she had to get up early the next morning.

Piss ass drunk at the time—Erin had dumped him that day and the guys were commiserating with him—he'd been a total ass. Right there in front of his men he'd grabbed her butt and told her to chill out, have a drink.

She'd slugged him in the gut. And damned if that woman didn't have one hell of a right uppercut.

She hadn't so much as bid him a "fuck you asshole" since then, which is what she'd said after she punched him. The guys still hadn't let him live that one down.

He took another gulp of his beer and shivered. It was past time he apologized for his behavior, but if she didn't get her hot little ass up here soon, he was going to freeze to the chair.

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### Chapter Two

Gracie picked up her bag and purse off the passenger side floor, threw her door open then balanced the pizza box precariously on her forearm. He was still there, as if he was waiting for her. She made her way up the walk toward her front door, casting a quick look back at her car, wondering if he'd seen what she'd done. No, the car remained out of the porch light's reach, hidden in shadowy darkness of the driveway. There's no way he could have seen into the car.

"Evenin'," he said in that deep, I-know-all-your-dirty-little-secrets voice.

"Yeah, hi," she said, barely glancing at him. She didn't need to look at him to know how damn hot he was. With his sun bleached blonde hair and dark blue eyes, he was a dangerous combination of little boy charm and fuck me now male energy.

Trying to keep a grip on her bags and the pizza, she dropped her keys. "Shit."

Steve was there instantly, grabbing her keys before she dropped anything else. "Got it." He stuck the key in the lock and sent her a wicked grin.

Her scalp tightened and her pussy throbbed. The man was lethal.

"Thanks," she said coolly. If he'd just stay away from her, she'd be fine. She could deal with him from a distance, as long as she never had to speak to him. She was a damn English teacher, but she went completely tongue-tied when he was within touching space.

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"Good day at work?" he asked as he pushed the door open and stepped to the side to let her pass.

"Fine."

"Want a beer to go with your pizza?"

She'd just stepped into the cozy warmth of her house when she stopped and turned wide eyes on him. "What?"

Steve leaned down and picked up a six-pack of Corona from the porch floor, lifting it toward her. "A beer. Want one?"

"I...uh..." *What the hell is he up to?* After two years of living next door to him, only once had he offered her a drink, and that had been just weeks ago while he was drunk and being obnoxious.

"Pizza smells good," he said as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him, leaving them in the dim light streaming through the front window.

Her stomach fluttered and her nipples pulled tight inside her lace bra. He'd never stepped foot in her house before. *Never.*

His arm lifted from his side, and then she blinked as light flooded the room. When the glare subsided, she took a step back. He watched her with predatory eyes, the same eyes he'd watched her with as Erin had sucked his cock.

"I'm hungry."

*Had he really said that?* Did he recognize the hunger in her eyes? She wanted to suck him off, lick his balls, taste his cum. Her hands shook and she nearly dropped the pizza.

The corner of his lips kicked up and it transformed into his charming little boyish grin. Just like that. "How 'bout I swap you a beer for a slice of that pizza?"

She spun away, praying he hadn't seen the need in her eyes, urging her own crazed thoughts under control. So what if he was the hottest bod to ever step foot into her house? So what if she wanted to throw him onto the couch and kiss every inch of that body? He was engaged. Taken. Gracie didn't go there. Not even with Steve.

"I think you have some guests," she said, keeping her voice from rising even though inside she was panicking. "And I have work to do." If

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he didn't leave soon, she would not—*could not*—be held responsible for anything she might do. She was human after all.

"They're all drunk." Steve took the box from her hand before she even reached the kitchen. He set it on the counter along with the beer. "And I have an apology to make."

She dropped her purse and schoolbag to the floor, then shed her down jacket and tossed it on the couch. "An apology?"

That adorable grin remained on his lips, and all she could think about was what was under his denim jacket. What was beneath the fly of his jeans. With a will of their own, her gaze flicked down there and—*Oh shit*, he had a hard-on. She could see the long ridge of it, the outline of the tip.

She squeezed her thighs together and prayed he'd leave soon. Hadn't her trip down memory lane in the car been enough? Not hardly, she thought. As soon as he was out the door, she'd grab her vibrator and really take care of herself. Hard and deep. Just like he'd do her.

Steve cleared his throat, and she ripped her gaze away from his crotch. Oh damn, he'd caught her looking. Not just looking, staring. And already starting the fantasy that would get her through the next few hours. Her cheeks flamed, but she met his gaze boldly.

"Apologize then, and be done with it."

He took a step toward her, until she could smell the beer on his breath, the spicy cologne he wore, the musky scent of his skin.

She swallowed, her throat dry. Maybe a beer would hit the spot.

"I'm sorry for grabbing your ass and being rude in front of the guys. That was uncalled for." His baby blues darkened to something menacing. Something thrilling. "I apologize for grabbing your ass now, but it's something I've got to do."

Before his words registered, she was in his arms. His big, warm hands cupped her butt. His rock-hard chest pressed against her breasts, the solid length of his cock nudging her abdomen. And then his mouth claimed hers, fulfilling half of every fantasy she'd ever had of him.

*Oh, God. Yes!* His lips were firm, commanding. His tongue tasted of beer and lust. Primal. He took possession and thrust into her mouth again

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and again. *More!* she wanted to scream but was too busy trying to breathe, trying to maintain some sense of sanity.

He growled into her mouth and turned with her, pressing her back into the counter as he thrust his hips against her.

Her nipples ached. Her pussy throbbed. She'd never come from a kiss before, but she was so damned close. So close...

"No," she groaned as she ripped her mouth away from his, which nearly killed her. "No."

He panted against her cheek but didn't release her. His hands flexed on her ass, making her whimper.

"Steve. No."

"Yes."

"Erin." Saying that woman's name speared guilt through her, made her feel sick. If it weren't for Erin...

After a few breath-stopping moments, he let go of her. She thanked God for the counter behind her, which prevented her traitorous knees from giving way.

Then the man had the audacity to laugh.

"You're an asshole," she growled, still afraid to move in case her legs had actually turned to jelly.

"You want me to call her up?" he asked when his fit slowed. "Tell her to come on over? Do you only get off through voyeurism?"

"Fuck you."

"That's more like it." He reached for her, but she ducked under his arm and scooted around the island in the center of the kitchen.

"Don't."

"If you only meant that, Gracie dear, I'd be out the door before you could blink. But I know what you want."

His eyes glittered dangerously, and she shivered. The bastard was right. He did know what she wanted, but that didn't mean she'd take it, regardless of the consequences.

"You're engaged! It's wrong." Who she was trying to convince, she wasn't sure. But she would not have sex, no matter how great it might be, with a man who was taken. That was a line she'd never allow herself to cross.

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Steve took a big mental step back. *Shit*. No wonder she looked like she was going to cut off his balls. Even after that hot afternoon, she'd never come on to him. He'd known she was a woman of morals, and he appreciated that about her. He just hoped it didn't put a damper on the getting his rocks off with her thing. He needed to find out if she was someone he could have a little fun with, or if she didn't do one—or a few—night stands.

"I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" Her eyes were huge, wary. But she was also so turned on her body practically hummed. No one that wasn't hot for him would kiss him like she did. She tasted so carnal. Hell, she even smelled of sex.

"She dumped me for a bloodsucking lawyer."

Her lush red lips fell open into a silent "O".

"Yeah. That night you came over, the night I acted like a total prick... She'd just told me it was over. She even admitted that she'd been with this other guy for a while."

Gracie came around the island. "Oh, Steve, I'm..." She let out a quick breath. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

He shrugged again. Ran his hand through his hair. He wasn't looking for her sympathy, but he had to admit it was kind of...comforting. "I'm really sorry I was such an ass to you that night."

"I'll take that beer now."

*Damn it*. Now she looked at him as if he was a lost puppy she wanted to take home and nurture. That's not what he wanted at all.

Grabbing a beer from the carton, he pulled his key chain from his pocket and used the bottle opener to pop the top. She took the bottle from him, being oh so careful not to touch him.

"How about if I put the pizza in the oven to warm, and you can have a seat while I...um...freshen up."

Disgusted with himself for putting a damper on the lust and bringing out the tenderhearted motherly side of her, he grabbed another

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beer for himself, plopped down on the couch and stared at the cold fireplace. After shrugging out of his jacket, he tossed it over the back of the couch. He'd gotten into her house, gotten his hands on her, and then fucked it all up.

He adjusted himself inside his jeans. The hard-on hadn't diminished one bit, promising a long, painful night. At least until he could make his escape and get back to his place and the privacy of his bathroom. Hell, with the state he was in, the front yard would be too far to walk.

Closing his eyes, he laid his hand over his dick, gripped the icy beer bottle in the other hand, and prayed he wouldn't make a fool of himself in front of Gracie.

He hadn't been this horny in years. He hadn't wanted to feel a hot pussy around his pulsating cock this bad in...maybe never? Every heartbeat made it jump inside his jeans, and a low groan ripped from his throat as he stroked himself.

"Did you say something?"

He jerked his hand away from his crotch and whipped his head around to see Gracie standing at the counter. He hadn't thought it was possible, but his cock got harder. She'd changed into something he'd seen her in last summer. Tiny shorts that showed off every inch of her mile-long legs and tight round ass. A black ribbed tank top that, when she moved, rubbed against her nipples and made them hard.

He shook his head, cleared his throat. "No." He was so ready to open his fly for a bit of relief.

She smiled at him and then leaned over the open oven door. Was she trying to kill him? Yes, he was sure of it. You don't waggle that kind of ass in a horny man's face and not expect him to grab it and slam into it.

He popped the cap off his beer and guzzled it.

If he got drunk...

A rueful laugh ripped from his throat. Didn't matter how piss-ass drunk he got tonight. Nothing was going to satisfy him but Gracie.

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### Chapter Three

Gracie pulled the pizza from the oven and set it on the counter. Her nerves jangled and her hands shook. Steve was single? He was here in her house, and he obviously wanted her. Bad.

Single!

Erin was gone. What a dumb bitch. *She* had dumped *him*.

Pulling plates from the cupboard, Gracie steadied her grip so she didn't drop them.

She wondered if she could go through with the plan she'd made while in her bedroom. She'd washed up, dabbed her favorite perfume behind her ear, and slipped into an outfit that had made him look twice last summer. She thought she'd make him forget Erin completely, at least for tonight. He didn't seem totally heartbroken over the loss of his fiancée, more pissed off that she'd dumped him for another guy. So why not have a little fun together? It wasn't as if he was here to propose marriage to her, so what was wrong with some adult foreplay...and more?

She wasn't in this for the long haul, so there was no chance of letting her heart get involved. Especially not with someone who worked in the rescue business. Hell no. She'd lost her dad when she was sixteen, while he was on a search and rescue mission in the Rockies looking for some stupid-ass mountain climber who'd disappeared. An avalanche had come down on top of her father, killing him instantly. No, heroes weren't on her long-term agenda.

But one night? Oh, hell yeah. Maybe two, she thought with a chuckle of anticipation.



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Never in her life had she been forward with a man, but if this was her one and only chance, she was going all the way. Revel in every second of the experience. She moved a couple pizza slices to each plate, picked up some napkins and then grabbed another beer. After downing the first one in her room, she'd decided a little liquid courage never hurt. She wasn't sure she could do all the things to Steve that she wanted to do if she were stone cold sober.

She trembled with the pleasure of wet heat between her thighs. Oh, yeah, tonight was going to be a night to remember.

Steve slouched on the couch, a pillow over his lap and a half empty bottle of beer propped on it. She handed him one of the plates, then sat down next to him, careful not to touch him. *Yet*. Nourishment first. Then hot, hard sex.

"Thanks," he mumbled. He leaned forward and set his bottle on the coffee table. The pillow stayed on his lap. She stifled a grin and bit into her pizza. He couldn't fool her. He was acting like a kid.

They each polished off the food in silence. She set her plate on the table, wiped her mouth with a napkin, then reached for her beer. "Open this for me?" she asked, as she turned sideways to face him and brought one knee up on the couch, lightly bumping his thigh.

When he dug into his pocket for his key ring, the pillow slid off his lap. Damn. The bulge was still big, but not the solid ridge that'd been there before. She'd have to do something about that. Her nipples tightened in anticipation.

Would he be forceful and rough? Submissive to her every whim? Gentle and sweet? At this point she didn't give a damn as long as he made her come. It'd been a long time since she'd been with a real live man. Her vibrator, which she affectionately called Stanley and used quite often, just couldn't compete with hot flesh or the musky scent of a sexually aroused male. And damn, this man smelled good.

He flipped the top off the beer and handed it to her, then watched her with those blazing blue eyes as she tipped the bottle back and drank down a few long swallows.

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She lowered the bottle from her lips and glanced toward his crotch. *Oh yeah, much better.* Her pussy throbbed in response to the sight of the long, thick line of his cock outlined by his jeans.

When her gaze met his again, she slowly licked her lips.

His eyes narrowed as he watched her mouth, his chest rose and fell with deep breaths, but he didn't move toward her.

Shit, she sucked at seduction. Well, what did she expect? She'd never tried it before, hadn't had to really. It wasn't as if she'd ever had a difficult time getting laid. She had a good body and tried to take care of herself. When she used to frequent the singles bars, after a quick hello, there wasn't anything left to do except enjoy herself.

"Why'd you come here tonight?" she asked, dropping her voice a little, slowing her normally quick speech.

His gaze lowered to her breasts and as if he commanded them, her nipples poked out against her tank top. Her breath sucked in with surprise at the intense electrical bolts that shot through her, zinging straight to her vagina.

"Why do you think I came here?" he said, then dropped his gaze even further to settle on her crotch. Could he tell how wet she was? Hot? Practically halfway there just from looking at him?

She let out a throaty little laugh. "To apologize?"

His gaze took a slow trip along her bare thigh. Still he didn't move toward her.

Frustration bubbled through her even as the heat of his gaze shot fireworks off in her brain. She wanted to squirm. To reach down and touch herself. To relieve the ache between her thighs.

"I think by morning I'll have a lot to apologize for." His gaze moved up over her hips, her belly, stopping at her nipples. Now rock-hard and almost painful, they begged for his mouth, his tongue. He cut his gaze upward and met her eyes. "Unless you tell me to leave, right now."

She whimpered at the dark danger she saw in his eyes. They practically glowed with feral heat. This wasn't going to be some casual stroll in the park. When he took her, it was going to be hard. Real hard.

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Her body shook with excitement. "If you leave now, Fireman, you *will* be sorry."

He nodded. "Good. Because I have plans for you, Teach."

She couldn't take it any longer. Reaching up she squeezed her nipple, hoping for just a tiny relief.

"Ah, ah, ah." Steve grabbed her wrist, pulling her hand away from her breast. "I've seen you pleasure yourself, Gracie dear." Still holding her wrist, he stood and tugged her to her feet. "Tonight you're not allowed to touch yourself in any way."

His voice was low, commanding. The happy-go-lucky Steve with the boyish grin had vanished and in his place stood someone who was more powerful. Even more of a turn-on.

"Understand me, Gracie dear?"

A shiver raced through her at his sinister tone. Goose bumps popped out on her arms. "Yes, sir," she said, letting him know she willingly stepped into his game. Very willingly.

He gave a slight nod, picked up their beer bottles in his free hand, and led her to the bedroom. After setting the bottles on the nightstand, he flicked on the lamp by the bed to its lowest setting, her wrist still firmly clasped in his other hand. The soft light flickered off his golden hair, but when he turned toward her, there was nothing soft about him. His face in shadow, he looked hard, like someone she'd run from on a dark street.

But she had no intension of fleeing her bedroom. As his gaze bore into her, there was nowhere she'd rather be. Never had she let anyone dominate her. She never would've guessed how thrilling it would be. How hot it would make her.

"Take off your clothes." He let go of her wrist and stepped back a half pace to give her room.

Shoving her shorts down her legs, she glanced up at him from under her lashes. His jaw ticked, his eyes narrowed. He slowly shook his head. A dare.

As she stepped out of the shorts and slowly stood up, she ran her hands up her thighs, dipped her fingers into her wet crevice. The moan slipped out without warning.

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Steve grabbed her hand and spun her around, pulled her other arm behind her back. "I warned you, Gracie dear," he growled in her ear. "No touching."

Shocked at the speed with which he'd trapped her, a little shiver of fear sliced through her. He was big and very strong. What if this wasn't a game? What if...? No. She'd known him for two years. Surely she'd know if he were some crazed lunatic.

"Orange," he said softly in her ear.

"Huh?" She tried turning her head to see him, but the way he held her, she could barely move.

"The safe word. Orange. Say it once. That's all it takes."

His voice was gentle now, and the fear inside her slipped away. She nodded her understanding.

"I'll let you go, if you swear to behave." His voice was firm once again, and she smiled to herself. *Holy shit*. Mark this night up as one to remember. He was good. And she knew he'd never do anything she didn't want. But damned if she didn't want it *all*.

She gave a stiff nod, and he released her hands.

"Take off your shirt."

Grabbing the hem, she pulled the tank top over her head and dropped it on the floor.

"Turn around."

Dropping her head forward, getting into the role of a scared submissive, she slowly turned toward him.

"Not bad. I think you'll do."

From what she could see, she'd more than do. God, she wanted to get his pants off. Get her hands—her mouth—on that dick. She bit her lip to keep from grinning.

"Are you wet?"

His words sent another hot lighting bolt racing through her, flushing her skin. Yeah, hell yeah, she was wet. Practically dripping with it. "I...I'm not sure."

"Spread your legs."

She moved her legs apart a tiny bit.

"More."

## Anna Leigh Keaton

Another small movement.

He reached out and slid his middle finger between her aching folds, purposely avoiding her clit. The bastard.

His middle finger glistened with her slick juice when he held it up. "Getting there," he said. He rubbed his finger over her nipple, and she whimpered as the cool air touched her wet tit, drawing it into a hardened peak.

"Taste," he said, holding his finger just an inch away from her mouth.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

### Chapter Four

Steve controlled his breathing as best he could, but dammit, he'd never been so ready to explode. Her body was everything he'd fantasized about and more. Full, ripe breasts with huge, dusky rose nipples. A tiny waist and flared hips. Built for a man to fuck.

When he started this little game, he hadn't realized how hard it was going to be to control his own need. He'd never been much for domination, or maybe it was that no one he'd tried it on fell into the role so quickly and easily. There'd only been that one tense second when he felt real fear from her, but he'd easily remedied that.

He rubbed his damp finger over her full bottom lip. "Taste it, I said."

Her pink tongue darted out, just barely stroking his fingertip. His cock jumped. If he didn't get out of these jeans soon, he'd be permanently disabled. And God help him, he didn't think he could collect disability on a sex injury.

He pressed his finger against her lips. "Taste it," he commanded.

She drew his middle finger into her mouth. Her tongue swirled around it, just like she'd do to his cock. He bit back a groan and withdrew his finger.

"Get on the bed."

Gracie climbed onto the high bed and curled into a ball on the far side, facing away from him. Oh yeah, she was good. The shy little teacher thing was a major turn on. Especially since he knew she didn't have a shy

## Anna Leigh Keaton

bone in her body. No one who watched him come in another woman's mouth, and got off on seeing it, could possibly be introverted.

"On your back."

She didn't move.

He bit back a grin. Cleared his throat. "Gracie dear, don't make me angry."

She slowly uncurled, the motion deliberate and provocative. He watched her hand slide down the curve of her waist, skim over her ass.

"I'm warning you."

She rolled onto her back and looked up at him with a sweet pout on her sexy red lips. "I need to come."

He ripped open his button fly and skimmed his T-shirt over his head. Pushing his jeans and briefs to the floor he almost wound up on his face, forgetting he still wore his steel-toed work boots. Letting out a slow breath and praying he didn't come before he got inside her, he sat on the edge of the bed and unlaced his boots as quickly as his shaky fingers allowed.

Holy fuck, this was so unlike him. Sex was pleasurable, sure, but never in his thirty-three years, not even as an experimenting teen, had he been so close to losing control and blowing his load before he wanted to.

He kicked off his boots and shoved the pants, underwear and socks to the floor. Then paused, remembering. He snatched his pants up again and dug the condom packet from his wallet. When he rolled over to reach for Gracie, she had one hand in her crotch, the other squeezing one of those luscious nipples. With her head thrown back into the pillow, her long, graceful neck exposed, Steve's heart stopped for a second. He'd never seen anything so sexy, so sensuous, in his life.

"Stop," he commanded in his firmest tone.

Her hands jerked away from her body, she turned her head away from him. "I'm sorry, sir," she whispered, but the way she arched her ass against the bed said otherwise. She was so close to coming he could smell it.

He'd wanted to eat her, lick up her juices, hear her cries as she came. But he wasn't going to make it. Not this time. Next time. Tomorrow

## Five Alarm Neighbor

night he'd take his time with her. Learn all her flavors and scents. Tonight he'd embarrass himself if he tried to hold off too long.

"You are very naughty," he said as he crawled toward her.

She shook her head, squeezed her eyes shut as if in fear. But her lips curled slightly.

"You don't follow directions worth a damn."

"I do. I promise."

"You lie, too."

"No," she whispered.

He straddled her and propped his hands on either side of her head. When his cock rubbed against her downy fur, he barely stopped another groan from breaking free.

"Look at me."

She shook her head.

"Look at me or you won't come tonight."

Her eyes popped open, their green depths sparkling. He held her gaze a few seconds, then let his slide over a slender neck to lush, white breasts with dark, hard nipples. Knowing she watched him closely, he leaned down and drew one between his lips. She cried out and thrust against him.

"Don't fucking move," he growled. With every bit of willpower he possessed, he forced the pressure riding his balls to back down. He wasn't ready yet. She wasn't ready yet. He wanted to come with her. Inside her.

"Please, sir," she panted.

He slowly licked the nipple and then blew on it, watching it harden even more. "Please, sir, what, Gracie dear?"

"Please fuck me, sir."

"Naughty language, Gracie dear. That's not very nice talk, is it?"

He sucked her tit into his mouth and ground his cock against her pubic bone.

She screamed and her nails bit into his thighs.

With a hiss, he grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head. "Not nice to hurt me, either."

"Fuck me," she growled. Her eyes blazed with animal heat. Her teeth gnashed together. Her entire body vibrated. When he went for the



## Anna Leigh Keaton

other nipple, she bucked and moaned. He sucked harder, making her scream in passionate frustration. "I hate you!"

"Are you wet now, Gracie dear?" he asked with a smirk, even though he knew she was. He could smell her sex, could feel the hot juices against his balls.

"Dripping."

"Very good." He grabbed up the condom and ripped the packet. "Put it on me."

With shaky fingers—thank God he wasn't the only one here about ready to burst—she rolled the rubber over his dick. His eyes damn near rolled back in his head.

"Now," she commanded, drawing his attention back to her sprawled beneath him. Ready and wanting.

He chuckled. He wished the game could last longer, but he was too close. Still, he had a role to play. "Who's the boss, here, Gracie dear?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, slashed her fingers through his hair and pulled his face close to hers. "If you don't fuck me right this second, I'm going to hurt you."

What the lady wants, the lady gets, he thought as he ground his mouth against hers, shoved his tongue between her teeth, tasting beer and lust.

She moaned and bucked. Her fingernails bit into his scalp and the pain added to his pleasure.

Shoving her thighs wide, he made one quick swipe with his hand to make sure she was ready. He found her slick, wet. Perfect. In one hard thrust he drove all the way into her.

She pulled her mouth from his and screamed. Her hips rose to meet him and her nails dug into his shoulders.

It took every bit of self-control not to come on the spot. She was so damn tight! With her head thrown back, her face tight with unleashed passion, she was a fire-haired goddess. A goddess under his command.

Slowly, so slowly he pulled out. She mewled and her nails scored his back. Sweat beaded his brow as he tried to control his breathing.

"More," she demanded.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

He slammed into her again, and again she screamed. The sound tore through him, almost shattering his will.

She reared up and bit his shoulder. Hard.

He grunted and pushed her down on the bed, his big hands covering her breasts, pinching her nipples. "Beg for it."

"Please," she cried, as he pushed the head of his cock inside and stopped.

"What do you want, Gracie dear? Tell me exactly what you want."

Her eyes opened, her gaze bore into his. "I want everything you have and more." Her voice was raspy, strained. "I want to be fucked harder than you've ever fucked another woman. I want every inch of your dick deep inside me, and I want to feel you come."

He pulled out of her. If he hadn't, her words alone would have sent him over the edge. He flipped her onto her stomach, shoved the pillows under her hips so her ass stuck up in the air. "Grab the headboard Gracie. You asked for it."

She gripped the top of the headboard and spread her legs wide, showing him everything he needed to die a happy man. He loved the sight of her tight round ass, her hot, pink pussy.

"Hurry," she pleaded.

He leaned over and nipped her right cheek. She squealed and jerked away. Grabbing her waist to keep her still, he bit the left one. She moaned and shoved back against him.

One taste, he thought as he buried his face against her folds and lapped up her sweet liquid. "So good." He pushed his tongue into her, and she moved against his face.

He gripped his cock and pressed against his balls to keep from coming. He was so damned close.

He flicked her clit with the tip of his tongue, and she squirmed. "Again," she demanded.

He sucked her hot little clit between his lips. She cried out and her body tensed. He went up on his knees, positioned himself behind her and rubbed the tip of his cock along her slick folds.

"Don't be an asshole."

He chuckled. "Tell me again, Gracie dear."

## Anna Leigh Keaton

"Hard. Damn you, Steve. *Hard!*"

He slapped her ass.

"Ow!"

He slapped again, knew it stung, but she laughed, deep and throaty. He wished he could see her face. Even before he'd thought of her as a sex toy, her sweet face had always been stunning.

"You ready, Gracie dear?"

She looked at him over her shoulder, her eyes narrowed. "If you don't do it now, I'm going to get Stanley out of the drawer and do it myself."

He chuckled. He could guess who Stanley might be. Damned if she'd use a dildo while he was here. Not tonight, anyway.

Rubbing his hand over the smooth, warm skin of her ass, he couldn't get over how perfect she was. Hoping he'd gotten himself under control, he slowly slid the tip of his penis into her hot, tight pussy.

Her arms shook as she held on to the headboard. He rocked back and forth, entering only an inch or so, pulling away.

"Don't you know how to follow directions?" Gracie snarled one second before she thrust backward and took him all the way in.

The laugh died on his lips as she rocked forward then slammed back against him. A groan tore from his throat, and he ground his balls against her. "Yeah, baby."

She pulled away, and he jerked her back. A little purr came from her as he withdrew yet again. He didn't want kitty noises from her. He wanted loud, long screams of passion. He crashed into her, causing her to moan. Not nearly loud enough. Gripping her hips, holding her still, he pulled back, then pounded into her as hard as he could. Again and again in a hot, hard, pulsating rhythm.

Her back bowed, her arms went straight as she held herself still for his beating. Still she didn't make a sound.

His balls smacked against her clit, his body making a satisfying slap against her ass with each thrust. He gritted his teeth and held back his own release. Sweat ran down his chest, and Gracie's back glistened with her own.

"Harder!" she demanded. "*Deeper!*"

## Five Alarm Neighbor

He ground against her with each deep penetration. No woman had ever taken so much of him. Wanted so much from him. Gracie, hot little Gracie wanted it all and more.

Releasing his control, he attacked. With a sound he didn't recognize as his own, he came down on top of her, grabbed her breasts and took her hard and fast and unleashed. The new position made her pussy even tighter and he shouted in exquisite pain.

When Gracie screamed, he went over the edge. The world shattered and went black. All he could hear were Gracie's cries. All he could feel was the tight milking of her muscles around his cock. All he could smell was sweet, sweet sex and Gracie's musky, damp skin.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

### Chapter Five

Gracie sucked in huge breaths. Her limbs were weak and heavy. Even her head felt like a brick as she turned it so her face wasn't buried in the mattress. Steve's hands still held her breasts in a loose grip. His face nuzzled the back of her neck. The weight of his body felt luscious, better than any fantasy she'd made up.

"I think I died," Steve mumbled against her hair.

Gracie drew in a quick breath as she felt his penis slowly slide out of her. She chuckled. "Heaven or Hell?"

His fingers flexed around her nipples. "Heaven. Definitely Heaven." He rolled off her and onto his back, his arm flopping to his side as if he, too, had just had the best sex of his life.

She studied his features as they relaxed into the little boy softness that always brought a smile to her lips. His eyes closed and his lips parted slightly. His chest rose and fell with the effort of regaining his strength. She grinned, feeling triumphant. Never in her life had she thought she could be quite so wanton or say the things to a man that she'd said to him.

One eye peeked open, a royal blue flash against his brown lashes. A grin split his face. "You look thoroughly satisfied, Gracie dear."

She raised one eyebrow, the only part of her body she could move. "So do you, sir."

He chuckled and rolled to sit on the edge of the bed. She envied him that he wasn't as weak as she felt. Worn out, she corrected. Completely done in. Usually she could come three or four times with Stanley before she was relaxed enough to sleep, but right now, as her

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eyelids drifted shut, she felt as if she were floating on a big fluffy cloud. Her fingers and toes still tingled. Tiny electric aftershocks shot from her crotch with just the slightest tensing of her muscles. She sighed.

The bed jiggled a bit as Steve stood. She listened as his clothing rustled, and then he strode out of the room. She wouldn't have minded a little cuddling, she thought absently as she floated on her warm, pink cloud. Oh well.

The bed dipped and she forced her eyes open. The light had been turned off, and all she could see now was his silhouette, a deeper shadow in the darkness. "Forget somethin'?"

He chuckled. "You sleep like that, you're going to be a tangled mess of complaining muscles in the morning." He slipped one pillow from beneath her belly, then the other.

"Thanks," she mumbled as she settled into the mattress. Even her tongue felt heavy.

The bed dipped again and then he was pulling her against him. "Come here, babe."

A slow grin played at her lips as she snuggled against him, her head in the hollow of his shoulder. "Don't you have company you should see to?" she asked around a yawn.

"Naw. Listen." His thickly muscled arm slid around her back.

"I don't hear anything." Nothing but the strong, steady beat of his heart under her ear.

"The stereo's off. Chances are they're all crashed out in my house. Someone usually takes my bed if I'm not in it."

Gracie chuckled and edged her leg over his thigh. "So you'd have no place to sleep, huh?"

"If you threw me out now, I'd have to crash in my truck. I could freeze to death."

She ran her hand through the light patch of springy hair on his chest. "Make for a bad headline," she murmured. "Fireman freezes to death after sex."

"The best sex of his life," Steve said through a chuckle that rumbled from his chest. Gracie shivered and scooted closer to him.

"Mine too."

Anna Leigh Keaton

"Been wanting to get my hands on you for months."

"Years."

Another rumble.

"Did she break your heart?"

Gracie didn't know where that question came from, or why it was important that he really wasn't suffering over that blonde bimbo. But it was. She didn't want him to hurt. He'd find someone else. Someone who'd cherish him like he should be cherished.

"Say goodnight, Gracie," was his answer.

"G'night, Gracie."

The last thought she had before she drifted off to sleep was that she wouldn't mind being the one to cherish him, not if that meant spending the rest of her life wrapped in his strong, safe arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Something soft, warm and wet tickled the skin between her shoulder blades. She squirmed. It licked her lower back. She moaned and pulled the pillow over her head. Something sharp stung her ass.

"Hey!" She jerked away and rolled onto her side.

Steve's deep laughter sent spirals of heat through her. Predawn light streamed in through the window, casting his boyish smile in cool gray shadows. Her breath caught in her throat. He hadn't left yet.

"What's with you biting my butt?" she asked, forcing a frown.

With a wide grin, he sprawled next to her, his penis jutting out, proud as could be. "Never had my mouth on such a delectable ass before. Can't seem to get enough."

She pressed her lips together, but couldn't completely stifle her smile. Reaching out, she ran her hand over his rippling abs. "I didn't get to do much exploring last night," she said, her voice unnaturally husky.

He rolled to his back, propped his hands behind his head. "By all means, Gracie dear, explore away."

Trailing her finger over his stomach, she reached the tip of his cock. He was huge. Squeezing her thighs together, reveling in the return of her

## Five Alarm Neighbor

arousal, she rubbed her finger over the silky tip. A tiny drop of moisture glistened in the wake of her touch.

“Just one little problem with your plan, babe.”

Gracie raised her gaze to his, saw his lips tip up in that wicked little grin. “What problem?”

“If you start playing now, I guarantee you’re going to be late for work.”

She jerked her head to the side and glared at the clock. “Oh, shit.” She scrambled over Steve, earning a grunt from him, and dashed for the bathroom. First period class started in forty-five minutes. *Shit, shit, shit.* She had a half hour to get to the school.

Jumping into the shower before the water was hot, she yelped and silently cursed Steve for letting her oversleep, even though she was the one who forgot to set the alarm last night. She shampooed, conditioned, soaped and rinsed in record time. When she threw back the shower curtain, Steve was there with a towel and a teasing gleam in those baby blues.

“Not one word, mister, or you’ll pay.”

“Promises, promises,” he muttered as he shook out the towel and tossed it at her before he turned and walked out of the bathroom. Still naked. Wide muscular shoulders, long torso tapering to narrow hips. Tight ass and thick thighs. He was so gorgeous. Made her hot, tingly. Wet and ready for another round.

He rounded the corner out of sight, and she pulled her thoughts back to the day ahead of her. Damn, she hadn’t even graded the three term papers she’d brought home. She’d have to do it during her lunch hour.

She dried quickly, dragged her brush through her hair and pulled it back into a wet ponytail. She didn’t have time for anything else. One last look in the mirror. Forget the makeup, too. Dashing into her bedroom she pulled clean panties, bra and socks from the top drawer of her bureau and jerked them on. She grabbed a pair of jeans and a green blouse from the closet, and then picked up her shoes from the floor before heading into the living room.



## Anna Leigh Keaton

The television was on, the morning news rambling low. She wiggled into her jeans and buttoned her blouse. Steve stood in her kitchen wrapping something in tinfoil. Fuck, did the guy walk around his own house naked? She hadn't gone as far as turning into a Peeping Thomasina, but she just might start if she could see this every morning.

She chuckled as she sat down and pulled her socks on.

"Something funny?" Steve asked, coming toward her.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" He was lethal, and she didn't have the time she wanted to admire his bod. His dick was semi-erect, and she briefly wondered if he'd taken care of things while she was in the shower. Or maybe that was his natural state?

"Nope. Off for the next two days. Coffee?" he asked, holding a travel mug out to her.

She stood and yanked up the zipper of her jeans. "Thanks. Need it." She took the mug from him and rushed to the counter where she'd dropped her bags the night before. She spun around searching for her keys.

She hated being unprepared. Finding her keys, she snatched them up. And she hated being late. She aimed an accusatory glare at Steve.

"Whoa, there, Gracie. Don't bite." He chuckled and handed her a tinfoil package. "Left over pizza. For lunch."

Something in her chest went a little soft. Something that wasn't supposed to get soft around Steve. "Thanks," she said quietly and stuffed it in her bag. She turned to grab her coat.

"What time will you be home tonight?" he asked, then took a sip from one of her floral coffee mugs. The dainty cup looked very breakable in his big hands.

"Listen, Steve." She zipped her jacket. "I'm not looking for anything...long term. I mean, I..." Her voice faded. She threw her hands out, not knowing how to tell the guy he was a great piece of ass, but that's all she wanted.

Steve chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose. "You don't need to look so terrified, Gracie dear." He grabbed her, pulling her body flush against his.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

Gazing into his eyes, she witnessed the change that overcame him—palpable and animalistic. His eyes darkened. His facial muscles tightened.

“I’m just not done with you yet.” His mouth attacked hers, his tongue invading to tangle with hers. Gracie’s body betrayed her. She grabbed his shoulders, hung on for support as her knees went weak and her pussy throbbed.

“Are you done with me?” he asked when he raised his head.

She couldn’t speak, her mouth incapable of forming an answer. All she could do was shake her head.

He winked, the boyish grin back in place. “Didn’t think so.” He let go of her and stepped back.

“My God,” she said on a shaky laugh.

He chuckled. “What time? I’ll bring supper.”

The man was hard again, his thick, solid dick practically begging for her mouth. With a sigh, she forced her gaze from his body and picked up her bag and purse. “I’ll try for six, but I can’t promise.”

“Good enough.”

She grabbed the travel mug of coffee from the counter, and Steve walked with her to the door. “Lock up before you leave?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Bye.” She reached for the doorknob.

“Hey.”

She stopped, turned her head toward him.

He caught her lips in a tender kiss. “Drive careful. The temperature came up and it rained last night. Morning news says the roads are bad.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He kissed her again, lightly traced her lips with his tongue. “Think about me.”

She laughed and shoved her shoulder against his chest. “Bye.”

Heading to her car, she noticed he’d been right. The temperature was hovering right above freezing, and even her front driveway was covered in a sheet of ice. She threw her bags on the passenger seat and slipped behind the wheel of her car. Her baby, she thought with pride as it started up with a purr.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

After buckling her seatbelt, she carefully backed out onto the road, but her front wheels still spun on the ice a bit. Damn, it was going to take forever to get across town to the high school. She drove to the second red stoplight and dug her cell phone out of her bag. She dialed the school.

"Hey, Marg," she said when the attendance secretary answered. "It's Gracie. I'm running late and the roads are hell."

"You're not the only one," Marg said. "Half the teachers are calling in late and only some of the buses have made it in. Bob decided to have the kids gather in the auditorium until there are enough teachers."

"Great. Be there as soon as I can."

"Take it easy. Don't hurry."

"I won't," Gracie promised as the light turned green. "Bye." She turned off the phone and slowly raised her foot off the clutch.

Glancing in her rearview mirror, her eyes widened in horror. A huge truck came barreling at her. She pressed the gas, but her tires spun on the icy blacktop.

The truck's headlights shining through her back window was the last thing she saw before the world crumbled around her and everything faded to black.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

### Chapter Six

Steve paced from the picture window overlooking the driveway to his kitchen, then back. He still couldn't get over it. He'd risked life and limb on the icy roads to go to the market to get the fresh veggies for his famous spaghetti sauce. And she fucking stood him up!

He glanced at the clock over the stove. Where the hell was she, anyway? It was after eleven. She never stayed out this late. He knew because he heard the purr of her souped-up engine every night when she got home. Never after ten. *Never*.

He shook his head and made another pass through the kitchen. The noodles were overcooked. The sauce had a skin over the top, and the garlic bread was stone dry from sitting in a warm oven for five hours.

As he headed for the living room, ready to turn on the late night news, he saw the flash of headlights as a car pulled into the driveway.

Clenching his jaw he stormed out the front door, ready to blast her for being totally and completely inconsiderate. She could have at the very least had the decency to pick up the phone.

The car in the drive wasn't Gracie's. And the woman stepping out from the driver's side sure as hell wasn't Gracie.

Steve stopped in his tracks and shivered—not from anger he told himself, but because of the cold night air. His breath formed a white cloud in front of his face.

The woman rounded the back of the car and opened the passenger-side door. He'd seen the woman before. What was her name? She visited Gracie. Often. He'd met her once.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

"Come on, honey," the woman said. "We're home."

Steve jogged down the steps toward the car.

"Let go of me," Gracie grumbled. "I can get out myself."

Steve's heart stuttered as he rounded the car and saw Gracie pulling herself out, leaning heavily on the door.

"Gracie?"

"Go away," she said, her back to him.

She wasn't wearing the clothes she'd left in. The down jacket was huge on her, and it looked like she wore hospital scrub pants.

"Gracie?" he said again, stepping closer.

Her teeth were chattering, her shoulders hunched. She didn't turn around, but she said, "Go away," again.

He turned to the other woman. "What happened?"

She pushed her thick glasses up her nose and frowned at him. "She was in a car accident."

Using the door for support, Gracie shuffled away from the car.

The breath squeezed out of his lungs when she turned toward him. "Oh, God. Babe."

Not only were her teeth chattering as if she were freezing to death, she had a black eye and a thick bandage taped to her forehead.

"I gotcha," he said softly as he bent his knees and carefully lifted her into his arms.

She winced. Her entire body shook, a trembling that reached at least seven on his internal Richter scale.

"When was the accident? Why isn't she in the hospital? She's in shock."

Glasses lady followed him up the stairs and unlocked the door to Gracie's house. "The accident happened at about seven this morning. She's been in the hospital since then. She has a slight concussion, but she made such a fuss about wanting to go home, they released her."

Steve set Gracie down on the couch and reached for the coat lapels, but she gripped them tight.

"Go get some blankets," he told Glasses, and he made a beeline to the kitchen and put the teakettle on to heat.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

Feeling like the biggest jerk on earth, Steve mentally kicked his ass for all the horrible things he'd thought while waiting for her to come home.

He went back to the couch. Glasses lady was covering her with a thick fuzzy blanket.

Gracie huddled in the corner of the couch, her eyes squeezed shut, shaking like a scared puppy. He sat next to her, pushed the hair away from her face and examined the bandage on her forehead. "How bad are the injuries?"

Gracie's friend sat down on the coffee table. "Six stitches in her forehead, the concussion, a sprained left wrist and right ankle. And a load of bruises, the worst from the seatbelt across her chest, but I think she's pretty much covered in them."

His jaw clenched. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Go...away."

"She's been saying that to everyone since I got to the hospital. She didn't want to see me, or the doctors or anyone."

Steve looked at the woman. "I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

She smiled. "Carol Haley."

"Right." He looked back at Gracie, laid his hand over hers. "Did they give her any medication?"

Carol reached into the purse at her side. "Some pain killers, but they said she shouldn't take them tonight because of the concussion. Said she shouldn't be alone, either." She set the brown pill bottle down on the coffee table.

"I'll stay with her," he said softly.

The teakettle whistled, and Steve went to the kitchen. He found a box of chamomile tea in the cupboard, made a cup, and added sugar. He carried it back to Gracie.

Carol was leaning over her, listening as Gracie said something in her ear.

"He'll take care of you," Carol said quietly.

Gracie scrunched down into the couch and pulled the jacket up over her face.

Carol looked up at him with hopelessness in her eyes.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

"It'll be fine. I'll take care of her."

Carol stood up and took his arm, leading him to the other side of the room. "I don't know what is really wrong with her. I've never seen her like this. It's like, the accident affected her brain more than just a concussion. I'm scared for her."

"She's in shock," Steve said. "I'll get some hot fluids into her and once she calms down, she'll sleep."

"But the doctor said —"

"Don't worry, I know what to do." Glad Gracie had such a good friend, he touched Carol's shoulder. "I'll have her back at the hospital in an instant if I think she needs to be there. Even if I personally have to strap her to the gurney."

Carol's shoulders relaxed a bit, and she adjusted her glasses.

"Good. I was so afraid...I didn't know what to do."

"Why don't you go home and get some sleep." He wanted to be alone with Gracie to try to calm her down. To get her to talk, or at least relax.

Carol nodded, picked up her purse from the coffee table and let herself out.

Steve went back to Gracie and sat on the edge of the couch. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

"Go away."

"Can't do that, babe. I promised Carol I'd stay with you. And you need to drink this."

When he reached for the jacket, to pull it off her face, she slapped his hand away.

"Gracie dear, don't make me angry."

She jerked the jacket down and glared at him. Pain-etched lines bracketed her lips.

His chest constricted. Seeing Gracie like this hurt him. "Babe," he whispered, "let me help you."

"I'm so cold and so tired."

"I know. You're in shock. You should be in the hospital."

"The bed was too hard. Everything hurts. It was so loud in there. They wouldn't give me anything for the pain. I want a shower. I smell

## Five Alarm Neighbor

bad..." Her voice trailed off and she dipped her head so half her face disappeared into the jacket.

"If you drink this, and start feeling a little warmer, I'll help you take a shower. Okay?"

"You can't see me like this," she mumbled into the jacket.

He touched her cheek, ran his fingers over the red-purple skin under her eye. "You're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Bruises fade."

A single tear slipped from her eye and it cut through him like a knife.

"Don't," he whispered, wiping the tear away with his thumb. "Everything will be okay. I promise."

\* \* \* \* \*

If Gracie didn't move, she didn't hurt. If she lay perfectly still, not one little muscle twitch, she could pretend none of this had happened. If she blanked out her mind, she could forget the sound of twisting metal and sirens. The sound of the machine they used to pry her out of the car. The feel of an IV being shoved into her vein. She could forget how close she'd come to dying.

A tear trickled into her hair. She'd thought she was dead. For one long moment in time, she couldn't hear, couldn't see. Like floating face down in a pool at night. Nothing. And then everything had been so bright and too loud.

"Shhh," she heard a whisper from beside her.

*Steve.* He hadn't left her side since Carol brought her home. Always right here next to her every time she woke up.

His lips kissed her cheek. "Do you want another pill?"

"No." She hated how they made her feel. Even though they helped her sleep, a deep sleep where she didn't dream, they made her mouth dry and her vision fuzzy.

"Talk to me," he whispered.

He'd been saying that since she came home. Maybe she could tell him. He'd taken care of her, helped her get in and out of bed, changed the



## Anna Leigh Keaton

bandage on her forehead. He even helped her shower when she was too weak to do it herself. The disgusting bruises hadn't scared him away.

"I didn't want to die," she said, her throat tight with tears. "My mom died when she was my age. In a car crash. I didn't want to be like her."

"You didn't die, babe. You're right here."

"It happened so fast. That's all I can think. In the blink of an eye, it could all be over." She lifted her heavy eyelids. Steve was propped up on his elbow next to her on the bed. His blue eyes were warm, full of gentle emotion.

"The accident wasn't your fault, Gracie. The guy ran into you."

"I know. That's what makes it even worse. I had no control over my own fate."

She shut her eyes again; the light still hurt her head.

She felt his lips brush hers and his hand settle on her belly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Steve?"

He set the book he'd been reading on the nightstand and rolled over to face Gracie. "Yeah, babe."

Her eyes were brighter tonight. Not so glassy and shadowed. Smiling at her, he reached over and pushed a lock of silky red hair from her cheek. The bruise below her eye was fading nicely.

"What's your medical training?"

"I'm an EMT Three and First Responder. Why? Is something wrong?"

"No." She rolled to her side, cringing when something hurt. He wanted to tell her to not move, even though he knew she needed to. She'd spent most of the last forty-eight hours in bed. "What do you know about endorphins?"

"Umm. They're a chemical in the brain that can be a natural pain reliever, usually produced by exercise."

"Or sex?" Gracie reached her hand out and laid it on his bare chest. Instantly his body reacted to her touch, to the simple fact that the word

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'sex' left her lips. His cock lengthened and pulsed, his balls tightened with a rush, nearly knocking the breath from him.

He laid his hand over hers. "What are you getting at?"

"I think they're working."

"You're not having sex, though, Gracie dear." He grinned. "Are you?"

"I've been lying here thinking about it for the past half hour."

His jeans became too tight, and he gently squeezed her hand.

"Have you?"

She nodded, a tiny motion of her head against the pillow.

"And the pain?"

"Not so bad." A small smile flitted over her lips. "But I could use some help."

Without another thought, he mated his mouth with hers. She tasted as sweet as honey. Her lips parted without hesitation, and he swept his tongue inside, tasting, taking, not getting enough. Wrapping his arm around her, he pulled her tight against him, pressed his crotch against her hip.

When she cried out, the sound was one of pain, not pleasure.

He let go of her instantly. "Oh God, babe. I'm sorry—I'm so sorry." Shame shot through him.

She was bruised and battered, and he was crazy to even think of sex. Okay, so she'd brought it up, but in a matter of seconds he'd been the one to lose control.

"Shh." She smiled and placed her fingers over his lips. "I'm all right."

"I hurt you." He couldn't stand the sweet, tender look in her eyes.

"Just my side."

He turned to leave the bed. To get away from her before he did something he'd regret. She grabbed his hand and held him in a light grip.

"Steve. I need you."

He ran his hand over his face. "I have no control where you're concerned, Gracie. I could never forgive myself if I hurt you."

"Steve," she whispered. "You'd never hurt me."

## Anna Leigh Keaton

He closed his eyes and begged for the ability to control himself. Sure, he knew how to pleasure a woman, had been doing it for over half his lifetime, but he never gave without taking. Why bother? had always been his motto. But he wanted to give to Gracie. Anything to shatter the troubling dreams she kept having. How many times in the past two days had he awakened her from a nightmare? Ten? A dozen?

He squeezed her hand. "Okay, babe." He stood up. "I'll be right back."

## Five Alarm Neighbor

### Chapter Seven

Steve stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. What he saw scared the shit out of him.

*He cared.*

He cared more about Gracie than he'd ever cared about anyone in his life. It wasn't just because she was hurt; he'd helped plenty of injured females and not felt *this*. He could drag a woman out of a burning building and perform basic life support on her, he'd held weeping women in his arms when they'd lost everything they held dear, but he'd never felt as if losing one of those women would rip his guts out and leave him bleeding to death.

His knuckles whitened as he fisted his hands on the counter.

A little over a year ago, sitting in a too-expensive restaurant with Erin, her foot fiddling with his crotch under the long tablecloth, making him hard and hungry for something other than the salmon on his plate, she'd said, "Let's get married."

At first he'd laughed. Sure they were great in bed, but should a future be based on that alone? And honestly, that's all they shared. She was a well-paid legal secretary in Cooper Valley's most exclusive law firm, and he was a blue-collar firefighter. They had nothing in common but hot sex, when they had the time to get together.

But then she'd pouted with those full lips that could suck him off in seconds, and he'd thought, "What the fuck?" He wasn't getting any younger, and they'd been dating for over a year. He hadn't seen any other long-lasting loves in his future; he was just too busy.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

Gracie had asked him if Erin had really broken his heart. The answer was simple. No.

He'd been more than relieved that she'd called it off, would have done it himself after learning she'd been sleeping with another man. He still didn't know which had made him more ready to wring her neck. Her reasons for the breakup—because of his dangerous job—or the fact that she'd been fucking her boss for months.

He'd had his share of women. Probably more than his share. Lots of women went after the blue-collar guys like him. Since he joined the department after getting his Fire Science degree, all he had to do was walk into any bar on any given night of the week, wearing his Cooper Valley Fire Department T-shirt, and he had his pick.

But Gracie was different. She didn't sleep around, men didn't come and go from her house, and except for a couple short trips out of Cooper Valley, she'd never stayed away overnight. She'd never overtly hit on him or any of his team. She was...special.

And she was a contradiction he'd never tire of. Sultry, sexy temptress. Someone who told him to fuck her hard. She made him give up the final constraints of his control when he'd never, ever done it before. But he'd seen the other part of her, too. The woman who'd sparked his interest from the day he bought his house. The warm, tenderhearted teacher who had her students over for barbeques in the summer.

He'd heard her talking to a pretty young teen last year. The girl had gotten herself in trouble with a boy and was scared to death to face her parents. Gracie had been right there with her, holding her hand, when the parents arrived. She'd defended the girl and talked some sense into the girl's irate father.

Gracie was a woman he could spend the rest of his life with and never find out all her secrets. She was as much a hero to those kids as he was to someone he dragged from a burning building.

And somehow, over the two years he'd lived next door to her, she'd become his. He hadn't even realized it until now.

But Gracie didn't want long-term. She'd made that clear the other morning. The deer in the headlights look she'd given him when he asked

## Five Alarm Neighbor

when she'd be home had said it all. For some reason, long-term scared the hell out of her.

He'd been honest with her when he said he wasn't done with her. Now, how the hell did he convince her that she'd never be done with him?

He closed his eyes and dropped his head forward. *Slowly. Very, very slowly.* So he didn't scare her off. He'd take as long as he needed, even if it meant the rest of his life.

With a new resolve, Steve turned away from the mirror, opened his fly and clutched his cock in his fist. First, he had to make sure he didn't physically harm her. And he couldn't promise anything with a raging hard-on. She pushed him to his limits. Since that afternoon last August, all she had to do was glance in his direction and he got hard. He'd thought that after one hot night with her, she'd be out of his system.

A harsh laugh tore from his throat. After one night of her begging for more, all he wanted was to give it to her. Again and again and again until they both died of exhaustion.

He pumped his cock and pictured her as she'd been the other night. On hands and knees, looking over her shoulder at him, her eyes narrowed with lust and frustration because of his teasing.

His balls tightened and his cum moved to the base of his dick. Remembering how she impaled herself on him, and how she'd begged for more, he moved his hand faster. *Harder.*

His seed shot out of him and with a groan, he leaned against the wall for support. "Sonofabitch," he said on a deep breath. How'd he ever let himself get in so deep?

\* \* \* \* \*

Gracie licked her finger and ran it over her clit. The aches in her body were slowly, too slowly, fading into a background noise she could almost ignore. But the memories remained and those were what she wanted to block.

And Steve had abandoned her.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

She couldn't blame him, though, she thought as she rubbed the fingers of her other hand over her nipple, willing it to tighten. She'd sounded so needy. So pathetic.

Gracie Terrence had never asked a man for anything. Hadn't asked *anyone* for anything since the day her father died, leaving her an orphan and at the mercy of a system that didn't have time or care for a scared, lonely teenager.

She gritted her teeth and pushed the thoughts aside. She wasn't that girl anymore. Thirteen years had passed since then. She'd gone to college, become a teacher, and done everything she could to help kids who needed her.

"Damn it," she said in frustration as a tear slipped from her eye. She pulled her hand away from her pussy and rolled to her side. She hurt. All over. But most of all she hurt deep inside because she'd done the one thing she swore she'd never do. She'd gone and let herself fall in love with a hero.

Confusion swamped her and she shivered, too exhausted to even cover her naked body with the quilt.

Now more than ever she knew that life was too short. She'd had her own brush with death. Steve took a chance of being killed every time he responded to a fire. Just like her father, Steve would rush to someone else's rescue and damn himself to dying too young. She didn't want to live through the agony of losing him like that. Losing anyone like that. She couldn't let herself love someone who she couldn't count on coming home at the end of the workday.

Thank God Steve didn't want a relationship.

She could keep her love secret; never let him know how she felt. Eventually he'd move on, which would hurt, sure. But she wouldn't be much worse off than she'd been before. The spinster schoolmarm who made sure all her free time was taken up with her students, homework to grade, and helping Carol with tutoring. No free time meant having no time to think. She hated thinking too much.

At least she finally knew what it felt like to be in love. Even if she'd chased him away with her weakness, he'd been here for her when she truly needed someone strong. She'd never be able to thank him enough.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

\* \* \* \* \*

Steve walked into the bedroom to see Gracie curled up in a little ball in the center of the bed. Naked. She'd shed the baggy sweat suit he'd given her to wear for comfort's sake.

Even though he'd just jacked off in the bathroom, his dick stirred within his jeans.

"Fuck," he whispered. No control where she was concerned.

She craned her neck and peered at him over her shoulder. "I thought you left."

"I said I'd be right back." He moved to the bed. "What's the matter?"

Her eyes were red-rimmed, as if she were fighting back tears.

"You're hurting. I'll get you a pill." He reached for the bottle of painkillers on the nightstand.

"No. I don't want a pill."

He set the bottle down and moved behind her, carefully wrapped his arm around her waist, one of the few areas of her body that wasn't bruised. "What do you need, then, babe?"

She let out a slow breath and turned her face away from him. "I want to feel you inside me again."

He groaned but forced his hips to remain motionless. He wanted nothing more than to thrust against her pretty, firm ass. "I'll just hurt you."

She laid her hand over his and pushed it down her belly until her downy thatch tickled his fingers. "I trust you."

But he didn't trust himself. Not with her.

She reached behind her, between them, and ran her small hand over the ridge beneath his jeans. His cock jumped to life. "I still turn you on," she said, wonder in her voice. "Even black and blue all over, you get hard looking at me."

He gritted his teeth and dipped his finger into her hot slit. "Some of them are turning a disgusting shade of yellow."



## Anna Leigh Keaton

A gusty little laugh escaped her lips. The sound was sweet and warm. He wanted to capture it and keep it.

As his middle finger slid over her clit, she let out a sigh and straightened her legs. "You have magic hands," she murmured. "So big and strong." She squeezed him through his jeans. "You also have the biggest dick I've ever seen in real life."

Laughter ripped through him, and he buried his face in her satiny hair. "Thank you."

She leaned back against him and moved her leg so he could reach her better. "No. Thank *you*."

He rubbed her clit until he felt her silky juices flow over his fingers. Bringing his fingers to his mouth, he licked her sweetness from them. "There's nothing tastier than a hot woman."

She moaned and squeezed his shaft again.

He'd planned to satisfy her orally, to keep his dick to himself tonight, but he needed her tight heat around him. Surrounding him. Milking the cum from his balls. How could he do that without hurting her? He studied her face a moment before asking, "Are you sure about this, babe?"

She brought her other hand to her breast and teased her nipple into a tight little bud. "Oh yeah. I'm sure."

He leaned over her, carefully, and captured her mouth with his. When she ran her tongue over his lips and moaned, taking pleasure from her own taste, he knew he had to have her.

Laying his hand over her beautiful breast, he kneaded the firm roundness of it, feeling the hard peak under his palm. He drank the moan from her lips and sucked her tongue into his mouth.

Her fingers fumbled at his waist then tugged his fly open. His cock jumped free of its restraints when she shoved her hand into his briefs and gripped him hard. Trailing wet kisses over her jaw, down her throat, he sucked her skin lightly. She shivered and slowly pumped him until he thought he'd burst.

Dipping his head he captured her nipple between his lips and suckled her, rolling his tongue around the dark bud. Her body rose off the

## Five Alarm Neighbor

bed slightly and she gripped his head with her free hand and shoved his face against her. "Please," she begged.

"Shh, sweetheart," he whispered. "We'll get there. Just relax."

She mewled like a kitten. God, he loved that sound. Needy. Filled with frustration and wild lust.

He trailed light kisses over the bruise between her breasts left by the seatbelt. If he could take her pain from her, he would in a heartbeat. Just seeing her battered and in pain nearly killed him. Renewing his efforts to be gentle with her, he slowly kissed his way down her belly, dipping his tongue into her cute little bellybutton and nipping the soft flesh of her abdomen.

Her stomach muscles tightened and the sound that came out of her was dark. Sexy as hell.

Watching her face for any sign of discomfort, he moved down the bed, kissing the bruise on her right hip, her left thigh. Her legs shifted restlessly against him, and he knew what she wanted. What they both wanted.

He spread her pussy lips and dipped his tongue into her hot slit. With another moan, she bucked against him. "Shh, babe. You have to relax, or I'll be forced to stop."

"No. Don't stop." She laid her hand over his head, urging him to continue. "Don't ever stop."

Triumph zinged through him. "Never," he promised.

Carefully moving her legs apart, he kissed her damp curls, and then stroked his tongue into her heat. She was so wet, so ready to take him. His cock ached for her. To claim her. Possess her.

When he cautiously slid two fingers into her pussy, she thrust against his hand. She circled her nipples with her own fingers, a sight that nearly made him come.

Still watching her, he slowly stroked his tongue over her clit. Her entire body shook. Again he dipped into her hot core and pressed his fingers deep, seeking that secret spot that would shatter her.

Her breaths came in pants. Her legs shifted further apart. Her hot juices flowed over his hand, his tongue. "Gracie," he groaned and thrust his cock against the bed.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

A little cry tore from her and her muscles began to tighten around his fingers. He sucked her clit as he'd sucked her nipple—harder, scraping his teeth over the ultra-sensitive tip.

“Steve!”

“Yes, baby.” His balls puckered and his cock strained for its own release, but he held back. He wanted to feel her, hear her climax. For once in his life he didn't want to be a selfish prick and take and take and take.

He knew his fingers had found their target when her ass rose off the bed and she let out a long keening cry. He drank her steamy release, reveling in the knowledge that he'd done this to her. For her. That he'd made her lose control completely.

Even after her body settled back on the bed, her arms relaxed at her sides, he soothed her with his tongue. Her auburn curls were soft and damp, a beautiful triangle over an even more perfect pussy.

Smiling, he watched her tremble in the aftermath of her climax and decided he could watch her—love her—forever.

No, he thought. Forever wouldn't be long enough with Gracie.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

### Chapter Eight

Gracie came slowly awake with Steve's rock-hard cock inside her. His arms wrapped around her in a cocoon of safety, his chest offering a solid wall of warmth against her back. The sensations of being completely surrounded by him were thrilling, yet oddly soothing, comforting.

His hips pressed against her ass over and over as he slowly moved against her. His hands didn't grope, but tenderly massaged her breasts. Her head rested against his shoulder and she could feel the flex and play of his bicep muscles against her cheek.

A quiet sigh slipped from her as she imagined herself on a sailboat in the open ocean. The rocking of his body against her like the slow rolling of waves. His tongue lapped at her shoulder, meandering up her neck to that sensitive spot beneath her ear.

"Good morning, Gracie dear," he whispered, his hot breath tickling her ear, making goose bumps pop out on her arms.

"Mmmm," was all she could manage.

His deep, soft chuckle rumbled against her back, sending a wave of tingles through her languid limbs.

"Your skin is so soft, so warm." He licked her again, and she couldn't hold back a pleased moan.

One hand left her breast to coast down her arm, then back up. His fingertips tickled her slightly as he dragged them down the side of her breast, over her ribs, the dip of her waist, the swell of her hip. She shivered, the pleasure inside her mounting. A slow burn. Something new and wonderful.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

"I can't get enough of you."

She pressed her ass against him, taking all of him inside her.

"Nothing," she said on a little gasp as his fingers skimmed her pussy lips, "has ever felt so...perfect."

His cock jumped inside her, touching her so deep, deeper than anything ever had. And still he rocked. Steady. Slowly.

He fingered her fur, but didn't delve deeper.

It didn't matter.

Like low burning embers, an orgasm began to build deep inside her. Her stomach muscles tensed. She fought to keep her breathing even.

"Let it happen, Gracie dear. Let it happen."

His whisper wafted over her like an ocean breeze as she floated on a warm sea carrying the fragrance of musky sex and hot male flesh.

"I can feel you," he said in that same husky whisper. "I know you're close. Your body tells me so. You get hotter inside. Wetter. And so tight it makes me want to shout."

And still he continued with the steady rhythm of his slow draw and press.

"Steve," she moaned.

"Ahhh, yes," he said in a rough whisper. "I feel it. Your muscles squeeze my cock so hard."

Inside Gracie, lightening bolts flared. From the tips of her toes to her fingers, she tingled. Her face heated. "Steve," she said again, her voice soft. Begging.

And then he dipped his finger into her pussy and just barely touched her clit.

The world exploded in a kaleidoscope of light and color behind her eyelids.

"Yes, Gracie love. Yes."

Even as his slow rhythm never changed, she felt his cock lengthen, harden, then pulse inside her, sending another crashing wave of heat and explosions through her veins.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Five Alarm Neighbor

"It's time for me to get going. I've missed a day of work already," Steve said as he rolled away and sat up on the side of the bed. If he didn't let go of her and get his ass moving now, he feared he never would. "And since you're feeling better —"

"I know."

"I need to get back. I'm on shift for the next three days."

He turned to see her nod. Her back was still to him.

"That means I stay at the stationhouse."

"I know. You've had this same routine since you moved here." She sounded surly and impatient. "Do you think I'd expect that to change just because we're fucking?"

Her words had the power of a kick to the balls. He'd never "made love" to a woman before, but he thought he'd done a pretty damned good job this morning, thank you very much.

She carefully pushed herself up to sit on the edge of the bed, groaning a bit as she arched her back to stretch the muscles.

Her response wasn't exactly what he'd hoped to hear. Not that he'd want her begging him to stay home with her; he couldn't do that, but...

He must be losing it.

"Yeah, well," he said, standing up to head for the bathroom. "You going to be all right here by yourself?"

"Just peachy."

Steve shook his head. *What the hell was with her?* One second she was soft and hot in his arms, the next she sounded as if she wanted him to get his ugly mug out of her house.

"Come take a shower with me?" he asked, hoping for some sign. A smile. Anything. "I still have an hour before I have to be at work."

She shook her head. "You go ahead. I need to get something to eat." Her voice sounded funny.

He rounded the bed and knelt in front of her. "Babe, what's —"

Gritting her teeth she practically growled at him. "Go."

He touched her thigh, but she shoved his hand away.

"Dammit. I said I'm fine."

But she wasn't. Tears glistened in her eyes.

*Oh, God.* Had he hurt her? "I'm sorry," he whispered.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

One shiny tear slipped from her beautiful green eyes, and she gave his shoulder a hard shove. "I said, go!"

"I never meant to hurt you, babe. I swear."

She grabbed up her pillow and buried her face in it. Harsh sobs shook her shoulders. He reached out his hand to touch her, but stopped himself just a scant inch from her cool white skin.

He shoved himself to his feet and stalked off to the bathroom.

*God damned worthless piece of dog shit is what you are, Steve Sheldon. Less than dog shit.* He threw open the shower curtain and turned on the water. *A parasite on dog shit.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Gracie gave in and did something she never let herself do. She buried her face in her pillow and cried her heart out.

How could he be so cold? How could he do what he'd just done to her body and then announce it was over? He had to go to work. That was it.

Angry with herself and her weakness—why couldn't she be as blasé about this whole tryst as he obviously was?—she slammed the pillow down on the bed and growled. She never wanted long-term with Steve. Never. Damned if he'd see any more tears from her. Damned if she'd let him know he'd just torn her heart out.

Slowly levering herself up, she realized she was well underway to a full recovery. The swelling in her ankle was down, but it was still a bit tender. Her wrist was better, thank God, and the rest of the bruised muscles just...ached a bit. She wouldn't be running marathons anytime soon, but she'd be back up to speed in a few more days.

She went to the closet and pulled out her big, ugly green terrycloth robe and slipped into it, tying the belt tight. Then she headed to the kitchen for a bite to eat so she could take some aspirin and not puke.

Steve was coming out of the bathroom, one of her fluffy pink towels draped around his hips. She looked away, afraid he'd see her feelings for him. She hadn't meant to fall in love. She didn't want to be in

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love with him. Not him of all people. A lieutenant with the fire department. A hero.

She'd just pulled some crackers from the cupboard to go along with the sliced cheese, when he came out of the bedroom fully dressed in jeans and white Cooper Valley FD T-shirt.

He stopped on the other side of the counter from her and stared at her for a long moment, while she avoided his gaze.

"Carol called yesterday while you were sleeping," he finally said. "She's going to stop by today after she gets off work. About three-thirty, she said."

Gracie carefully laid a slice of cheese on a square cracker and took a small bite. The tangy taste of it nearly choked her. *Please go away*, she silently begged.

He settled his fists on the countertop. "Gracie..."

"You'll be late for work," she said, her throat painfully tight with more tears.

"I'll call you," he said. Then he picked up his jacket and strode out the front door.

"Sure you will." Another tear streaked down her cheek and she angrily brushed it away. Was there ever a stupider person on the face of the earth? she wondered. What kind of knucklehead can't even have a quick affair with a totally hot man and keep her heart in place?

She took her cheese and crackers back to her room, crawled into the bed that still smelled of sex and Steve, and pulled the blankets up to her chin. "Gracie," she said to herself. "You're one dumb bitch."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Gracie! Open up!"

The thumping on the front door roused her from a drugging sleep filled with visions of Steve's body. His thick cock. Wide shoulders. Skilled hands.

"Gracie! Are you okay?"

Carol.



## Anna Leigh Keaton

Gracie threw back the covers and made to jump out of bed, forgetting about her bruised body. She groaned and almost landed on the floor. "Just a minute," she called as loud as she could. Still wearing the robe, she limped to the front door and opened it.

Carol stood in the crisp afternoon light hugging a huge bouquet of coral-colored roses. "Hey, sweetie," she said with a big grin. "Met the delivery guy in the driveway." She raised her arms to signify the roses. "These are for you."

Gracie frowned, stepped aside to let her friend in. "From the school?"

Carol set the bouquet on the coffee table and pulled the card from the clear plastic holder. "Nope. Got a bunch of get-well wishes from the staff and your students in my purse." Carol handed the card to her after she shut the door. "I'm assuming these are...ah...a bit more personal?" Carol winked.

Gracie moved to the couch and slowly lowered herself down. She leaned forward and sucked in the sweet fragrance of the roses. They had to be from the school. Who else would send her such an expensive array of at least two-dozen roses?

Carol sat down next to her and studied her face. "You look like hell, Gracie."

Gracie scowled at her best friend. Carol had only been at Cooper Valley High since the fall semester started but something had clicked between them, even though they were totally opposite in every way. Carol was the school librarian, fresh out of college and a nasty divorce. She was quiet and shy, and dressed like an old lady, but she was the sweetest, biggest-hearted woman Gracie had ever known.

"I'm doing better," Gracie informed her, then sat back on the couch. "Still a bit achy, but much better."

Carol tilted her head sideways and shoved the thick black-rimmed glasses up her nose. "Is that all?"

Gracie downright frowned at her. "What else would it be?"

Carol shrugged. "The hunky fireman from next door?" A little grin tilted her lips, making her beautiful, even though she hid her beauty so well. "He was acting all caveman and protective the other night. Wouldn't

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let me talk to you the three times I called yesterday because you were sleeping. I was worried he was holding you captive or something.”

Even though the reminder of Steve hurt, Gracie couldn’t help but chuckle. “You read too many romance novels.”

Carol’s grin turned into a big smile. “Yeah, well, I know what I’d do if I were being held prisoner by someone who looked like him.”

“Do tell,” Gracie teased.

Carol blushed bright red and looked away. She cleared her throat and pushed her glasses up. “Aren’t you going to see who they’re from?”

Gracie ripped open the envelope. Instead of the little floral card that usually accompanied a bouquet, out fell a folded sheet of notebook paper. Oh, no, she thought. Not another kid who couldn’t draw the line between teacher and student.

“Uh oh,” Carol said, as if reading her thoughts.

Gracie carefully unfolded the paper, her mind racing over the faces of each of her seventy students. Who might it be this year, and how did she deal with this one? Last year she’d taken the love letter to Bob, the principal, and let him deal with it. It was by far the safest course to follow, and the student in question never again attended her class. But word had somehow gotten out, and the boy had been embarrassed. She hated to see any of her kids in pain.

The handwriting wasn’t from a student; she could tell that right off. The strokes were bold and mature. She glanced at the bottom to see: *XOXO Steve*. Her heart thudded in her throat as she went back to the top of the letter.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

### Chapter Nine

*Gracie dear,*

*When I asked the florist the difference between the flowers in the case, she handed me a list of colors and what each meant. So many fit you, it took a while for me to choose. Red is for beauty, courage and passion. You have all three in spades. White is for youthfulness and charm. There is so much of each inside you. Yellow is for friendship and joy, and I have found both in you. Pink is for gentleness and admiration. I've seen your gentle side and I've never admired anyone more. But coral is for desire.*

*Above all things, I desire you.*

*Forgive me for hurting you this morning. Let me make it up to you?*

*XOXO Steve.*

Below that was two phone numbers. One was his cell, the other the fire station.

"Well?" Carol asked when Gracie glanced from the paper to the roses. "Which one gets to go see Bob this semester?"

"It's not from a student," Gracie murmured, confusion swamping her. If he hadn't been saying goodbye this morning, what had it all been about?

Carol grabbed the sheet of paper from her hand, then squealed like a little girl. "Oh, he's got it bad for you!"

## Five Alarm Neighbor

Gracie shook her head. No. He didn't have it bad for her. Desire wasn't the same as love. Nothing but lust, she told herself, even as a tiny spark of hope flared to life.

Then she squashed that warm, tender feeling blossoming somewhere near her heart. She didn't want him to love her. She didn't want to feel any sparks of hope for a future with Steve. There was no future with him, she firmly told herself.

I'm not done with you yet, he'd said. That's all it was. He wanted more sex. That was good, right? That's all she'd wanted from him from the first.

"I desire you," Carol said, then giggled. "Oh, God, I swear if I ever got a letter like this, I'd just die."

Gracie looked over at her friend. Carol grinned at her. "You going to call him?"

She took the paper back from Carol and carefully refolded it, gently put it back in the envelope. "I have to think."

"What's there to think about?" Carol asked, her brow puckering into a frown. "Two dozen long-stemmed roses. A love letter. Jeez, girl, just what would you have to think about?"

"It's not what you think, Car," Gracie said, slipping the envelope into the pocket of her robe.

"Oh, no," Carol groaned. "This isn't one of your anti-hero things, is it? Did you boot him out? Did he get too close to that big ol' lock on your heart?"

Broke the lock, she almost said, but bit her tongue. Carol knew all her secrets, even how she'd lusted after her sexy next door neighbor since the day he moved in, though Gracie had left out a few pertinent details about one August afternoon last summer.

"It's just sex," Gracie said, even as a sharp pain pierced that tender heart. "And you know I'd never get involved with someone who risked their life for a living. That would be plain stupid of me."

"You're a cliché, Gracie."

Gracie grimaced. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're going to die a lonely old woman if you don't let someone besides me into your heart."

## Anna Leigh Keaton

Carol was right, she realized. But she'd die a lonely old woman if she got seriously involved with Steve, too. Because a hero's lifespan wasn't all that long. Her own father had only been thirty-six when the avalanche got him.

Besides, Steve wasn't looking for long-term. He wanted right now. The only decision she had to make was if she wanted right now to last just a little longer or not. And if her heart could take any more beatings.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was after eleven that night before Carol left. They'd ordered Chinese food and watched an old Cary Grant movie on PBS. With food in her belly and another good cry over the silly romance, she headed to bed after locking up.

As she crawled up onto her high bed, the paper in her robe pocket crinkled. Not that she needed a reminder of Steve. Even when she and Carol talked about nothing and everything as they watched the movie and ate too many calories, he was almost a tangible presence in the room. At least to her. The subtle scent of the roses would catch her at odd times, bringing back to her every word of the letter.

The letter. With a sigh she flipped on the bedside lamp and pulled the envelope from her pocket.

What did it all mean? she wondered as she reread it. "I desire you," Gracie said softly.

Did she want more of him?

Yes.

Did she like it when he talked dirty, pretended to be dominant and fucked the hell out of her?

Definitely.

What about when he held her close and whispered softly in her ear?

Oh, God, yes.

That was the problem, though. When he held her close and whispered...it was almost too much. That's when her heart beat faster

## Five Alarm Neighbor

with something other than lust. When those thirty-foot high brick walls she'd so carefully constructed around her heart began to crumble.

But could she give it all up yet?

She rolled over, grabbed the phone from the side of the bed, and punched in the number of his cell phone before she lost her nerve.

"Gracie?" he answered on the first ring. His voice was low, little more than a whisper.

"Uh...yeah," she stammered.

"I was afraid you wouldn't call. Hold on babe. Want to get out of the bunkroom."

She heard a spring creak, and then a door close.

"I'm here," he said, his voice still whisper-soft.

A shiver raced down her spine and she curled up in a ball, hugging her knees. "Thank you for the roses. They're beautiful."

"Gracie. Baby. I'm so sorry about this morning. I should have kept my hands to myself. I should have known better..."

She frowned, confused, when he paused.

"Baby, if I was hurting you, why didn't you tell me to stop?"

*Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid Gracie!* She pushed the heel of her hand against her eye. He'd meant he was sorry he *hurt* her. Hurt as in physical pain.

She let out a gusty sigh. "You didn't hurt me, Steve." She shook her head in disgust at her own foolishness.

"Don't lie to me, Gracie. I saw it in your eyes. God, I could just... I swear Gracie, I swear I'll—"

"Steve. Shut up." She decided she didn't want to hear anymore about how sorry he was that he physically hurt her when he'd given her nothing but pleasure that morning. Right up until he said he had to go to work. Maybe she'd taken it wrong. Maybe he'd been so extra tender with her because she was injured. Maybe things could go back to the way they'd been before...

"Sorry."

"I'm fine now." She blew out a quick breath. "Well, fine about this morning. I think my...hormones are off kilter or...residual shock or something. I don't know. You didn't hurt me, I swear." She bit her lip for

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a second then pushed on. "Where do we stand? Our...our whatever it is? Is it over?"

The long, silent pause suffocated her. "Steve?"

"I don't want it to be."

Air whooshed out of her lungs. Relief and terror. Relief that she'd have him again. That he'd be with her. Terror that when their affair *did* end, she'd be left in emotional shambles. "Me either."

"Oh, thank God," he said. "I thought... Baby, I have to go out of town for a few days. I won't be back until next Friday."

She pulled the phone away from her ear and frowned at it, as if he could see her face.

"...Chicago...building collapsed...search and recovery...O-five-hundred."

She put the phone back to her ear. "What did you just say?"

"A building in Chicago. The lower levels were already occupied, but the upper levels were still under construction. Some snafu happened this afternoon and the whole thing collapsed. Chicago put out a call for search and recovery workers. The lieutenant is sending my crew because we've had the most experience. We leave at five tomorrow morning."

"Search and recovery," she said softly. That's what her dad had been doing when... "You should be sleeping then. I'm sorry I called so late."

"Don't be. Now I can go and not worry that... I'm glad you called, babe."

"Please be careful."

"I'll be home Friday evening. Have dinner with me?"

She smiled a bit, trying to chase the worry from her mind. "Come over to my place when you get home. I'll have something waiting for you."

"Oh, baby." His voice dropped to a satiric growl. "I hope that means what I think it means."

Warmth flowed through her, touching her everywhere. "See you Friday."

"G'night, Gracie love."

## Five Alarm Neighbor

Her breath caught for a second. "What did you say?" she demanded, but he was already gone.

Gracie *love*. Not Gracie dear. Hadn't he said that before? When they were having sex? She couldn't remember, but if he had said it before, it hadn't registered then.

She hung up the phone and turned off the light.

He didn't mean it, she told herself repeatedly as she scrunched down into her blankets. Just another endearment. Steve Sheldon was nothing more than a big flirt who wasn't done with her yet. He desired her. That's all. Desire. Lust. Want. Maybe even *crave* for a while.

That's all.



## Anna Leigh Keaton

### Chapter Ten

Steve dialed Gracie's number as he hopped in his truck at the airport's long term parking. They'd spoken on the phone every night he'd been away, though not for long. He'd been exhausted. Depressed by the senseless destruction they'd encountered in Chicago. The construction company, working months behind schedule, had let the building's owner open the bottom ten floors of a new forty-story building before it was complete. Dozens of people had been buried under the wreckage of the collapse. The structure had been unsound. Hundreds of laws broken by city inspectors. The investigation would go on for months.

"Hello?" Gracie said over the line.

"Hi, babe. I'm at the airport. Be home in about twenty minutes." He started the truck to let it warm up.

"I'm ready for you."

Her voice was husky, sexy. His cock jumped to life, and he had the urge to gun the engine and tear out of the parking lot.

Instead he leaned back in the seat and grinned. "Are you?"

"Uh huh."

"What are you wearing?"

Her low chuckle was filled with erotic promises. "Something I picked up at Sexyfun this afternoon."

Sexyfun was Cooper Valley's only lingerie and sex toy shop. He laid his hand over his unruly dick. "What would your students think if they knew you shopped there?"

## Five Alarm Neighbor

She laughed. "I have a roast in the oven. It'll be ready in a couple of hours. Better get here soon, or we'll only have time to...eat."

He groaned. "You are so fucking hot."

"Hot. Bothered. And really wet."

"I'm on my way." He put the truck in gear and drove toward the parking lot exit.

"The front door's unlocked. Come to the bedroom. I'll be waiting." She hung up.

He tossed the phone on the seat and turned out of the lot onto the highway, barely able to keep the truck at the posted speed limit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gracie dropped the kitchen phone into its cradle and dashed into the bedroom. She talked a good game, but could she pull it off? She ripped her food-splattered sweatshirt over her head and tossed it in the hamper. Kicking off her tennis shoes, she wiggled out of her jeans. Grabbing the black plastic bag from the sex store, she skittered into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

Steve had obviously come in on an earlier flight. He'd said he would be home at seven. A glance at the clock told her it was just past five. Dinner was cooking, but the rest of her plans might go down the drain if she didn't hurry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steve pulled up in front of the duplex. All the lights were off in both sides. His he'd expected, but hers?

He grabbed his duffle from behind the seat and went to her door. It was unlocked, as she'd promised. Stepping inside, he opened his mouth to call out to her, but snapped it shut when he saw candles flickering around the room from every solid surface. The counter, the coffee table, the stone hearth.

Dropping his bag by the door, he slowly made his way around the room, blowing out each candle as he went. Beautiful as it was, the

## Anna Leigh Keaton

firefighter in him couldn't leave them burning when they'd be in the bedroom for who knew how long.

The bedroom door was closed. He knocked lightly. No answer. Holding his breath, he turned the knob and slowly pushed it open.

Holy Christ.

She'd turned her bedroom into a room made for sex.

More candles flickered on the dresser, which had shadows dancing through the sheer gauze that hung from the ceiling. Satin sheets draped the bed in an erotic shade of red. Huge black satin pillows scattered haphazardly on top completed the setting. But where was...?

"Take off your clothes."

Steve turned toward the silky voice. Dressed in something black, she blended into shadow by the closet. All he could see were the whites of her eyes and pale patches of skin. He'd never thought something he couldn't see would prove to be so damn sexy.

"I said, take off your clothes. Don't make me angry, Steve dear."

His cock strained against his jeans. His knees went weak. She'd turned the tables. And holy shit, it turned him on.

Hoping his sight would adjust so he could make out more of her shape, he threw off his jacket and T-shirt. He kicked off his shoes, shoved his pants and underwear to the floor, then stepped out of them.

"Not bad," she said, her voice husky, so fucking erotic. "I think you'll do."

He swallowed, wondering if he'd come before he even saw her. That voice alone made him lose control. It already had, twice, over the phone while he was away.

"Get on the bed."

He nearly dove for it, ready to beg her for whatever she was willing to give. But this was her game, and a little anticipation wouldn't hurt. He stood still and waited.

"I said, Steve dear, get on the fucking bed."

His balls tightened, cum pressing at the base of his dick. He moved to the bed, gritting his teeth so he wouldn't lose his load before she touched him. He stretched out on his side, facing her, trying to focus on

## Five Alarm Neighbor

her, wishing he could change the candles' flicker into a spotlight. What the hell was she wearing?

"On your back."

He reached down and wrapped his hand around his cock, pressing against his balls to hold back his release.

"Get your hand off yourself, you dirty man."

"Make me," he dared her.

She stepped into the candlelight.

"Oh, God," he groaned. The sight of her... He had to squeeze his eyes shut and concentrate with all his might not to go over the edge.

"I said, Steve dear, get your hands off yourself. Now."

He couldn't. If he let go, he'd explode.

The bed dipped slightly, and he opened his eyes in time to see her leaning over him. Black leather straps crisscrossed over her tiny waist and between her breasts. The thinnest strap of leather he'd ever seen covered her pussy. Her lips were painted deep red, her eyes outlined in black. White teeth flashed before she bit down on his nipple.

"Hey!" he shouted and jerked his hand off his cock.

A deep throaty laugh came from her, a dark and carnal sound he'd never heard before.

"Behave, Steve dear, or I'll be forced to hurt you."

Her finger trailed from his throbbing nipple, down the center of his abs, over the tip of his penis. It jumped and his balls tightened painfully.

"I'm going to come any second," he warned.

One shapely eyebrow rose as she looked down at him. "You think so?"

*No doubt about it.* He nodded.

She leaned over and went for his nipple again. He gritted his teeth, waiting for the pain. Instead, she lightly swirled her tongue around it.

Sucking in a deep breath, he prayed he could hold off just a few minutes longer. He wanted to let her have her fun. But sonofabitch, he'd never seen anything sexier than his Gracie in black leather.

"Have you been a bad, bad man?" she asked in that voice that was some other Gracie. Her lips closed over his other nipple, and his hips thrust his dick into the air.

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"Yes," he groaned

"Do you need to be punished?"

"Yes, ma'am." He gripped the slippery sheet to keep from grabbing her.

"I thought so."

In one smooth motion, she threw her leg over him, her ass right in his face. Oh dear God, she wore black knee-high boots with fuck-me heels.

"Eat me," she commanded as she shoved her hot pussy onto his face.

He brought his hands up, spread her cheeks, pulled the leather thong to the side and licked her from clit to asshole.

She let out an animal cry.

"Again!" she demanded.

He shoved his tongue inside her and pinched her clit between his fingers.

She came instantly with a scream and a gush of hot juice on his face.

Instead of collapsing on top of him, as he feared she'd do, her lips closed over the tip of his cock, and she pressed at that awesome spot below his balls.

His body went rigid and there was no holding back. With a roar, his seed shot into her mouth. Her hot lips clamped over him, taking it all down her throat. When he was fully spent, she licked him clean.

After a few moments, she moved her ass out of his face. Not that he'd minded it there. She had one fine ass.

He couldn't move. Every muscle in his body had turned to gelatin.

She turned around and came up beside him, reached over him and drew a few tissues from the box on the nightstand. She grinned and wiped the moisture from his face. "Welcome home, Steve dear."

All he could do was gaze at her. Her hair was the color of dark cedar in the candlelight. Her eyes glowed with heat and...

"Come here," he whispered.

She leaned into him, her booted leg going over his thighs.

"Closer."

Her face neared within inches of his.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

He cupped her cheeks, pushing the bangs off her forehead. Nothing was left of her car wreck except a one-inch scar close to her hairline. "Closer," he said, and pulled her down on top of him, capturing her mouth with his. He groaned when he tasted himself on her tongue.

Her hands delved into his hair, her fingers fisting and tugging. She was wild, still ready for more.

He rolled her over, coming down on top of her, their mouths never separating.

Her nails scored his shoulders, back, and his dick stirred to life. My God, he thought as he grabbed her wrists and pinned them over her head. Never in all his life had a woman turned him on as much, as fast, as Gracie could.

She bit his bottom lip and playfully fought his grip, but he held her down. *Game over. My turn.* He thrust his semi-erect cock into her.

"That all you got?" she said with a giggle.

He chuckled.

On the next stroke, he was fully hard. The third time he slammed into her.

"Much better, bad man."

He released her wrists and grabbed her thighs, bringing her legs over his shoulders. He ground his hips against her, fully embedded in her tight pussy.

Her eyelids drifted shut. Her mouth dropped open. Steve grinned in triumph. This time he'd make it last as long as she needed. He swirled his hips in a circle, and her breath caught for an instant.

"Like that, Gracie dear?"

"Y-yesss."

He levered himself up on his knees and shoved one of those big pillows under her ass.

"Take more."

Gripping her thighs, he rammed into her hard and fast, loving her with everything he had to give.

She gripped the headboard and took all of him. When she climaxed, her cry was primal. As her inner muscles worked his cock, he rode her orgasm, withholding his own release. When her body went limp,

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he pulled the pillow out from beneath her, lowered her legs from his shoulders and remaining embedded in her sweet body, he gathered her into his arms.

Her short pants were hot on his face.

Still he waited.

Her heartbeat thudded against his chest.

He waited.

Finally, when the little electric-like pulses around his hard cock subsided, her eyelids fluttered open. She gazed up at him with the most gorgeous eyes on earth.

"I love you, Gracie dear."

Her eyes widened. Her body tensed. "Orange."

## Five Alarm Neighbor

### Chapter Eleven

Steve paced the length of the bay next to Ladder Truck Two, and silently called himself every kind of jackass and fool, then made up some more names for good measure.

Six days since that disastrous night in Gracie's bed. One hundred and forty-six hours since she threw him out of her house, practically naked, and told him the game was over.

Hadn't some know-it-all sex therapist said women wanted words of endearment? They needed to know the man cared for more than their bodies?

He snorted.

Whoever had come up with that load of crap had never met his Gracie.

He'd left countless messages on her answering machine explaining that what he'd said hadn't been part of any game. He did love her. He wanted a future with her.

She hadn't returned his calls. The one time he'd waited outside her house until nearly eleven o'clock at night, she'd walked right past him with nothing more than a glare in his direction, refusing to listen to anything he had to say.

He sent her more flowers. He found them sitting on his welcome mat, frozen and wilted when he got home.

He'd written her a letter. He found it taped to his front door, unopened.



## Anna Leigh Keaton

What the fuck was he supposed to do to get her to talk to him? To at least explain to him why she was so dead set against a real relationship?

He slashed his fingers through his hair in frustration. Goddamn women. Why'd they have to make everything so fucking complicated?

The tones sounded just as Rick Johnson, the probie in charge of monitoring the radio, called out, "Lieutenant. Call coming in."

Steve hit the alarm on the wall and jerked open the door to the truck. "815 Walkinton Street. Structure fire. All stations respond," came over the radio.

His crew filed out the door, all going for their turnout suits hanging on the wall in the bay. He picked up the radio and called in his response, then grabbed his turnout.

"Toby, you drive."

"Yes, sir!"

"Sounds like a bad one," Keith added.

"Let's roll," Steve called and climbed into the truck.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fucking phone rang again.

Sitting in the middle of her bed grading homework, Gracie ignored the insistent jangle. How much more unsubtle could she be? Why couldn't the man get it through his thick skull that she didn't want to talk to him or see him? Was she going to have to go get a restraining order to get him to leave her the hell alone?

Jeez, she thought, was he an idiot? Plain as day she'd laid it out to him the morning after their first night together. She didn't want long-term. Not with him. He'd agreed, but then went and changed all the rules.

Didn't he realize how much this was killing her? To pretend he wasn't leaving all those sweet messages on her machine? The flowers? She'd been so damned tempted to open that envelope and read his words to her, but she'd denied herself. Sent it back unopened. Couldn't handle any more pain to her battered heart.

Why the hell couldn't he have been an accountant or even a factory worker? Something that wouldn't kill him before he hit forty? Better to get

## Five Alarm Neighbor

over him now than after they were married and had a couple kids. Better to have a bruised heart now rather than one so shattered by his death that it could never be repaired. She couldn't risk that.

The ringing stopped as the answering machine picked up the call. It wasn't Steve's voice this time, but Carol's. "Gracie, sweetie, if you're home, pick up."

Gracie grabbed the phone by the bed. "I'm here, just avoiding one no good—"

"Turn on channel nine."

"Huh?"

"Channel nine. The news."

"Hold on. Gotta change phones." Gracie set the receiver on the nightstand and went into the living room, picked up the portable phone, then clicked the TV on with the remote.

For an instant, the video looked like more footage of 9-11. But then the camera panned the scene, and she saw the Cooper Valley retirement complex going up in flames. "Holy shit," she said into the phone.

"Gracie," Carol said softly. "Turn up the volume."

She hit the control and listened.

"To recap our top story," the newscaster announced, "three firefighters are still trapped inside. All from Cooper Valley Ladder Company Two."

"Oh God..."

The monotone report continued. "An anonymous source tells us they are identified as Fire Fighters Toby Angel and Keith Campbell, and Lieutenant Steve Sheldon. Crews here are working hard to get them out, but so far there's no word yet on their condition, and the fire continues to rage out of control."

"No," Gracie collapsed onto the couch as her legs gave way. "No!"

"Gracie, honey..."

Tears blurred her vision. "Dear God, please. No."

"Gracie—"

She dropped the phone and surged to her feet. After a wild search for shoes and her coat, she grabbed her keys and dashed out the front door.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

She climbed behind the wheel of her shiny new SUV and cranked the engine. She had to get to him. She had to tell him. "Oh, God, please don't let it be too late!"

Driving too fast, she swiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks. He had to be alive. He *had* to be. She couldn't lose him. She *couldn't!*

A block away from the retirement complex, authorities had closed the street. She brought the SUV to a screeching halt and vaulted out of it, running around the barricades toward the burning building.

Fire trucks sprayed water from four directions onto the building. Red and blue lights from ambulances, more fire trucks, police cruisers and EMT units flashed blindingly bright.

As she shoved past a group of onlookers, a thick arm wound around her waist, pinning her to a solid wall of a man. She screamed and kicked.

"Let me go! He's in there, he's in there!" She clawed at the gloved hand around her middle.

"Easy now. All of the residents have been safely accounted for."

Struggling harder, she screamed, "You don't understand. I've got to get him out!"

"Who?"

"Steve! *Let go!*" She kicked backwards, but her foot glanced off a heavy boot.

"Ma'am, please calm down."

"Steve!" she screamed. "Steve Sheldon the fire fighter. He's in there." She pointed at the building.

The man said something else but a sudden explosion blocked out any words she may have heard. In stunned horror, she watched as the building caved in on itself. The roof, normally four floors high, crashed onto the second floor.

"Oh, God." She quit struggling against the man's grip. She'd lost another hero. "You fucking son of a bitch," she accused the man as tears streamed down her cheeks.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

"Ma'am." The man's gloved hands went to her shoulders, turned her to face him. He was a uniformed officer, but she couldn't see his face through her tears. "Ma'am. Listen to me."

She slid to the ground, her legs unable to hold her up any longer. He knelt beside her trying to talk to her as she sobbed.

*In a blink of an eye. Gone.* Anyone at any time, no matter what they did for a living. She could have died in that car crash. Steve could have died crossing the street instead of in a burning building.

Time was so short. So fragile. How many hours had she thrown away that she could've spent in his arms? All those days she could've shared with him, but no. She'd been afraid of this, scared of losing him and being hurt. Now, she was hurt anyway.

"Oh God."

Her last words to him had been so mean. So cold.

Now, he'd never know how much she loved him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steve sat on the running board of the fire truck and sucked in the oxygen from the mask he held over his face. His throat ached, his lungs burned as if they were on fire. He closed his eyes, but that couldn't stop the sting that made them water.

He'd taken off his respirator and given it to a little old lady just before the ceiling on the first floor began to fall in. If Toby and Keith hadn't dragged his ass out of there, he would've been toast by now.

"Lieutenant?"

He lifted his head and saw Johnson. Thank God he hadn't sent the probie instead of going in himself.

"There's a commotion over there." Johnson pointed toward a group of uniformed officers. "They're looking for you."

He pulled the mask away from his face long enough to croak out, "Send 'em over." Then he closed his eyes as he sucked in more oxygen.

"Steve!"

Gracie? He pried his eyes open, but his vision was blurry.

## Anna Leigh Keaton

"Oh, God!" She threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I thought you were dead," she said between sobs. "I thought you were dead."

He dropped the oxygen mask and wrapped his arms around her. "I'm fine." His voice sounded like gravel rubbing together.

"I don't want to love you. I never wanted to love you." She kissed his ear, his cheek, his forehead. "You're a goddamned hero. I don't want a hero. Heroes die." Her lips grazed his chin, his jaw. "But damn you. Damn you."

He captured her head in his hands and pulled her back so he could see her face. Her pink jacket was soot-smudged from his turnout. Her face had black streaks from his own skin. "Gracie dear—" A fit of coughing cut off his words.

The oxygen mask was shoved back on his face, and he glanced up to see Toby standing next to him. "Take it easy there, Lieutenant."

"He's hurt," Gracie told Toby, cradling Steve's head against her breasts. "He needs a doctor." The words came out in a high-pitched panic.

Steve closed his eyes and took hold of the oxygen mask. He felt like shit, but Gracie felt good.

"He just inhaled some smoke. He'll be okay soon," Toby said, then leaned over and peered into Steve's face. Steve gave him a weak smile, and Toby grinned. It'd be a hell of a long time before Steve lived down the fact that he let a woman coddle him during a fire. "Chief's here. Says to get your sorry ass to the hospital to get checked out."

Steve nodded. He turned his face up to look at Gracie. Tears streaked down her face and she kept touching his hair and cheek as if she needed the contact to know he was real.

"I love you," she whispered in his ear. "I didn't want to, but I do."

He pulled the mask away from his face and threaded his fingers through her hair, pulling her mouth down to his. She was sweet and fresh compared to the acrid taste of smoke in his nostrils and mouth. With his other hand he cupped her ass and pulled her tight against him.

Wolf calls and cheers went up around them, but he ignored the men. Gracie was all that mattered right this second.

## Five Alarm Neighbor

She slowly drew her mouth from his, cradled his cheeks in her hands. "I've never been so scared in my life," she whispered.

He shook his head. "I want you, Gracie." He swallowed hard. "I love you with all my heart, but this is my calling. It's in my blood. It's what I do."

She gazed into his eyes. "I know."

"No one knows what tomorrow will bring."

She nodded.

"Are you willing to chance it with me? Give us a shot?"

Her bottom lip trembled and more tears dropped from her lashes. "Don't you ever leave the house without saying goodbye. Don't ever..." She took a shuddery breath.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face against his neck. "You'll always know how much I love you, Gracie dear. No matter where I am, or what I'm doing, you're in my heart. I promise I'll never let you forget that."

Life was chancy, he and Gracie knew that, but he'd love her with his whole heart for as long as he had breath in him. And looking down at her pretty, soot-smudged face, he knew she'd just given him the same gift.

The End

## Anna Leigh Keaton

### Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic, even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor and, while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar....

She loves to hear from her readers and always responds.

You can e-mail her at [anna@annaleighkeaton.com](mailto:anna@annaleighkeaton.com) or stop by her website at [www.annaleighkeaton.com](http://www.annaleighkeaton.com)

## Five Alarm Neighbor

Also available from Cobblestone Press

Fool's Fortune by Sara Dennis

### Chapter One

The gunshot echoed in Valerie's mind, drowning out all other thought.

The damned car keys wouldn't fit in the slot! *Breathe, Valerie, breathe. Try again.*

Kyle—her baby, her little boy—slumped in the passenger seat, his skin ashen and beaded with sweat. Blood stained his fingers and the towel pressed against his leg. He struggled to keep his eyes open, then sagged against the door again, eyes rolled back in his head.

"No! Kyle, *no*. You have to stay awake." The car keys slipped from Valerie's fingers as she reached to shake him, the jingle lost beneath his whimper of protest. Mingled guilt and relief raced through her. What was she thinking? An ambulance. She should call 911.

No. She had to do something. She couldn't wait for an ambulance to arrive. She pressed a kiss against her son's forehead. Eleven years old, not such a baby after all. "We're going, Kyle. We're going. You stay awake for me."

She stopped just shy of cracking her head on the steering wheel, and ducked to drag the key ring into her hand. Garage key, office key... Why were there so many when she only needed one? Her fingers were slick with Kyle's blood, and numb. There. She stabbed the car key into the



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ignition and cranked it with a vicious twist.

The car lurched backward. Kyle whimpered again. *Parking brake, stupid parking brake.* Valerie slapped it down and peeled out of the driveway, going much too fast for the winding street.

"You okay, baby?" Of course he wasn't okay. He was bleeding. Her son was bleeding all over the front seat. "Talk to me, Kyle. Stay awake."

"Don't wanna talk." He mumbled the words. His eyes fluttered open then closed again. The eyelashes she loved to tease him about, long and unfairly thick, were too dark against the pallor of his skin.

She'd been working in the office at the back of the house, the perfect place to get away and work without giving up time with her son. Kyle and his friend Randy had played a marathon session of video games. She'd paid little attention to the racket they made tromping upstairs to look through Kyle's trading cards. It was nothing compared to the next sound. The gunshot had the impact of cannon fire.

Valerie startled back to the present just in time to see the stoplight turn red. Too late to step on the brakes, she tightened her already white-knuckled grip on the wheel and prayed to make it through before anyone tried to turn. She'd survive a few curses and honking horns. Getting Kyle to the hospital was more important than any of that.

"Mama, why are we going so fast?" Kyle turned his head slowly, as if that simple movement took all the strength he had. His hands had slipped off the towel and now sat idle in his lap.

"We're going to get someone to help you, but you have to help me, too, okay? Keep your hands on the towel, baby. Keep pushing down."

"But it *hurts*." His voice wavered.

Valerie forced another wave of tears away. "I know, sweetie, but it's just a little more. Okay? Can you be brave just a little longer?"

He didn't answer, but she saw him knot his fingers in the bloodstained cloth.

Valerie put her foot down on the accelerator and blew through another light.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Five Alarm Neighbor

"472, what's your 20?"

Dylan reached for the handset without thought. The motion was a part of him, as natural as breathing. He could do it without fumbling even when his mind wandered, which it often did at this time of day. Something about the hour after lunch and the comfortable fit of the Camaro's seat.

Most days, he kept himself awake with a steady flow of ice water and caffeine, but the coffee from this morning was cold now, and he couldn't hit a rest stop with a dispatcher on the line. He shook the haze of daydreams off and cleared his throat.

"472 is sitting on 80 West, watching people hit their brakes about five miles outside Fortune River. What've you got for me, Cheri?"

"Ten-four, 472. Be advised that we've got reports of a racer headed your way."

Dylan sat up straighter. Someone racing in the middle of the day? Now he was awake. He glanced in the rearview mirror, waiting for the car that would give itself away. "Anyone in pursuit?"

"That's a negative. We got the call from someone on a cell phone. Guess she cut him off and he decided to call it in. Friendly guy." Sarcasm oozed through the airwaves, and Dylan gave in to a grin. Cheri was good when she was all business. She was more fun when she let professionalism slip a little.

"Let's hear it for the concerned citizen. What am I looking for?"

"The caller puts her in a dark blue sedan. He didn't get a make or model, but he thought it might have been a Toyota."

Might have been a Toyota. Dylan bit his tongue. In Northern California, it seemed like everybody drove a Toyota these days. "Not much help," he muttered, eyes still on the mirror. "Did he get a plate number?"

"Nope, but he did get cut off. He guessed she was doing eighty before she hit the freeway. We ought to be glad he didn't try to chase her down for the tag."

"You're right. Just grousing. I'll keep an eye out—"

A dark blue sedan crested the hill behind him. Dylan watched it weave through the three lanes of traffic, moving so fast the rest of the cars

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looked like they were standing still. When it whipped past him, his radar gun clocked it at 95.

"I've got him," Dylan reported. "472 in pursuit."

\* \* \* \* \*

Valerie didn't want sirens and flashing lights *now*. She was speeding and she knew it, but today she needed the cops to be busy somewhere else.

She glanced in the mirror again, hoping that he was after some other car. She looked a third time because the red and blue lights on the white Camaro just didn't make sense. Policemen didn't drive Camaros. They drove black and white Crown Victorias. Big, heavy cars, not Camaros. She scowled and forced her attention back to the road.

"Mama, are the cops after us?" Kyle's voice was a whisper, but he was trying, bless his soul.

"No, baby. Don't you worry. We're not doing anything wrong." Nothing except breaking traffic laws left and right. Valerie pushed the gas pedal to the floor, and the speedometer inched past the century mark. Speeding or not, she wasn't going to stop now.

She slapped the horn and a motorcycle rider zipped out of her way. She darted across two lanes directly in front of an SUV. The driver leaned on his horn and flashed her with his hi-beams, but Valerie didn't care. She shouted an apology he'd never hear and raced on down the road.

She nearly missed the hospital exit. The car fishtailed as she jerked the wheel to the right, wobbling over the reflectors set into the black top. Kyle whimpered then went quiet. Maybe it was better that he'd passed out.

Valerie choked back a curse and whipped around a pickup truck, then blasted through the stop light at the end of the off-ramp. Tires squealed as she took the next left too sharply, and another chorus of car horns went up in her wake.

The wail of the police siren kept coming. The cop in the Camaro wasn't giving up.

"Fine," she muttered angrily. "Follow me all the way. Arrest me

## Five Alarm Neighbor

when we get there. I don't care!"

She didn't care as she squealed through the right turn onto the road that circled the hospital, and she ignored the one-way sign on the turn she took to get to the emergency room door. She pretended not to notice the people who stopped to stare as she screeched to a stop. She was blind to the Camaro cop as he roared in behind her. All that mattered was getting Kyle to someone who could help.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Acura. Damned blue Acura. Toyota, my—"

The driver's door on the Acura flew open with such force that Dylan half-expected the hinges to give way. The driver leaped out of the car and ran around the hood toward the other door. She was unarmed and paying no attention to the crowd gathering to watch. Five-foot-five, five-six at the most. Slender frame. Hundred-twenty pounds. Curly, dark brown hair. Not much of a threat under ordinary circumstances, but with the way she'd been driving, there was no telling what she had in mind.

Dylan kicked his door open and had his gun in his hand the moment he was on his feet. He had great reflexes—that'd been proven in his tests—but the ability to avoid stumbling while doing two things at once didn't keep his heart from pounding in a situation like this.

"Stop! California Highway Patrol." He gave it a moment to register. Not that he expected her to give up and stand still. Most of the time they didn't, but everyone deserved a chance. When she reached for the handle of the passenger side door, he lifted his gun. "Second warning. Hands up, and step away from the car!"

This time the words got through to her. She jerked as if he'd struck her, and stared wide-eyed at him. She didn't lift her hands, though, so he repeated the command.

Her expression shifted. Grief replaced panic, as if she'd just realized where she was and what she'd done. She did as he asked, and even from a car-length away, he could see how her hands trembled. Her cheeks were pale and her eyes red-rimmed. But what grabbed Dylan's attention was the smear of color on the palms of her hands. The muzzle of his gun

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wavered. "Jesus, is that blood?"