

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

EM PETROVA

FIREHOUSE 5

**ONE
FIERY
NIGHT**

One Fiery Night

Em Petrova

Firehouse 5, Book One

Firefighter Luke Puckett doesn't want to get involved with anyone; not after his brother perished fighting a fire, leaving behind a wife and four kids. Then Luke pulls a woman and her child out of a burning house, and is stunned to find she's his college ex. Though he fights to stay away, Luke's desire for her lush curves is impossible to battle.

Josie Springer escapes the enormous house fire with nothing but the clothes on her back and her daughter. As she begins to recuperate from her losses, she finds she's gained something bigger since Luke walked back into her life. She's always held a candle for this lover who dumped her with little explanation.

While their relationship sears between the sheets, Josie and Luke still harbor personal doubts it will work—until a near tragedy forces them take another look.

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Chapter One

The woman's shriek reached Luke's ears even above the roar of flames. The walls rippled with fire and the air was so clogged with black smoke he could barely see his hand in front of his face.

But I've gotta find her.

He moved swiftly but gingerly through the burning house, carefully placing his heavy boots where the beams most likely ran

beneath the floor. He couldn't afford to step through the wooden planks and breach a horizontal channel of fire between the ceiling of the lower story and the floor of the upper.

All his training flooded into his mind. But a sixth sense took over, and that's exactly what he'd been counting on. The instinct to find his victim.

He moved down the hall as fast as he could, away from the scorching heat. The staircase was on fire. Why did they always catch before the victims could get out?

Dragging in a deep breath, he

threw out his senses and continued on. His oxygen mask fed him precious air—air the inhabitants of this house didn't have.

He could almost hear his chief's voice echoing within the safe walls of his mind. *Move your ass, Lieutenant.*

Luke reached a closed door. *What's behind door number one?* He put out his bare hand—he never wore gloves—and touched the wooden slab. Warm but not searing.

The scream sounded again from his right and he abandoned the door, practically running through

the upstairs, following that voice.

“Where are you, darlin’?” He spoke into his mask.

“Who you callin’ darlin’, Lucifer? Find the woman and get out!” His chief’s voice filled the communication device in his ear.

A grin stretching his face, he plowed on, feeling walls, doors. The house seemed to hum like a giant teapot simmering on a stove. If they were lucky, they had three minutes. Four tops.

“Fuck, where are you?” He turned toward another room, pressed a palm to the door and pushed it open, bracing himself for

the worst.

A woman flew at him, arms and legs flailing before his vision, blonde hair and tear-streaked face red from the heat and crying.

“My little girl! She’s in there! Hurry!” She pointed to a closed door.

Luke’s blood ran cold but he quickly checked his reaction. In Firehouse 5, he was known for his ability to remain stoic and to get the job done. But he didn’t like the idea of another door with a child trapped behind it. Where did it lead?

Mentally, he laid out the house.

Simple two-story Victorian structure. One staircase? He fucking hoped so. Sometimes back staircases leading between a maid's room and the kitchen existed in these older homes. If that kid was trapped in that room with its own staircase and the kitchen below was on fire...

He wrapped his fingers around the frantic woman's upper arms and dipped his head close to hers so she could understand him through his mask when he gave his order. "Get down. Get low. Don't follow me. Stay right here, and I'll come back for you."

Her mouth was opened in a silent scream, her face a mask. With a shock, he recognized those dainty features and her full-lipped, wide mouth.

No, it's not Josie. Get your ass in there and save that kid!

The woman was in shock. He saw it in the stunned way she stood, shoulders stiff and face blank. Terror did that to people. Dammit, if he couldn't get her to follow his commands, he'd end up treating her for smoke inhalation as well as shock.

Into his hear, his chief's voice boomed. "You okay, Lucifer? Haul

ass. We're holding off the flames as best we can, but the whole structure is leaning."

"Yeah, I feel it. I've got the woman but there's a kid too." With that, he shoved the woman down with a hand on her spine. Her knees struck the floor and she remained in this position, as still as if he'd knocked her unconscious.

Twisting toward the door, he assessed it in a blink. Not scorching, but hot. *Fuck, and locked too.* Chances were smoke had breached that space and the child was dying...

"Not today!" He kicked in the

door with all the strength in his thigh muscles. It slammed off the interior wall—a wall that was shimmering with heat. Waves formed before his eyes and he lunged into the space, scouring it for the figure of a child.

Black smoke roiled from what was indeed a back staircase. A glance told him the fire was licking up the walls. In seconds, the whole place could crumble.

No child in the corners or under the bed. That left only the closet. He whipped open the door and saw her curled into a tight ball, fragile arms spun around her legs, eyes

wide with terror.

He lunged forward and scooped her up, then in three strides reached the other room. At the moment he didn't know whether to curse these old Victorian houses with the rooms running right into each other or celebrate them.

Grasping the woman around the waist, he plucked her off her knees and into his hold. With both mother and child in hand, he made haste toward the window. The woman gathered the child to her chest, freeing his one hand. With jerky movements, he threw the window open and shoved out the

screen.

“We see you, Lucifer. Ladder coming your way.”

The cool air of the night didn't permeate the thick fire response gear he wore and he couldn't breathe anything but the air coming from the oxygen tank on his back, but the woman and child drew deep draughts into their lungs. Luke's heart warmed as the ladder swung into view. And then he placed the little girl into the waiting firefighter's arms, victory a sweet taste in his soul.

* * * * *

The social worker with the kindly brown eyes and the gentle expression placed a foam cup of coffee into Josie's trembling hand. Josie kept her other hand locked around Maggie's upper arm, afraid to stop touching her daughter.

I almost lost her, she said to herself for the twentieth time. She drank in her daughter's pale face, round, blue eyes and upturned nose. People said Maggie looked just like her when she was a child. Except Josie was certain she'd never worn that tight-lipped look of fear.

"Ms. Springer, can I bring you some food? The cafeteria is closed,

but there are always sandwiches.”

Josie shook her head. “I’m fine.” She couldn’t think of eating. She’d lost her house, her possessions, all of Maggie’s baby pictures—but thank God she hadn’t lost Maggie. “Did they discover where the fire started?”

The social worker nodded. “With the car. It was parked in an attached garage...?”

Shock ripped through Josie. “Y-yes.” She always parked there rather than on the busy street. Last year when she’d finally gotten the last of her ex-husband’s junk out of the way, she’d been thrilled to have

private off-street parking.

She stared straight ahead at the pale walls of the hospital counseling center. After she and Maggie had been thoroughly checked for injuries and given some oxygen to counteract any smoke inhalation, they'd been brought here and a social worker assigned to them. Because they were now homeless.

“Let me get this straight. Our house and everything burned. And we also have *no car?*”

The social worker's brows drew together and her mouth turned down. “I'm very sorry. It's always a

blow to the victims of a fire to discover what you've lost. The important thing is you escaped with your lives. The rest can be replaced."

Josie suddenly felt very small. She gulped back her tears and straightened her shoulders. "Of course you're right." Pulling Maggie onto her lap, she dropped her chin to the baby-fine, honey-blond head. The fruity scents of children's shampoo filled her nose, mingled with the reek of smoke.

The social worker continued, "We've set you up in a local hotel. You have seven days there.

Hopefully by that time, you'll have some other arrangements made. You say you don't have family to help you?"

She shook her head. "Not in this city. And I can't leave because of my job." *And the custody arrangements.* Maggie's father had been adamant that his daughter wasn't moving too far away from him. Josie sighed. He was a good father, if he hadn't been a faithful husband. His sexy, redheaded coworker had benefitted after Josie was snipped from the picture—getting trips to sunny destinations, luxury cars and the comfortable

house.

The hollow cavern in Josie's belly returned as she thought about her house. All gone. Everything. She didn't have a pair of shoes to go to work in and Maggie had lost her prized teddy bear.

At least Josie had good insurance to cover the losses, but it might take months to receive a check. In the meantime, she'd have to empty her savings. Probably rent an apartment.

"Who was the fireman who pulled us out? I'd like to thank him."

A grin stretched the social

worker's face. "You and everyone else. The press is already after him, and he's been given an award for heroism. It seems the house had been about to fall and they only send one man in on missions like that."

Josie sat forward, adjusting Maggie on her lap. The little girl was nodding off—it was early morning and she had gotten no sleep. "Do you know his name?"

"No, I don't, but I'll find out for you. Wait right here." She patted Josie's hand, stood up, and vanished into the bustling hospital.

"Like we have anywhere else to

go," she murmured to herself.

Maggie's eyelids fluttered open and then shut again slowly. Josie's heart broke and wept for the ordeal her daughter had endured. But she was well aware that the end could have been much worse. Fortunately she only had to replace a teddy bear. And even some of the pictures could be gained back because Maggie's dad had an album or two.

Josie rocked her daughter out of years of habit. Minutes passed and the sounds of the hospital blurred into the background. She stared at the pale wall, exhausted but unable to sleep in this hard chair with

Maggie in her arms.

Suddenly the door opened again. She swung her gaze upward, expecting the kindly social worker, but a man walked in. Tall with bulky muscles and very short, wheat-colored hair. His face and forearms were a light golden tan. She could only imagine that tan ran all the way into his low-slung jeans.

She met his gaze and did a double take. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Luke?” Her voice was a harsh croak.

His features rippled, running through a display of unknown

emotions, and then settled. He ran his very long fingers—she knew those fingers intimately—through his hair, sending it into spikes. A muscle jerked in his jaw.

“Yeah, it’s me. Are you okay, Josie?”

She shifted, dying to stand and be at his level, to wrap her arms around the man who had once consumed her college years. Right now, she ached to feel a strong set of arms around her. Being alone with the weight of the night’s events was working under her skin like a thousand needles, the sharp memories and loss drawing blood

and tears. She couldn't even lean on her asshole ex because he was off on spring break with *her*.

Tears blurred Josie's vision.

Luke made a noise in his chest that instantly raised the fine hair on her body. That quiet sigh was almost a moan, and all too familiar after hearing him make it in bed so many times.

He crossed the room, his big boots thumping softly. Kneeling before her, he met her gaze fully. God, had he ever been this beautiful or rugged? Age had chiseled his features into those of a god. His wide-spaced ice-blue eyes

pierced her. Even if her daughter's weight wasn't pinning her to the chair, she couldn't have gained her feet. Her knees were suddenly jelly.

He nudged her chin up with his big thumb. The touch ignited her, sending shocks to her fingertips and toes, and low into her pussy.

"I knew when I saw you in that burning house that it was you," he said gruffly.

"Wh-what? You saved me?" Her senses reeled. She tried to recall the figure of the firefighter who had rescued them, and could bring to mind only a broad man decked out in gear.

A smile tipped up the corner of his mouth—that smile she'd fallen for in advanced math. She'd asked the professor a question and glanced over to find Luke Puckett giving her that same smile.

Day-umm.

“Luke, thank you. How can I ever thank you enough?” she burst, barely holding her tears in check. She remembered how he hated to see her cry. Even when he broke up with her, he'd tried to soothe her tears.

He stroked her hair off her face, the touch zapping her anew. The mixture of tenderness and the well-

known pressure of his fingers went straight to her pussy, robbing her of thought.

What's wrong with me? I can't react to him now, after my house just burned to the ground and we narrowly escaped. Hell, she couldn't react to him at all. He'd made it plain before they graduated that they needed to go their separate ways—that she'd never live that long-cherished dream of becoming his wife. Shortly after, she'd met Tony and they'd been married within a year.

Big mistake. But one that had granted her a beautiful daughter.

Luke's gaze caressed her. She could nearly feel it moving over her face. He zeroed in on her lips. "You're all right? They treated you for smoke inhalation?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded entirely too breathless.

He prodded the sensitive skin beneath her jaw. "You sure, Josie?"

The sound of her name falling from his lips made her shudder. Concern crossed his handsome features. "You're cold. I'll get you a blanket."

"No, no, I'm fine. Please stay and talk to me. I didn't know you were a firefighter."

Rather than take up the chair the social worker had abandoned, he remained on his knees before Josie. Suddenly he stiffened and drew back. He grabbed up her left hand where it supported Maggie under her bony legs.

A sigh of relief whooshed from him.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking to see if an angry husband is about to storm into this room and bust my jaw for touching his wife.”

She lifted Maggie a bit. Her blonde head lolled against Josie’s chest. “Ex-husband. And I don’t

think anyone would have a chance at breaking your jaw, Luke. You've...put on some muscle."

Saying this was like stating that her house had had a "little fire". Gross understatement. In college, he'd always been fit. Football had kept him roped with muscle and training on the track had contributed to his overall appearance. Now he was broader than she'd ever imagined he could be.

A grin carved brackets around his mouth and he rubbed a palm over his chest. The swells of his pecs beneath his slim t-shirt drew

her gaze. Her pussy clenched and moisture soaked her panties.

Stop. What the hell am I thinking?

“Muscle added by hauling hoses.”

“And people out of burning buildings?”

“That too.” The expression in his eyes softened. He reached for her again, this time threading his fingers into her hair. “You sure you’re all right? They checked you thoroughly? And this little one?” His gaze skimmed Maggie and Josie’s heart skipped a beat, seeing his concern. Tears filled her eyes again.

“We’re all right. Tired and... maybe a little scared.”

That noise in his chest issued again, this time making her nipples bunch. She could almost feel his lips and tongue moving over her breasts, that sound rumbling from his solid chest.

Solider chest now.

He wrapped his arms around both her and Maggie and pulled them against his wall of flesh. His scent engulfed her immediately—musk and male and a new cologne that was perfectly fitting. She dropped her head to his shoulder and released the tears she’d bottled

up for hours.

He rubbed her spine and whispered soft words into her ear, probably to keep from waking Maggie. Josie allowed him to comfort her, too weary and despondent to worry about the fact that he'd dumped her years ago. Ignoring the fact that he'd told her she wasn't what he wanted.

When she gained control of her emotions, she lifted her head and gave an awful sniff. He chuckled and reached for the box of tissue that had been placed on the floor at her feet. He handed her two and while she wiped her nose, he used a

third to dry her streaming eyes.

“Why are you being so sweet to me?”

“I’m a firefighter. It’s my job to rescue damsels in distress.” He glanced down at Maggie. “*And* their children.”

“You do this for every woman you rescue from a blaze?” Her voice was rough with emotion.

“No. But I do it for women I love.”

Chapter Two

Luke scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to erase the memory of Josie's face when he'd opened his mouth and the bomb had dropped out of it. The *L* word. Why, why, why had he said that? He hadn't been in love with her for a very long time. Not since the moment he'd learned she was schmoozing his big brother.

Luke had brought her home to

the suburbs from college with him often, and it was inevitable that Ryan and Josie would become friends. Ryan was like Luke, except bigger, better, more full of life.

Not anymore. Ryan had perished in a five-alarm fire on the West Side of the city he and Ryan had moved to as adults, when a roof caved in on him. He and another firefighter had died along with the inhabitants of that single-family home. At least the five family members got to pass into the afterlife together. Ryan had left behind his wife and three kids.

Heaving a sigh, Luke paced the lobby of the hotel, determined to go

up to Josie's room and apologize for what he'd said. How was he going to do that though? He couldn't just barge into her room and tell her he didn't really love her.

Because it would be a lie. The instant he'd had her in his arms again, that burning ember of passion had flared to life once more. It had almost cut his heart out to leave her in college, but he couldn't have her lusting after his brother. Couldn't have married her, wondering at every family function if the pair were stealing a moment together.

Ryan wouldn't have done that.

What makes you think Josie would have?

He took another turn past the vending machines and steeled himself for what was to come. Heading on to the elevator, he punched the button of her floor. The unit lurched upward. He leaned against the wall and flexed his fingers. They were still a little sore after the fire. He really should wear gloves but they were so obtrusive. And he wouldn't have felt her body through them as he carried her and the little girl out.

Maggie, she'd called her. A child born to an unknown man whom

Josie had fallen in love with and committed herself to. What had happened between them? Had her gaze wandered from him too?

The old betrayal seized Luke's chest. He'd carried this grudge against Ryan for too long. Thank God he'd never allowed it to come between him and his brother, because Ryan's life had been too short, and Luke never would have forgiven himself for something like that. It was bad enough carrying it inside all these years. He'd thought the anger long-ago dead, but Josie's appearance had resurrected it, like opening a door only to find a wall

of flame ready to surge out and capture him.

Did he really want to go through with this? He could ride back down to the lobby, walk out of the hotel and never see her again. In a city of this size, it was possible. And now he didn't know where she lived.

“No, I'm doing it,” he said quietly to himself. His shadowy reflection on the silver wall didn't tell him anything about how he looked, but he could guess. He looked like a fucking mess—exactly the way he felt inside.

The doors yawned wide.

Automatically he looked right and left, down each hall, a part of his training as inherent as breathing. He could no more stop himself from checking for danger than he could stop himself from loving Josie.

He strode down the hall, keeping his steps even. If not, he'd break into a run. The urge to see her again was that strong. What was it about her that sucked him right in? The streaky blonde waves curling over her shoulders, heavy and full of body? Her full breasts and hips tapering to an impossibly tiny waist between? Even after

bearing a child, her waist was still trim, though slightly rounded in a way that enflamed him more than ever. But more than her appearance, he remembered her laugh and her sweet-as-honey disposition.

Fuck, he had it bad.

Reaching her room, he stared at the numbers for a long minute. Did he want to open this door and perhaps greet the fiery pain her presence in his life would surely mean?

He knocked. Inside, he heard a flustered, "Who is it?"

Drawing a gulp of air to dispel

the tightness in his chest created by the tone of her voice, he answered, "It's Luke."

The door opened and she stood there in all her glory, wearing jeans and a white t-shirt that clung to her ripe breasts. He didn't think she was wearing a bra. *Goddamn, I'm in for it now.*

Her eyes were wide and bright with an emotion he recognized easily—excitement. Not just any excitement, but *sexual*. Without meaning to, he dropped his gaze to her nipples. The hard pearls stretched the cloth of her shirt. He was dying to move her into the

light cast by the cheap desk lamps and study the faint pink hue.

He clamped his hands into fists.

“What are you doing here?” Again, she was breathless. Had she recovered from her smoke inhalation? He’d checked with the social worker and been told she and Maggie had been treated as a precaution – they hadn’t truly suffered from the smoke. Still, concern made him narrow his gaze.

“Are you all right?”

She shook her head as if not following his question. “Why wouldn’t I be?” Standing aside, she let him pass, which was good

because he was coming in whether she invited him or not.

Glancing around the room, he found it empty. "Where's your daughter?"

Josie shoved her hands into her front jeans pockets and rocked a little on her heels. "With her dad. He came for her this morning."

"Yeah? That's good."

"Is it?"

"Fuck, yeah."

Her lips turned up in a quizzical smile. "Why is that?"

"Because it gives me the chance to do this." He grabbed her around

the waist and yanked her against his chest. Using his thumb beneath her delicate jaw, he tipped her face up at the instant he swooped in, crushing his lips to hers.

Their groans mingled and hung in the air between them, as charged with electricity as a downed cable in a puddle. One fraction closer and they'd both be jolted with the energy they'd always shared.

The sweet taste of cherries filled his head. Damn, she tasted exactly the same. He pressed on the seam of her mouth with his tongue and she opened to him. With a growl, he plunged inside, tasting her

heated walls, stroking the silken depths with his tongue.

Pressure bubbled up in his groin. His cock swelled and his balls drew up tight to his body. He lashed her to him with a hand on the small of her back, lifting her on to tiptoe.

She snaked her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her, meeting him stroke for stroke. Her tongue flipped, igniting the fires of his desire. If he was hard before, he was steely now. Painfully so. His cock bulged against his zipper, throbbing in time to his heart.

He drank from her lush lips,

slowing the kiss and nibbling, then using feathery flicks on her tongue. His head spun with her nearness. Everything about this woman called to him, from her round little thighs to her innocent green eyes. In that instant, he couldn't remember the real reason he'd dumped her. Surely he'd been suffering from head trauma from a football accident or something. Josie was just too perfect for him.

She started to pull away and he followed her, sinking his teeth lightly into her lower lip and tugging her back. He watched her through hooded eyes at close range.

Passion and confusion warred on her stunning features.

Well, he was going to erase the confusion part right now. He'd told her he loved her, hadn't he? He'd never stopped.

Lifting her beneath her thighs, he turned for the bed. It was still unmade. He laid her down on the ruffled sheets and pinned her hips with his.

"Luke," she managed between his demanding kisses.

He threaded his fingers in her soft, fragrant hair and trapped her further. "Mmm?" He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth until

she was gasping. Her hands played over his spine, nails lightly scraping through his shirt. She worked one leg free and wrapped her ankle around his hip.

“Why are you doing this?” she panted.

He worked his hand down her side to her rib cage, his fingertips brushing the round underside of her breast. Lust spiked in him. She definitely wasn't wearing a bra.

“Because you're beautiful.” He kissed a path down her jaw to her throat and along her collarbones. God, he'd always loved her body. Her reaction to him was unequalled.

He'd never been with a woman who gave herself the way she did.

She caught his head. He used his mouth to warm the tip of her breast through the cloth of her shirt, sending a warm puff of air through the fibers. "Why—?" she choked. "Luke!"

He opened his mouth over her breast. His cock throbbed against her thigh, demanding release. "I've missed this, Josie. Missed how soft you are. How smooth your skin is. And your taste..." He bit through the cloth into her nipple.

She arched, crying out. She rocked her hips into his and he bit

off a groan. Going slowly was torture, but he needed to. He planned to relish every stolen moment with her.

Stolen.

Was that what he truly wanted? A one-time encounter?

The answer burst inside his mind like an explosion in an oil refinery. No, he couldn't bear the thought of finding her again, taking her, then letting her go. He'd never expected to have her pop into his life after all these years, but here she was. Warm and sweet and giving him that tender-eyed look that had always sent him over the

edge. The blurry look that accompanied her orgasm.

“Luke, please!” She tugged on the short hair at his nape.

He lifted his head and met her gaze fully. Expectation clouded the air. He could nearly hear her question—what exactly was he asking of her?

“Josie, I can’t lie and tell you I’m not thrilled to find you again.”

“I-I am too.”

“And this was always perfect between us.” He ground his erection into the V of her legs.

She threw her head back with

bliss, but didn't break the connection of their gazes. "Soo good, yes."

"I want you now."

"Just now?"

His heart flipped and raced out of control. "I want you again." There. The words were out and she could take whatever meaning she wanted from them. Hell, he didn't even know what he meant by them. His instincts to possess her were taking over, a feral need that rushed through his veins with an injection of adrenaline.

He let his mouth hover over hers. "Let me pleasure you."

She searched his gaze, her eyes swimming back and forth between his, the pupils blown wide the way he remembered from their lovemaking. Damn, to sink into her and feel her clench around him as he stared into her eyes and brought her to the pinnacle —

“Yes,” she whispered. Surging upward, she kissed him. Passion roughened their kiss. He slanted his mouth over hers and began their lovemaking in earnest. No more make-out session. No college foreplay. Pure raging hormones and lust between a man and woman who had once been in love

with each other.

He pinched the hem of her shirt and eased it up her body, trailing his fingers over her skin as he did. Age had made her rounder, which turned him on more than ever. His balls clenched against his body and his cock oozed pre-cum, wetting his boxer briefs.

Jabbing his arousal into her body again, he forced a moan from her. "You always liked that, baby. My cock rubbing you through our clothes as we kissed for hours."

She gripped his shoulders and brought him back to her mouth. She opened wide for him and he

swept the interior, out of his head now with need. The hum of the air-conditioning unit faded and the quiet whir of traffic on the street outside the hotel disappeared, leaving only Josie and the soft panting gasps she released.

“I’m gonna make you scream for me.” He pushed away and dragged her shirt over her head. Her long, streaky blonde tendrils of hair floated around her shoulders and the tops of her breasts. He tossed away her shirt and swooped in, capturing one straining pink nipple on his tongue.

She mewled and writhed

beneath him as he bathed her areola with his tongue, re-learning the feel of her. He lapped one, then the other, swirling his tongue around each until he thought he'd come in his jeans. He reached between their bodies and pinched the head of his shaft hard, forcing his state of arousal back a notch.

Not yet. He'd promised to make her scream and he was damn well going to do that.

She grasped the cloth between his shoulder blades and yanked his shirt over his head. She threw it and immediately brought her hands back to his body. Her warm

fingers splayed over his chest, flicking his nipples the way she knew he adored.

“Fuck, Josie,” he hissed.

“Yes, fuck me. God, you’re so much bigger than you were.” She touched him everywhere—shoulders, pecs, biceps. When she ran her hands down the ridges of his abs, he shut his eyes and fought the shudder of ecstasy that threatened.

When she breached the button of his jeans, he grasped her wrist and pinned it to the bed. “Not yet. First, I need the screams.”

They shared a smile that went

straight to his soul. Before he could say what was in his heart, he ducked his head and tugged on the button of her jeans with his teeth. They popped open and he slid down the zipper with a forefinger. Reaching up her body, he teased her nipples into tight peaks again.

“Mmm, you have on white panties. You know how much I love to see that white cotton.” In one swift motion, he tugged off her jeans. Her golden legs stretched right up to the tiny white panties. For a moment, he simply devoured her with his gaze. He'd never known hunger like this before.

Why, oh why, had he walked away from her?

He positioned himself between her thighs and kissed her mons through her panties. He could tell from the texture that she no longer had the soft tuft of light-brown curls there. He stuck out his tongue and tested it again.

She bucked upward. The scents of her arousal struck him and he uttered a fierce growl. "Please, Luke. Taste me."

His cock jerked in his jeans. Fuck, she was going to unman him if she continued to talk that way. And when she got really worked

up, she could be downright dirty.

He grinned against her flesh. Then, using the point of his tongue, he ran it down the seam of her labia. She moaned and knotted her fists in the sheets. He held her firmly in place and watched her face as he wet the fabric, molding it to her body. When the outline of her pussy was visible, he leaned away and grinned.

“Yeah, that’s what I needed to see. I’ve been dreaming about that for years.” Hell, he still beat off to the image of her pussy lips through her panties. He loved nothing more than to tug the cloth aside and

plunge into her slick folds then. But right now he had to see her—he just knew she was bare.

Her eyes glowed, dark with need. “Luke, come to me. I need you.” She rocked her hips again, bringing her pussy against his chin. Her juices were starting to soak through the crotch of her panties. With a groan, he opened his mouth over it and faintly tasted the nectar.

“Luke!” She pulled his hair and a laugh rumbled from him.

“So impatient, baby. You never were impatient before.”

“I’ve waited a decade for this, dammit. Of course I’m impatient,”

she panted.

Her words sank into the folds of his brain and hit an expressway to his heart. A decade they'd been apart, but she'd been dreaming of this, as he had?

Unable to hold back another minute, he hooked his fingers in her panties and tore them off her. The ripping noise brought a full-bodied laugh from her. He grinned in response. The sound was water to his parched existence.

Then with fervor, he spread her legs wide and delivered a big, open-mouthed kiss that enveloped her entire pussy. The smooth crest

beneath his mouth was fuel to his fire. And the flavor of her cream burst on his tongue.

His control slipped through his fingers as he dipped his tongue into her wet sheath and tasted her. It was like having her for the first time—that same insane lust mixed with the shock that he'd been able to get her attention, let alone into bed.

Her inner thigh muscles jumped as he fucked her with the point of his tongue in exactly the way he knew she adored.

“Fuck, Luke! You're...sooo... good.” She lashed his head to her,

directing him where she wanted him.

Gently he used his fingers to stretch her labia, exposing her swollen pearl. A hiss passed her lips. Staring up at her beautiful face, he lapped her clit, watching spasms play across her features.

She rocked her hips, lifting her body to meet his strokes. He pushed back the hood of her clit with his tongue and located her core. Pressing it tight to her body, he met her gaze.

Her eyes were wide with ecstasy, her tousled hair dripping into one eye. A strand caught on

the moisture of her lower lip brought a growl to his lips.

The connection between their gazes was un-fucking-deniable. This was how it always was with her—he could drown in her very existence. He'd fought so hard to get her out of his blood—it had taken *years*—and here he was, between her sumptuous thighs once again.

Into the flames.

Exactly where he wanted to be. He was a firefighter, after all.

He swirled his tongue over her folds until she writhed. Just when she began to quiver, he slipped two

fingers into her tight channel. Curling them expertly, he located the spongy knot of nerves on her front wall. He nudged her G-spot once, twice...

With a throaty cry, she shattered beneath his mouth. Juices coated his jaw and tongue. He held her firmly, plunging his fingers faster and extending her orgasm as he wildly sucked her pearl.

Out of his head now with need, he brought her down slowly. His cock felt as though it was in a stranglehold. If he didn't get release soon, he was going to bellow his need. Hell, he was going

to do that anyhow, as soon as he got inside her.

She gripped his biceps, urging him up her body. Hovering over her, he gazed into her passion-blurred eyes.

“Missed you, baby,” he whispered before claiming her mouth.

She moaned as he shared her flavors with her. His cock stiffened even further. Damn, he'd forgotten how much she loved to kiss him after he went down between her legs. She opened her mouth wide for him and he fed her his tongue in gulping strokes.

Twisting her hair in his hands, he dragged her closer. Shit, he was rapidly losing control of the inferno of emotion in his chest. Backing out wasn't an option—he'd run into the flames and hope to come out on the other side in one piece. He'd done it countless times on the job. But exposing his heart to the fire that was Josie might mean he didn't make it out of this room without becoming scorched.

He kissed a path down her throat to the swell of her breasts as he removed the rest of his clothing.

“Luke, come to me.” Her hot plea washed past his ear.

Hitching her thighs around him, he poised at the quick of her. Suddenly, realization slammed him. This wasn't *his Josie* from their college days when they were in a safe, monogamous relationship and she was on the Pill.

“Fuck, a condom. Hold on.” He released her and dove over the side of the bed, swiping his pants from the floor. He hoped carrying a condom in his wallet didn't make it look as though he was a player because he was far from it.

He ripped the packet open with his teeth and spit out the remnant of paper. Rolling the condom over

his straining erection, he shot her a glance. Praying her desire hadn't cooled.

Within a few seconds, he was stretched atop her again. As his flesh kissed hers, she gasped and fluttered her fingers over his chest. She wore a pink glow—part satisfaction, part need, he knew from previous encounters.

He traced her lower lip with his thumb. God, how had he lived without looking at these lips—kissing these lips—for so many years? A decade lost. At the moment it seemed for naught. A waste.

He ground the tip of his cock against her wet pussy. "You want this, darlin'?"

"Please." She gripped his cock at the root, drawing it to her neediest spot.

He nudged her entrance again, holding her body and her gaze prisoner. Dammit, in the ten seconds he'd found her silhouetted by flames, she'd bound his heart to her again.

Something akin to panic welled inside him. Before he could jerk away from her and tell her this was all a mistake, she pressed her warm, wet pussy against him. His

mushroomed head disappeared inside her.

“Oh, fuck!” With one swift thrust, he rooted himself balls-deep. He fell completely still, grinding his molars against his release and glaring down at her.

But she only issued that soft noise of pleasure he loved and bathed her lower lip with her tongue.

“I need to feel you moving inside me, Luke. I’ve needed it for a decade.” Her quiet admission upended his heart. It flipped and throbbed in a brand-new rhythm. He began to piston his hips in time

to it.

His balls tensed, the pressure mounting. Her taste clung to his lips and her aroused scents hung around him. With each plunge, he pushed her another fraction closer to the headboard. Her breasts wobbled in their natural perfection, full and round, the tips dark pink.

Leaning over her, he caught one between his lips and rolled it. She clamped her legs around him, locking her heels, which seemed to be a little more difficult since their college days. His job had added some muscle bulk.

A shuddering sigh teased his

hair. “Luke...”

Even the lilting way she said his name was adorable. Why had he dumped her again?

It wasn't because the sex wasn't fucking fantastic.

Her body began to quake—a sign she was close to release. He lifted his mouth from her delicious bud and, sliding his hands beneath her, brought her up to meet his movements. She rode him, rising and falling on his cock, eyes glowing, skin scalding, hair twitching around him, her soaking folds hugging him—

She stiffened and cried out. He

pumped her harder, driving his cock into her sensitive tissues as she convulsed around him.

Hot come shot upward and erupted from his cock. His groan was the tenor harmony to her soprano. Shocks ripped through him. Stars burst behind his eyes.

Suddenly she went limp in his hold. Her head fell back, her silky locks dangling. He threaded his fingers through them and supported her as the last spurts of come emptied into her body.

No, into the condom.

A pang went straight to his soul. Once she had been his, but that

rubber barrier reminded him that she was no more.

Could she be again? The tiny voice in the recesses of his mind was that of the hurt young man who'd let her go because she'd taken interest in his brother. Would Luke ever truly be able to trust her? Though Ryan was gone, the memory of her betrayal was not. Ryan had assured him that Josie had never made a move on him, but Luke had read the looks she gave his brother.

He laid her on the bed and eased off her.

She caught him back by wrapping her fingers around his

arm. He stared at the delicate white digits. She'd never seemed so small or vulnerable.

“Give me a second.” He lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed each tip before heading to the bathroom.

Josie's limbs tingled and her sex throbbed with pleasure. But she could hardly breathe as she listened for Luke to come out of the bathroom. What was taking him so long?

He regrets it. I know it. She curled onto her side and pulled the sheet over her head. Damn, she'd done it

again. Positioned herself in a relationship that was sure to fail. And after her ex replaced her with the redheaded bombshell from work, Josie didn't think her deflated ego could handle another rejection. A rejection that was sure to come. Luke had dumped her once. He'd do it again.

But hadn't she seen tenderness in his gaze? Hadn't he told her he still loved her?

She released a ragged sigh. The last thing she needed right now was a rocky love affair. Her divorce had been final for a little more than a year but she couldn't just drag

men into Maggie's life without upsetting her.

Why had she allowed Luke to barge in and kiss her like that?

The answer was simple. She still carried that small flame of love for him. Their past was all mixed up with the fact that he'd saved her and Maggie's lives. And she was feeling more than despondent right now. She'd thought his touch might ease that, and it had for a short time. Now the weight of the world bore down on her, pressing on her chest so she couldn't do more than breathe heavily around the gathering sobs.

The soft click of the door opening sounded like a shot. She jerked and whipped the sheet down, fighting to still the panic in her chest. This was much worse than a one-night stand. Their history made everything seem magnified. She'd truly loved this man, had even entertained notions of marrying him after college and living happily ever after. But following a trip to his family's house for a school break, Luke had gotten antsy and clammed up. When they returned to the university, he'd dumped her.

She remained curled on her side

but when his footsteps sounded near the bed, she shot him a glance. Lines of strain formed around his eyes and mouth but the instant their gazes connected, his expression softened.

He sank to the edge of the bed and her weight rolled toward him. The scents of their lovemaking clung to him and suddenly she wanted him again very badly. But not at the cost of her heart. She had to gain some distance.

Scooting into a sitting position, she folded her knees to her chest. She covered her nudity with the sheet but not before he got a good

look at her. The hunger was back in his eyes.

“Why did you really come here?” Her question hung between them, weighting them to reality. They’d fucked—not made love—because their bodies still called to each other. But he didn’t want her. No one did, right?

He opened his mouth and then shut it.

Oh no. That couldn’t be good.

He found her fingers through the sheet and enfolded them in his fist. “Let’s just say I couldn’t stay away from you.”

Her heart jumped at his words.

Did he mean them though? As long as she'd known Luke, he hadn't been just a Romeo, delivering lines that would woo a woman into his arms. He was a great guy. Genuine.

But she should still send him out of her life. She couldn't afford to compromise her heart again.

He inched nearer. She wanted to close her eyes against the sight of his broad chest, which rippled with muscle.

"Josie, talk to me. What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?" He stroked a stray lock of hair off her cheek with enough tenderness to bring her to her knees

if she hadn't already been sitting.

She drew a deep breath and released it. What came out of her mouth was not the accusation that he'd wrongfully seduced her or the demand that he leave her room.

"I want to hear about you. Tell me what you've been doing with your life besides fighting fires and rescuing people."

A grin stretched his handsome features. He gave a rumble of a laugh and leaned forward until their foreheads bumped. The brilliant flecks of silver in his ice-blue eyes threatened to steal her precious grip on her emotions.

“Baby, until I saw you silhouetted by those flames, I wasn't really living, and there's nothing to say. Except now I'd be glad to stay in this hotel room with you all day. But there's one little problem.”

“What's that?” Her breathless tone betrayed her if the hardening of her nipples under the sheet hadn't.

He flicked his tongue over the corner of her mouth. “I don't have any more condoms.”

Chapter Three

Luke strode through the lounge of the firehouse, ignoring the calls of welcome from his fellow team members. But he couldn't ignore his captain's voice when he followed Luke into the locker room.

The metal door of his locker squeaked as he opened it to check his gear. He started pulling out the garments and looking them over for wear. This was a safety

precaution every firefighter must perform, but Luke had been too upset after that last call to look then.

“I know you’re just inspecting that jacket to keep from meeting my gaze,” Captain Pearce Johnson said.

Luke didn’t try to deny it, but bobbed his head in affirmation. “That’s right, Caps.”

His friend and leader moved closer. “You ready for that ceremony tomorrow? Your dress uniform all pressed?”

Luke’s stomach sank to the soles of his boots. The last thing he

wanted to do was accept a medal of heroism from the city for saving Josie and her daughter. She'd definitely be at the ceremony, and he simply didn't know how he was going to handle that.

After spending an entire day in her bed, it had pained him to rip himself from her arms to come to work. The night shift was never a picnic anyway, because most of the calls they received occurred during the dark hours. Who knew what they'd be up against tonight? And Luke was afraid he'd be distracted by the memories of Josie's touch.

He hung his coat back inside his

locker and reached for his pants. Before he could tug them off the metal hook, Pearce shut the door.

“What’s going on with you, Lucifer?”

The nickname ruffled him and brought him firmly back to the present. The vision of Josie’s green eyes after he’d given her a final body-racking orgasm dissipated like a wisp of smoke.

Luke sighed. They called him Lucifer because only Satan could withstand the fiery hells Luke could. He was the only one on the team at Firehouse 5 to be able to stand up to very extreme

temperatures for long periods of time. He was a special ops guy, sent in to rescue people from buildings no one else could breach.

And thank God he could. No one else wanted to go into that burning Victorian house and try to find the victims. Especially since the city didn't have any blueprints on record for that old home. That's why Luke hadn't truly known about the back staircase.

He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to ignore the sweet scents of Josie still clinging to his hands. Even after washing them, he detected her arousal. He clamped

his hand into a fist to keep from drawing his fingers to his nose and inhaling deeply.

“Sorry, Caps. I’m a little off balance tonight.”

“You’d better get your head on straight. It’s sure to be a rough night. You know how Saturday nights are around here.” His leader’s dark gaze penetrated Luke, probably reading too much. Pearce was known for his insight into people. That’s what made him a great captain. He gave the team members only jobs they were sure to excel at.

But he didn’t know everything.

A few years ago, Luke and this captain had gone rounds about Luke's desire to gain his paramedic certificate. After Ryan's death, he felt compelled to learn everything he could to save human lives. Pearce had thought his special training for solo missions enough.

In the end, Luke had won. His training made him sought after by many of the surrounding fire companies. But he'd never leave Firehouse 5. These people were like his family—Pearce included. Now it was protocol that every firefighter have paramedic training.

“That woman I saved?” he

heard himself say. “She’s my ex from college.”

Pearce let out a low whistle. “What’s the chance of running into a burning building and saving a woman you know?”

“That’s what I was thinking. Which led to some higher thinking...”

“Higher thinking doesn’t happen with the head in your pants, Lucifer.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose hard. That was the trouble—he hadn’t only allowed lust to speak for his actions. His heart had swiftly ruled.

In the other room, raucous laughter sounded, followed by several hoots and guffaws from his fellow firefighters. At this moment, he wished he could be sitting with them, chatting and enjoying some of Damon's special barbecue, which Luke could smell all the way in here. Waiting for the next 9-1-1 call was hard enough without the crushing need to feel Josie beneath him. Or the worry about how to shake her off.

"I think I fucked up pretty bad, Pearce. But I have no clue how to remedy it."

"Well, you'd better get your

head on straight pretty quickly. We don't have room for errors. Do you need the night off to regroup?"

"Nah, not that. I'm all right." The very last thing Luke needed was time to himself. He'd end up staring at the room numbers 429 quicker than he could respond to a four-alarm fire.

At that instant, the bell pealed.

Pearce brought his hand down on Luke's shoulder, pinning him in place. "I'm trusting you. Don't let me down."

"Never have, never will." He grabbed his heavy pants and jammed his legs into them, hitching

the suspenders over his shoulders.

The rest of the squad suddenly surrounded him and Pearce, everyone yanking on gear and adjusting masks and tanks.

In the background, the scanner radio blared. The voice gave the particulars in an urgent yet precise way, spelling out the address of an overturned tanker on the interstate.

“Great. A fucking gasoline spill. Better have those gloves handy, Lucifer,” said their chemical spill specialist, Mitch Morelli. The big Italian stared at him a heartbeat too long.

Luke clapped him on the back,

dispelling the tension. He'd always felt Mitch had a thing for him and now was not the time to tell him not only was he completely hetero but he was entirely too fucked up by a woman to think straight. "I don't need the gloves, Morelli. Now let's roll."

"Scramble, men!" Pearce's sharp command sent them all running for the response unit. Ahead of them, a crew of six men tore out of the parking lot in their largest truck. Morelli, Pearce and Luke jumped into the smaller one.

Pearce was on the horn, barking orders to the police who were

already on the scene.

Luke checked all his gear twice before realizing his cell phone with Josie's new number programmed into it was back in his locker. He couldn't even give her a call and tell her —

What? That he loved her?

After 9/11, many firefighters wished they had spoken those three little words before responding to the call. Hell, his brother Ryan had probably experienced a moment of panic when he realized he was never again going to see his wife and kids.

Luke's job was dangerous. Perils

could flare up in an instant, taking the lives of the people who fought to keep others safe.

“You all right, Lucifer?” Morelli was jostled as the truck whipped around a corner.

“He’d damn well better be,” Pearce ground out, shooting Luke a pointed glare.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good. No worries.”

Ahead of them, the traffic of the main thoroughfare through the city split off to allow them right of way. The truck hit speeds of sixty miles an hour. The lights of the businesses were a blur. As they

passed the street leading to Josie's hotel room, Luke stiffened.

Hell, he had to get his head on straight. While he most likely wouldn't be braving the flames alone this time, he still would need to keep on his toes. Explosions were likely, as were burns. Maybe he should have grabbed his gloves.

In minutes, they arrived on the scene. The other unit was already there, spreading foam on the wall of flames dancing around a tanker overturned on its side, leaking gasoline like a giant monster with its entrails spilling forth.

“Fuck, this doesn't look good.”

Pearce slammed to a forceful stop and the three of them jumped out.

Luke stuck to Morelli's side as they kitted up with their own devices to douse the flames with a special chemical. They'd have their hands full though. The wall of fire shot into the night sky.

"Lucifer, you and Morelli flank up with Dobbs and Howland. Morelli, make it your business to rein in this beast!" Pearce's instructions faded away as he ran to the other team members and made sure they were doing their jobs to the best of their abilities while remaining safe and cautious.

“Where’s the driver?” Luke called out to the nearest police officer.

He ran over, a hand on his hat to keep it from being blasted off by the heat coming off the massive fire. He pointed to the paramedic crew at the far side of the highway. “Banged up but no real damage. Don’t worry about him. Just do your job, Lieutenant!” He jogged away from the peril again and Luke turned his attention to the fire eating up the spilled gasoline like a greedy toddler slurped ice cream.

The roar grew until he could only see Morelli’s lips moving as he

spoke to the captain through their communication device. The scents of burning gas and destruction didn't penetrate Luke's mask. All he could smell was Josie. She was all over him.

Despite his dangerous position, his cock stirred to life. He bit back a growl, but it transmitted through the comm link. Morelli swung his head Luke's direction.

He gave a wave as if to say "I'm okay" and continued to hose down the flames. The wall of fire was beginning to lower inch by precious inch.

At the place where the truck

emptied onto the ground, an entire unit from a neighboring firehouse had been positioned, concentrating their efforts to keep the nine-thousand-gallon fuel tanker from blowing sky high. They'd managed to shut the leaking valve and were busy laying flame-retardant chemicals on top of the gas.

Suddenly the flames flared up in front of him. The heat blasted him backward but he braced himself as more of the flammable liquid caught. The hair on the backs of his hands singed and he clenched his fists automatically, stretching the tightening skin.

Into his ear, his captain hollered. "Watch yourself, Lucifer! You're not indestructible!"

Fleetingly he wondered what would happen if he was injured—or worse, killed. Would Josie mourn him?

She would, without a doubt. But the bigger question was what would happen if he got close enough to her to also infiltrate her daughter's life. He pictured himself as a stepfather. Caring for that little girl who looked so much like Josie would be easy.

"That's it," he said aloud, not meaning to.

“What?” Morelli’s voice came at him, and the man was staring at him from the depths of his mask.

“Nothing.”

But it was far from nothing. He’d just made a decision about Josie. Debilitating pain clawed at him but he had to man up to it. Ryan had left his wife and kids, but damned if Luke ever would.

No, he would remain single and childless for the rest of his life.

* * * * *

The fire chief took the podium and the voices of the crowd

silenced. But the click of cameras continued to sound as reporters took pictures of the big event. Josie bounced on her toes, her heart pounding. Maggie's hand was warm and dry in Josie's own slick grasp. She'd spent half the night awake, wondering what Luke was doing and if he was safe. Finally she'd drifted off in the wee hours of the morning, only to be awakened by pounding on the hotel door when her ex returned Maggie.

She'd dressed her daughter in a sweet pink sundress and her golden hair was tied off her face with a matching bow. She clutched a

brand-new teddy bear around the neck. This new toy was named Mr. Fluff like the last one—the one that had perished in the fire. They'd been unable to find the exact same bear, but Maggie had taken this with great stoicism for a five-year-old.

“I can still pretend he's the same Mr. Fluff, Mom. And he'll feel very special because he has a good name.”

Josie had quickly dropped her tear-filled eyes.

She swallowed the rising lump in her throat. They'd replaced so little in their lives so far. Today,

after the award ceremony, she planned to scour the classifieds for an apartment to rent and maybe a used car.

The chief began to speak in a deep, rich voice. For long minutes he talked about the department and Firehouse 5, which Josie hadn't known the name of before. She listened intently but kept glancing around, hoping to get a glimpse of Luke.

Several reporters beside her took advantage of the chief's pause to ask about some events the previous night. With a hollow stomach, she listened to his

accounts of a gas spill, a five-car pileup that had resulted in a conflagration, and a fire that began in a fireplace a few blocks from where she lived.

Had lived. Her mental correction wore on her. Now brittle with emotion, she scanned the crowd again.

And saw him. Luke was about thirty steps from her, staring at her unwaveringly. Her heart leaped into her throat and she felt a smile bound to her lips.

He didn't return it but gave a solemn nod. Ice trickled through her limbs and settled in her

fingertips. The old wound in her heart opened a little and bled with worry. What was going on? He looked far from enthusiastic about seeing her.

She continued to stare at him. His shoulders looked impossibly wide in his dark-blue jacket, which was decorated with gold pins. His tanned skin glowed against the stark white of his shirt and it looked as if he'd freshly shaved. His trim hair lay neatly against his head, glinting with lighter streaks in the sun.

Maggie began to hop on one foot. Her teddy bear went flying

and struck the back of the legs of the man in front of them. He turned around, spied the bear, picked it up and handed it back with a smile.

Josie thanked him quietly and then lifted Maggie into her arms just as the chief introduced Luke.

“Three nights ago, a single-family home went up in flames. Our very own Luke Puckett, also known as Lucifer, went into the unstable structure and rescued a mother and child. For this, the city and Firehouse 5 grant him an award for heroism! Luke, come up here.”

Applause exploded around her as Luke pushed forward and climbed the short flight of steps of the courthouse. He nodded to the chief as he accepted a plaque. Then he turned and allowed the mayor to drape a medal around his neck.

Josie zeroed in on his face, watching for a change in expression. Though he gave a tight smile, lines still bracketed his eyes and mouth. Something was definitely wrong. Did it have to do with her? Maybe after the ceremony, she'd discreetly slip into the crowd and catch a cab back to the hotel before he felt he needed

to find her.

Feeling better about her plan, she listened as he gave a short acceptance speech. Then, to her horror, she and Maggie were invited up to the podium to have their pictures taken with their rescuer.

Her knees turned to water. Why she hadn't thought of this request beforehand, she couldn't fathom. She'd seen pictures like this in newspapers before. Of course they wanted a photograph with the victims he'd saved. They'd probably hang it on the firehouse wall too.

“Damn,” she said under her breath. Slowly she made her way through the press and up the steps with Maggie. Her little girl wrapped her arms around Josie’s neck and held tight.

Josie looked up and straight into Luke’s eyes. For a brief moment, his features rearranged themselves in a look of happiness, and then settled again into a frown.

Definitely catching that cab. In fact, she couldn’t wait to immerse herself in the crowd afterward, disappearing from the event and from Luke’s life. She simply couldn’t take another rejection

from him. He'd gutted her the first time. After losing her house and possessions, she was a walking raw wound, unable to deal with a single negative word from him or anyone else.

Luke leaned forward and spoke quietly into the microphone. "This is Josie..." He floundered for a moment, having almost given her maiden name. He recovered quickly. "And her daughter Maggie. I'm proud to be standing here with them on this beautiful summer day."

She swallowed the gravelly lump in her throat. "Thank you,

Mr. Puckett.”

His gaze shot to hers and his features convulsed at her formal address. She'd done it to put some distance between them. If he gave her even one soft look, she was liable to fall into his arms, Maggie or no Maggie. She'd have to explain later, but...

What was she thinking? She shook herself and tried to discern whether or not the press had enough pictures of her. Most likely she'd appeared dazed and disturbed, which she was. But the reason was less because she was going to have to rebuild her and

Maggie's lives than because of Luke's sudden reappearance in it.

Luke said something more and applause sounded. Josie took the opportunity. Rushing down the concrete steps in her new high heels, she sped off through the throng of people, weaving in and out of bodies as fast as she could.

"Josie!" Luke's voice sounded above the crowd. She didn't bother to turn. In fact, she pushed herself faster.

She considered herself to be in good physical shape—she jogged and did yoga—but carrying a kindergartener for any distance was

no easy challenge. She'd trained more easily for marathons.

By the time she reached the edge of the crowd, she was huffing and puffing. Strong fingers wrapped around her wrist, bringing her to a halt. She released an inner stream of curse words that would have psychologically damaged her daughter forever.

“Josie, what’s going on?” Luke stepped close—too close. She retreated a bit and placed a palm on the back of Maggie’s head, trying to keep her from noticing anything was amiss, but the little girl began to struggle to be put down.

When Josie didn't respond to her demand, she flailed her legs, sending Josie off balance. She started to topple forward, dragged down by her daughter's weight.

Luke grabbed Maggie up in one arm and righted Josie with a hand on her waist. He started to speak, then stopped dead and looked down at Maggie. She looked up at him with her angelic eyes and smiled.

His brows smoothed and he arranged his features into a mask. Then he set Maggie on her little sandal-clad feet. She started to walk off into the crowd and he grabbed

her back. Firmly clasping her hand in his, he addressed Josie.

She stared between them, stunned. He was actually acting more like a father to Maggie than her own dad sometimes did. One time Josie's ex had called, frantic, saying Maggie had wandered off while they were at the park. Josie had been panicked and livid in turns. She'd just been about to switch over the call to dial 9-1-1 when he gave a relieved yell. Maggie had been playing with some kids nearby and he hadn't seen her go. The parents of the other children brought her back.

Josie had laid everything out for her ex at that moment, swearing she was going to take him back to court for complete custody unless he changed his ways. He hadn't made a misstep since.

Luke shook his head like a dog that had just been shut out of the house. "Why did you run?"

"I—" She glanced down at Maggie, who was busy talking to Mr. Fluff. "I need to get home. I mean—" A blush scorched her face and throat.

He made a noise in his chest. Not just any noise—*the noise*. The one that ignited her. Hell, that was

half the reason she'd fallen under his trance again. She had to distance herself with all haste.

Apparently sensing this, he shifted closer, completely barring her path. The crowd had dispersed and funneled around them. He continued to hold Maggie's hand. "Josie, you think I don't know something's up?" Something dark and hurt sparked in his eyes. It gave her a pang to see it and know she'd put it there. Yes, he'd hurt her once, but she wasn't in the business of slaughtering people's emotions. She didn't want to hurt him.

She sighed and ran her fingers

through her hair. His gaze changed to one of intense passion. He inched closer.

“Tell me why you wanted to avoid me.”

“I-I think we both know things didn't work out well for us the first time...”

He dropped his gaze to his dress shoe. He scuffed it against the sidewalk. “I can't argue with that, Josie.”

“Then why did you stop me from going?” She stared at her daughter's little hand engulfed by Luke's. He worked his thumb back and forth over Maggie's fingers.

Did he realize he was doing it?

A lump clogged her throat.

He captured her gaze again.

“Look, I don’t have all the answers yet, but let me tell you this. I’m not willing to let you go.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, now, today. And later too. Just— Josie, can’t we do something together?” He looked down at Maggie, who was rocking her teddy and singing a lullaby. “Go to the park? Have hot dogs and cheese fries and ice cream?”

“Ice cream!” Maggie latched on to the only two words in the world that could draw her from her

imaginary realm.

“Yeah, Josie. Come on.” He lowered his head toward hers with exquisite deliberation. His breath washed across her face. “Ice cream. And the carousel.”

“Horsies!” Maggie piped up.

Her chirping tone broke through the haze of need suddenly raging inside Josie. She straightened away from Luke, hoping he got the hint. She was not about to be seen necking with a strange man in front of Maggie. Yet her body screamed with frustration at her decision. Her traitorous nipples longed to be kissed and

fondled. Her skin prickled with want of his touch. And her pussy pulsed heavily as desire pooled between her legs.

Maggie tugged on her hand. "Can we get ice cream, Mom?"

With massive effort, Josie tore her gaze from Luke's to look down at her little girl. Her first instinct was to run from any more contact with Luke. Her heart was about to be crushed beneath his heavy firefighter's boot, she knew it.

"How can I argue with you two?" she asked with a tense smile.

How could she argue with her heart?

Chapter Four

Luke stood back from the carousel and watched the colors blur by. The obnoxious music that usually got under his skin when he was jogging in the park now fed him an excitement he'd never known before.

As the carousel began to rotate, he kept his gaze riveted to it, waiting for Josie and Maggie to come into view. Maggie had chosen

a white horse with rainbow reins. Luke had hoisted her onto its back and Josie took up a position beside her. When Luke jumped down and headed off, Josie had called out.

“Where do you think you’re going, firefighter?”

The words had sent a shiver of pride through him. “I’m going to stand on the side and keep an eye out for dangerous situations.”

The only danger was of him losing his heart to this woman all over again. As the two pale blonde heads flashed by, he saw they were both grinning and waving. His heart lurched. *I really am in too deep*

already.

For long minutes he grew lost in thought. If he and Josie had continued on, Maggie might have been his child. The instant the idea formed, he mentally stamped on the fragile image accompanying it—a vision of his nieces and nephews weeping at their father's grave.

No, Luke wasn't going to let that happen. No string of fatherless children would be left to grow up with a mother who struggled to rebuild their lives without him. Besides, Josie hadn't been the one for him then. What made him think

she was the one now?

She sent him a wave as they rounded again. Her long hair rippled behind her and the cloth of her summery dress conformed to her breasts. Maggie squealed as the horse went upward, her little legs kicking wildly.

Luke dug his hands into his pockets and waited for the ride to end. Confusion warred in his heart. On one hand, he felt the need to walk away and continue his life as it had been without Josie. But when he'd seen her flee into the crowd, his heart had seized with terror.

“Damn,” he said softly.

“Congratulations, firefighter. Our city needs more heroes like you.”

Shaken from his dark thoughts, Luke pivoted to the elderly gentleman who'd spoken. A smile instantly sprang to his lips at the sight of the dapper little suit, the hat no one wore in these modern times, and the adorable little old lady who held his arm. The pair looked like a couple out of a movie or a television ad.

“Thank you.” Luke nodded reverently to them.

“Here comes your little girl. What a cupcake!” the lady

exclaimed as Maggie shot through the line of people to Luke's side.

To his shock, she threw her arms around his thighs and pressed her cheek to his dress pants. He automatically cradled her head with his palm and looked up into Josie's glowing eyes.

The old lady patted his arm. "Nice to see men like you still exist, sir."

The couple toddled off together, arm in arm. Josie stood beside Luke, watching them go. "Did you know them?"

"No. I—" He looked down at Maggie, who was grinning like the

Cheshire cat. "Let's get those hot dogs."

With a tight feeling in his chest, he led the way through the old-growth trees and past the duck pond to the spot where the hot dog vendor always set up his cart. The smell of onions and chili topping wafted on the light breeze.

They walked three abreast. Josie drifted toward him like a magnet to steel. When her shoulder brushed his for the third time, she flushed deeply.

"Sorry."

"Don't be."

"Don't?" Her voice held a catch.

He tilted his head back and stared at the pale-blue snatches of sky through the tree canopy. The rustle of pigeons taking flight filled his ears, followed by Maggie's exclamation of delight.

Luke stopped walking and Josie bumped into him again. Without meaning to, he lifted his hand to cradle her cheek. "You don't ever have to be sorry for touching me," he said in a low, gruff voice.

Her eyelids fluttered and her ripe lips opened on a sigh. She caught his hand and pulled it away from her face. "Let's just get those hot dogs." She grabbed Maggie's

hand and hurried off.

His body responded to the sway of her hips beneath the floaty white dress she wore. His pulse tripped and his cock stretched against the fly of his pants. He vacillated between finding a trustworthy babysitter for Maggie to steal her mother away under a shade tree and removing himself from this dead-end situation as quickly as possible.

The woman had tried to start something up with his brother. And even if she was the perfect woman for Luke, he wasn't in the market for a family.

By the time he caught up to Josie, she'd already purchased a hot dog and fries for him. He tried to press cash into her hand and she refused. "I have money, Luke. Just not a place to live."

Feeling like more of a cad for preying on her emotions when she was at one of the most vulnerable points in her life, he followed the pair to a park bench. They sank down in silence and Josie situated Maggie with her hot dog, a napkin, and a bottle of juice.

"I'm really sorry about your house, Josie."

She paused with the hot dog

halfway to her mouth. "Me too."

"I don't know enough about your life. Where do you work?"

"Gordman's Pharmacy. I'm the head pharmacist."

He was relieved to hear she had used her degree and had a stable job.

"They've been great about giving me some time off while I get my affairs in order. I originally expected to work today, but then I heard about the award ceremony... Congratulations, Luke." She stared at him so intensely, sweat broke out on his face and neck. Too easily he recalled how she felt beneath him,

soft and warm, her body cradling his so perfectly, his cock nestled against her moist folds—

He shot a glance at Maggie. Seeing she was fully engaged in devouring her hot dog and feeding sips of juice to her teddy bear, Luke made his move. He buried his nose against the fragrant column of Josie's throat and kissed the sensitive spot he knew would make her shiver.

She made a soft noise and tried to move away but he slipped his hand beneath her hair and clasped her nape firmly.

“Don't fight it, baby. I can't.

You've been driving me crazy for days."

Her breath came faster. "Luke —"

"I know, I know. Maggie." He opened his mouth over her earlobe and swirled his tongue over it.

She clamped her hand on his thigh inches from his cock. It jerked to life, swelling to its full length in seconds.

"All done, Mommy!" Maggie jumped off the bench.

Josie jerked as far away from Luke as she could, which was mere inches. He stared at her profile, hungry for her full lips and to taste

the bead of sweat that zigzagged from her hairline.

“Can I go look at the ducks?” Maggie asked.

The shore of the pond was approximately ten paces from the bench where he and Josie sat. Close enough to keep an eye on the child while giving him and Josie a minute alone.

“Sure, sweet pea. Just stay behind the rock wall.”

Maggie skipped away, glancing once over her shoulder at her mother. Josie smiled and waved.

“Thank you for the carousel ride, Luke. She needed something

to brighten her week.”

“I wish I could do more.”

She looked at him hard. “You don’t think saving our lives was enough?”

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “It’s my job. Last night I battled a gasoline fire and cut a couple people out of a car wreck. It’s all in a night’s work.”

Her eyes darkened and he lost himself in them for a minute. Too easily he remembered the way they looked when she came on his cock. “I forgot you’ve been awake all night and...the night before.” A pink blush stained her cheeks. She

glanced back at Maggie, breaking the spell between them.

He couldn't stop the grin from spreading over his face. Yeah, the day and night before she'd been wild in his arms as he loved her repeatedly. He slid an arm around her waist and dragged her across the bench until their hips bumped. Then he followed her gaze to where her daughter stood, talking to a pair of ducks and Mr. Fluff at the same time.

"I managed to snag about four hours of sleep after the wreck and before my shift ended this morning," he said. "Listen, Josie,

about that day in the hotel —”

She stiffened, her expression stony. “This is just like a bad movie.”

“You don’t even know what I was about to say.”

“I do know. You’re going to say we were once good, but then something happened and our relationship ended. Then the fire and the fear and the shock of finding each other again unexpectedly —”

“Josie.” He nudged her face up toward his.

She continued to ramble. “And our bodies just took over despite

what our minds wanted –”

Fuck, he couldn't stand to see her like this. It was like watching her cry after their breakup. What did he really want? He needed to make up his damn mind. Now. She had a child and a heart to protect. He wasn't the type of guy to screw with a woman's emotions. Was he jumping into the fire or running?

She bit into her lower lip ruthlessly. The flesh grew red around her very white teeth. The sight was a spear right to his groin. And his heart. No matter what turmoil was going on in his chest, he didn't think he could leave her

alone. He drew a deep breath and let his instincts take over, just as he did when he was on a call.

“That’s not what I was going to say. I wanted to tell you that I couldn’t wait to spend another night with you.”

She stopped mid-spew, her mouth hanging open. He ran his thumb over her lower lip and smiled crookedly.

“It’s all I can think about.” He meshed their fingers and kneaded the hollow of her hipbone with the other hand.

“Luke, are you sure?” The longing in her eyes filled him with

protectiveness. He wanted to cover her with his body and shield her from the harsh world. Her and the little blonde girl who was now quacking like a duck.

He swallowed hard. This was surely how Ryan had felt about his wife and kids. As if he should personally build a bunker and tuck them away inside with all the treasures and luxuries that would ensure a happy existence.

Shit. He was in deeper than he thought.

He glanced at Maggie's straight little back and then leaned in and stole a soft kiss from her mother.

“I’m very sure. And, baby, this time I won’t have to run to the corner store for more condoms.”

* * * * *

Josie hooked a heel around Luke’s hip and jerked him against her. Her pussy throbbed with need and her panties were soaked through. If he didn’t strip her in the next thirty seconds, she was going to take action herself.

He groaned against her lips as his tongue swept inside her mouth. His flavors dizzied her. Musk and male with an underlying hint of the

mint he'd sucked after dinner.

The three of them had rounded off their trip to the park with an ice-cream cone. Then they'd driven around the better sections of town in Luke's truck, looking for apartments to rent. Following that, he'd taken them out for Chinese. He'd gone home to shower and change while Maggie's dad came to pick her up. He was going to get her to school since Josie was without a vehicle.

Luke hadn't even made it through the door of the hotel room before Josie attacked him. It was shameful really.

She slipped her tongue against his wantonly, wriggling closer to his broad chest. Running her hands over his muscled spine, she caught his shirt hem and swiftly divested him of it.

He rumbled a laugh. "Eager, I see."

"I want you." Her hotly whispered confession fell between them. He drew away to meet her gaze. A heartbeat throbbed in her ears, as loud as the roar of the fire had been in her home.

Then, as if a gun had been fired into the air, signaling the start of a race, they threw themselves at each

other. He yanked her off the bed and stood her at the side between his knees, wildly kissing a path across her collarbones and down to her cleavage. In one swift yank, he removed her shirt.

She scrabbled at his shirt buttons, panting, gasping and then whimpering with need. He caressed her sides, moving upward to cup her breasts. She issued a not so quiet moan that made him raise his head and grin.

Her heart broke open a little more at the sight of that bad-boy smile. At this minute, she might have been twenty years old again.

The familiar utterance left her lips before she could stop it.

“I’m in love with you, Luke.”

He stopped kissing her breasts and buried his face against her belly, clutching her tightly to him. His hands convulsed on her waist and he breathed heavily, as if he’d just run a marathon.

Josie’s throat closed off. What the hell was wrong with her? The tenderness between them didn’t equate to love—it was born from the feelings they’d once shared as young adults. This wasn’t love.

But her racing heart told her she was wrong.

Now what was she going to do? He hadn't exactly responded to her revelation. In fact, he wasn't moving at all. Which left her two options—continue to seduce him and get what she wanted physically or call it off.

To cover the blunder, she pressed on his shoulders, hoping he'd lift his head and she could kiss him. She'd been known to use her tongue for persuasive purposes. She was confident she could again, if only give her the chance. Right now, she had to make him forget she'd opened her big mouth.

Suddenly he lifted his head.

Their gazes clashed. Bolts of lightning sounded in her mind as the electricity flashed.

“Christ, Josie.” He plucked her off her feet and stood in one fluid motion, bearing her across the short span of the room. He kicked aside a desk chair and leaned against the desk. Pressing on the small of her back, he brought her hips flush against his.

She gasped as his steely length ground against her lower belly. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she yanked him down. Flicking her tongue over his lower lip, she rocked into him.

His reaction was swift. He pinched the clasp on her bra and popped it. The lacy cups fell away from her body, sending a shiver of heat through her. He peeled the fabric off and dropped it without a care. Then he opened her waistband with one practiced tug.

She smoothed her hands over his roped muscles, learning each cut and swell. The thickness of his shoulders drove her wild. She needed to feel him over her, his weight pressing her down, making her feel more precious and safe than she had in years.

Plucking at the short hairs on

the back of his head, she parted her lips to his plundering tongue. Lust spiked in her core. Her nipples drew up as hard as gems against his warm flesh.

He captured one nipple between his fingers, rolling it, pinching it with a slow, steady pressure that made her cry out. Juices flowed out of her sex and wet her panties further. The afternoon with Luke had been the worst kind of foreplay. Keeping their distance for Maggie's sake had been torture. And the times Luke had touched her had sent her from simmering to boiling in

milliseconds. For hours, she'd existed in a state of absolute need. Now she planned to take what she wanted, and more.

Reaching between his legs, she smoothed his length through his worn jeans. The head seemed to pulsate. She craved a taste of his salty come. Still responding to his kisses, she dipped her fingers into his waistband and stroked the tip.

He reared back with a growl. The feral light in his eyes sent tremors of passion through her. This was Luke at his finest, times ten. The young man she'd been in love with early on had morphed

into this rough and demanding firefighter.

He shoved her jeans and panties down her hips. Before she could even step out of them, he had her buttocks in hand, kneading them, stretching the flesh apart to allow the cooler air to wash over her intimately.

She moaned and worked on his jeans too. He was still leaning against the desk, so the fabric was trapped. Insistently she tugged. A crooked grin cut a path across his chiseled features and he rocked away from the desk.

“I’ll give you your way this

time.” His eyes were candles, holding more than the fires of desire. Could he possibly still feel the same way about her that she did about him? Worry blanketed her once more. He still hadn’t responded to her love words. Not really. Not unless “Christ, Josie” was a response.

She hooked her fingers into his jeans and boxers, pulling them off together. The musky scents of his body filled her head, spearing her with lust all over again. She needed him in every way possible—over her, under her, in her mouth and stretching her heated walls.

A shiver tore down her spine, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. He gave her a smoldering stare. The ice blue of his eyes did nothing to cool her.

He leaned against the desk once more and drew her between his thighs. Hooking an arm under her leg, he pulled it up, planting her foot on the desk. And giving him complete access to her pussy.

A coo left her. Out of her head with need, she dug her fingers into his spine, trying to force him into her, where she most wanted him. He slid his fingers between her legs and circled her throbbing clit. She

cried out, tossing her head back.

He swooped in and kissed the arch of her throat as he strummed her button. Dark tendrils of bliss spread through her rapidly—too rapidly. She wanted to savor each exquisite touch, but in seconds, she was pleading with him.

“Make me come, Luke. God, your fingers are so good. Ohhh, yes. There!”

He ground her core into her body, wriggling gently. Cream flooded her inner thighs and his hand. He continued his assault on her throat, nipping the skin down to her breasts.

Gasping, she flipped her head down to watch him swallow one turgid peak on his tongue. Quaking now, she could barely stand. He sucked her nipple as he flicked her clit, driving her higher. Higher.

She splintered with a guttural moan, curling around him, jerking as the waves of ecstasy pounded her. Sanity fled. Her world narrowed to include only this strong man supporting her and bringing about the contractions of her release.

“That’s it, darlin’. Come for me. Drench my fingers. Then I’m going to keep stroking you until you’re on

the verge once more. Only then will I fill you with my cock.”

His words inflamed her. She cried out and he found her mouth, swallowing her noises, pulling them from her with his tongue and his rough fingertips. As the last pulsations ebbed away, she collapsed forward.

He cradled the back of her head, tucking her solidly against his shoulder, and buried his finger to the knuckle.

She shattered again. The orgasm struck her from nowhere. But he'd primed her pussy so well, each touch ripped through her. Pumping

his finger rapidly in and out, he extended her release. She bucked against his hand, her breathing harsh and ragged in the quiet space.

“Mmm, Josie, baby, that’s it. God, I love seeing you come. Feeling your pussy hug my finger. How about two fingers?” He added a second, stretching her until she hung suspended in a state of orgasmic bliss. Every nerve in her body sang. Just when she didn’t think she could survive another hypersensitive second, he withdrew his fingers.

Her pussy clenched around the emptiness, aching for him already.

But he filled her mouth with his tongue even as he rolled a condom onto his thickened shaft and eased into her wet pussy.

She scraped her nails lightly over his shoulders and down his spine, dragging him closer. His flesh was like steel covered with warm velvet.

He tore his mouth from hers and gazed into her eyes. She watched his face convulse in pleasure as he sank his cock to the root. Holding completely still, they stared at each other.

“I can’t withhold myself from you any longer, Josie. This is much

more than sex.”

Her heart palpitated and she held her breath, waiting to hear those words. The ones that meant she wasn't just a walk through the halls of memory, but truly a person he could love in the present. She could move past the pain of their breakup. They'd been young and hadn't exactly known who they were yet.

He shifted within her. Air rushed from her lungs. She closed her eyes against the heat snapping through her system.

“Look at me, baby. When I start to move within you, I want to look

into your eyes. When I tell you I'm still in love with you, I want to see your expression."

Shock stole her ability to think. Had she heard him correctly?

Silver lights played in his eyes and a smile teased his lips. He brushed his mouth over hers. Before she could respond, he moved away. She followed him and he caught her lower lip with his teeth, tugging lightly.

"Move with me, Josie. Ride my cock."

She let go of her control and simply let herself feel. Swaying her hips forward, she sank over his

length. He hissed his pleasure. She withdrew slowly, holding his gaze. The passion and love in his gaze warmed her heart and soul. Finding him again had been the best thing to happen to her next to the birth of her daughter. Even though she'd lost her home and all her possessions, she'd gained so much more when Luke entered her life again.

His veined erection filled her, stretched her perfectly. Her body clamped down on him and he released a groan. Lashing an arm around her waist, he anchored her solidly against his chest so not a

fraction of space was present.

Then, without warning, he plucked her off her feet. She wrapped her thighs around his hips automatically, locking her heels behind him. The desk softly thumped the wall with their movements.

Each thrust nudged her neediest spot, shooting her higher up the incline of need. Rarely had she experienced this sort of lovemaking – the full body, mind and soul kind. Being linked in that moment was like the stars had lined up and the entire universe heralded the news of the love they shared.

She kissed him, flipping her tongue against his as they rocked together in perfectly timed unison. Juices soaked him, easing his path. The fires in her deepest core were raging out of control.

“I’m going to come!”

“Yeah, baby. Give everything to me. Let yourself go. Let me hear you say my name!” He plunged deep once, twice...

With a harsh growl, he came. His orgasm heated her walls, sending her over the edge.

“Luke!”

He swallowed her cry with his mouth, feeding her the rasping

growls bursting from him as he spurted his seed.

For long moments she rode the pulsations of bliss. He splayed his big palm over her spine, spanning most of it and making her feel delicate in his hold. His breath fluttered the hair at her temple.

“Mine.”

The single word inspired pure joy in her. A puff of a sigh burst from her chest and a smile spread across her face. She searched his icy eyes and saw only warmth and love.

Holding her gaze, he pushed away from the desk and carried her

to the bed. He laid her down gently, their bodies still connected. He stretched over her, bearing his weight on his elbows. His muscles bulged and she couldn't help but run her hands over them.

“I know it's only been a few days, Josie, but I mean it when I say you're mine. I want you in my life every day. It killed me to let you go.”

A sharp pang struck her heart. “Then why did you? I never really understood...”

He dipped his head, hiding his gaze. “Because of Ryan.”

Confusion rose up inside her.

What did his brother have to do with anything? Had he persuaded Luke to dump her? And if so, why? She'd always felt a camaraderie with Luke's brother. They'd felt like family from the start.

“Ryan?”

He shook his head. “Forget it.” He rolled off and walked to the far side of the room. With his back to her, he removed his condom and dropped it into the trash. She watched him fearfully. Would it always be like this for them? A roller coaster of highs and lows? Flashes of pleasure followed by steep drops that ripped her

stomach – and heart – out?

“Luke, talk to me.” Her sexual haze had faded and now she lay shivering, alone and cold and more afraid than someone should be after making love to a man who confessed his love for her.

He pivoted but kept in profile. The dim light in the room outlined his muscular body, making him look like a model or a god. To her, he was, and so much more. But she had to know what was going on in that head of his or they'd never resolve the differences between them.

“I saw the things that were

going on between you and Ryan.”

Shock tore through her. She jerked upright and was on her feet in a flash. “What?” she practically screamed. “Nothing ever happened with your brother. I-I don’t know how you could think that. I never had contact with him after our relationship ended, and I have no idea where he’s at now.”

“He’s dead.” His voice was flat but held an underlying note of despair.

Her heart clenched. She took a hasty step toward him, wishing to comfort him, but he made a sharp gesture to keep her at bay.

“He died in a fire, trying to pull a family out.”

She stared at Luke's pained expression and her chest quivered with silent tears. More than anything, she wanted to draw this man into her arms and ease him. But he was apparently angry with her, laboring under the delusion that she and his brother had betrayed him.

“I'm so sorry to hear that, Luke.” Her voice broke and he swung his gaze to hers. For a moment, she stopped breathing. His jaw was set and a tendon violently jumped in the corner.

“I know you were interested in Ryan,” he accused.

“What? Why would you think that? I was never interested in him as more than a friend!” The sticky juices she’d spilled for Luke wet her inner thighs. She crossed her arms over her body to try to still the shaking.

“I saw the way you were starting to look at him. Flirting with him.”

She shook her head. “I-I didn’t. That was your misconception!”

“Really?” He rooted her in place with his sharp gaze. The accusation in his eyes cut her to the quick.

Tears prickled her eyelids.

“Luke, it was always you. I never strayed from you. If you hadn’t ended it, I would have hoped to have someday become your wife—”

“Stop it, Josie! At least tell me the truth after all this time!” His bark brought her tears to the surface. They bulged at the roots of her lashes and ran down her face. Devastated, she began to cry in earnest.

“I have no reason to lie about this, Luke. Not ever, but especially not now.”

“If you tell me the truth, maybe

I can get past it in my mind and we can make something of this." He waved a hand to indicate them and the hotel room that was still wreathed with the scents of their passion.

Her heart cracked in two. What could be salvaged after his accusation? He'd dropped her years ago because he felt he couldn't trust her. What would convince him now?

She stumbled across the room and grabbed his clothes. Gathering them into a bundle, she stalked back and threw them at him. He caught them with an astonished

look on his face. His shirt tumbled to the floor.

“Get out, Luke!”

His eyes narrowed and he took a step toward her. “You’re going to kick me out without even trying to explain yourself?”

Fury claimed her heart and the tears that spurted from her now were ones of anger. “I shouldn’t have to! You just told me you love me, but you basically can’t trust me and think I betrayed you with your own brother! Ugh!” She clenched her fists and stomped one bare heel into the carpet. “You don’t even know what you want, Luke! Don’t

even know what you're feeling!"

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bouncing in his throat. "That's true."

"Get. Out." She pointed to the door. When he didn't move, she spun away and started getting dressed, throwing on her jeans and panties and her shirt went on without bothering with a bra. She never wanted to see this infuriating man again. She'd always prize his act of heroism that had rescued her and Maggie from their burning home. But she didn't need to put up with more hurt caused by a man.

He dressed slowly, throwing her long looks that threatened to steal her control. She didn't know whether to climb on top of him and sink over his cock or call hotel security.

"Please go." She faced him, panting for breath as if she'd run a mile in minutes.

He let his eyes slip away from hers and pressed his lips into a tight seam. "I don't know what to say."

"Yeah? You seemed to find some good words a half an hour ago when your cock was inside me. I guess it was all a lie though."

His features shuddered and then

settled into a mask. "I never lie."

She stared at him, numbness stealing over her. She folded her arms over her chest. "Neither do I."

He twisted away from her and slammed through the door. When the heavy door clicked shut on the love of her life, she crumpled to the floor in a mess of sobs. *I did the right thing*. She chanted this to herself as she tried to choke back the tears that were the result of a broken spirit. How many times could she put herself out there, only to be hurt?

Luke had agreed that he didn't know what he wanted or what he

was feeling. He'd probably told her he loved her because he was caught up in the moment. She had no idea—couldn't think around the pain lacerating her heart.

The only thing she knew for certain was that she wasn't going to tell him she'd betrayed him by showing interest in his brother. Josie was a lot of things—a good mother, a hard worker, honest, caring and faithful. She was also hopelessly in love with Luke Puckett.

But she couldn't put herself—and Maggie—out there again.

Chapter Five

Luke hurried his steps and kept his head down, hoping to slip under the radar of his fellow firefighters. He strode through the lounge area and on to the locker room. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Morelli's big form rise from the sofa and follow.

He continued, ignoring both him and Pearce, who shut the door behind the three of them. Luke shot

them a glance and then spun toward his locker. He opened it with more force than necessary and it smacked the adjoining locker with a metallic crash.

“Problems, Lucifer?”

At that moment, he seriously felt like the entity he was nicknamed after. Only a devil would hurt a woman like Josie. What the hell had he done?

Broke her heart and fixed it so she'll never speak to me again.

Without answering his captain, Luke shoved his duffle bag into the bottom of his locker and yanked his gear out to perform his routine

check for wear.

Morelli circled him and Pearce closed in too, like two vultures on their prey.

“Better tell us what’s going on, Luke.” Morelli wore a no-bullshit look that would ordinarily have made Luke laugh, especially if it was trained on any man besides him.

“It’s personal.”

Pearce thumped a fist softly against the locker door. “If it’s going to inhibit your performance as a firefighter, it’s no longer personal.”

“What makes you think I’d let it

affect how I respond?" Luke's chest tightened with rage.

His captain stared him down. "Because you can't even inspect your gear without your hands shaking. Spill it, Lucifer. You need a friendly ear. You've got four."

He hesitated. He considered his captain and Morelli to be some of his best friends. As close as brothers. He no longer had a brother to confide in, and besides, he couldn't have talked to Ryan about this particular trouble even if he'd been alive. Ryan had repeatedly told Luke the same thing Josie had—that the two of

them were simply friends and Luke was crazy to suspect anything more.

“I don’t need to participate in a bad episode of a soap opera. *Firehouse 5’s Locker Room Confessions* or something like that.” He threw his gear into a heap on the floor in front of his locker and slammed the door. When it didn’t shut because of the bulk blocking the door, he kicked it.

The action eased him some and he tried again. He slammed a boot heel off the metal, denting it. Then with a harsh bellow, he let loose, punching and delivering violent

kicks to his locker. His knuckles split and blood warmed his skin. The knot in his chest tightened until he thought he'd rupture.

“Goddammit! I fucked up! I lost her!”

Suddenly Morelli snagged him around the waist. Luke spun on him viciously, prepared to lay into the man.

Pearce stepped in, shoving Luke in the chest and sending him staggering away from Morelli. He clenched and unclenched his hands just so he could continue to feel the pain. Luke lunged again, but Pearce grabbed him and held him.

“Let go of me,” he growled.

Pearce shook his head. “Not yet, Lucifer. We can control you if you can’t control yourself.”

“I’m in control! Now let me go!” He cocked his elbow, meaning to deliver a blow to Morelli’s midsection, but Pearce caught his arm and ruthlessly twisted it downward. One flick and his elbow would be dislocated.

Morelli spoke. “We all fuck up sometimes, man. Does this have to do with that woman that you rescued?”

The mention of Josie took the fight from Luke instantly. His tense

muscles caved in on themselves. He tore free of Pearce's hold and collapsed on the floor with his back against the opposite bank of lockers. Dropping his head into his hands, he fought against the tears that threatened to fall. The last thing he wanted to do was break down here in the firehouse in front of his friends and his boss.

He jammed a heel into the floor. Its thud did nothing to loosen the lump in his throat.

Pearce pulled up a metal folding chair and straddled it backward. "What's going on, Luke?"

He breathed heavily and tried to

formulate the words so they could understand. "I thought something had happened between the woman I'm seeing and my brother."

"Ryan?" Morelli sank to the floor beside him.

"Yeah. Years ago when we were in college. That's why I broke up with her, but I never really told her the reason. It's been eating at me. I thought I could get past it and love her—" The word grated from him. "But I couldn't. I brought it up and when I did..." He scrubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, feeling more despondent than he ever had in his life. "The instant the

words were out, I could tell by her face that I was wrong. Horribly wrong.”

“But by then it was too late,” Morelli guessed.

He nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, but whatever he was about to say was drowned by the shriek of the fire alarm.

Pearce stood so quickly his chair scooted back and hit the lockers. The door burst open and the rest of the fire crew ran in, suiting up at warp speeds. Luke jumped to his feet and pulled on his pants, coat and boots. Reaching into his big locker, he shoved his gloves aside to

locate his mask and air tank.

The particulars of a two-alarm fire blared from the radio. Pearce was issuing commands between pauses. "Morelli, you're with me. Dobbs, Howland and Zacherel, you're in unit one. Luke, it sounds like you'd better put on those gloves, man. The building isn't safe and you're going in."

Luke nodded but ignored his captain's command to grab his gloves. Instead, he tugged his hat down and picked up his air tank. "I'm ready, Caps. I won't let anything hinder my performance."



Josie stripped off her clothes and dropped them into a pile on the floor of the hotel bathroom. What she wouldn't give for her own comfortable bath in her Victorian house. She'd loved the decadent tiles and the big old porcelain tub. She'd carefully chosen the most luxurious towels and brass accoutrements for the space. For many months it had been her refuge.

Now it was rubble. A black tooth in the unbroken smile of the neighborhood where they'd lived.

With a hitching sigh, she pulled the thin, coarse, hotel towel down from the wire rack on the wall and stepped into the shower. The hot water poured over her, washing away the traces of Luke's kisses. His scents swirled down the drain, eradicated by the citrus body wash she used.

Thank goodness Maggie was with her father. At least her little girl wouldn't see her in this state. A glance in the mirror had shown Josie a face more ravaged than it had been after the house fire.

Hours had passed since Luke had walked out. She'd spent the

time alternately sobbing and inwardly raging. How stupid it had been to put herself out there again, only to be kicked into the dirt.

Well, now I really have nothing. She turned her back on the spray and let the warm fingers of water spread over her scalp. There was little she could do but start over. New house, new car, new stuff. Luke fell into the “old” category, since he was an old boyfriend twice over.

She didn't need love in her life. Focusing on her career and raising her daughter to be a good person were enough.

They'll have to be.

She scrubbed her hair and rinsed it. Then she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, reluctant to get out. She could barely stand the idea of spending time alone in the hotel room where the memories of her and Luke's lovemaking were still so fresh. He'd told her he loved her, for goodness' sakes.

And then he'd accused her of sniffing around his brother.

"Ugh!" She switched off the shower and whipped the curtain forcefully back. With jerky movements, she toweled herself off

and wrapped her hair in another towel turban-style.

Striding from the steamy bathroom nude, she caught the voice of the news reporter on the television she'd left on. "Fire crews are on the scene of a two-alarm blaze on the South Side tonight. Mary Jensen is on the scene. As you can see, flames are leaping to heights of forty feet. The roof is completely on fire, and the building is on the verge of collapse. Fire companies from the South End are working to put out the fire and it's rumored a homeless man has taken up residence inside. Only one

firefighter is specially trained to work under conditions such as these—our own hero Luke Puckett from Firehouse 5.”

Josie’s heart seized and then plummeted to her feet. A cold sweat broke over her. She folded in half, struggling to drag air through her lungs, which were somewhere around her knees.

She plastered a hand to her chest, choking and gasping. *Luke*. Inside that fireball? What if she never saw him again? Was never given the chance to tell him how much she loved him or to make things right?

In a split second, she'd made up her mind. She threw on the first thing she saw, which was the white sundress she'd worn to the award ceremony, without bothering to put on undergarments. She slipped on a pair of flip-flops and was out the door, her hotel key and her purse in hand.

Outside, the summer night was sultry. The air wrapped around her like a lover's arms, but she continued to shiver despite the temperatures. The black sky was velvety here, but on the South Side, an orange glow would light the night from the flames of the house

where Luke was doing his job.

A perilous job that could cost him his life.

Fear choked her. After their argument, she'd thought him lost to her. But death was... Well, permanent. She'd never be able to forgive him or rage at him or kiss him. All the amazing things that meant she was head over flip-flops in love with him.

She ran into the street and hailed a cab. As it skidded to a stop, she yanked the door open and jumped inside, practically yelling at the driver to take her to the fire on the South Side.

“You’re crazy, leddy,” he said in a thick accent.

“Please hurry! Someone I love is in that fire!”

He peeled out into traffic at her words and stomped on the gas. She rode the edge of her seat, too afraid to lose sight of the strip of road ahead for fear it would somehow slow them if she did.

Precious minutes ticked by while the flames on the TV screen flickered in her mind’s eye. *Luke, please be okay. Give me the chance to listen to what you have to say.*

The cab couldn’t go fast enough for her. By the time they reached

the first blocks of the South Side, she was bouncing on the seat, lips moving in a silent prayer.

The driver hit the brakes behind a line of traffic. "This is as close as I can get, leddy. They've got the street blocked."

"Thanks!" She tossed him a big bill and hopped out of the car. Streaking down the sidewalk as fast as she could in her flip-flops, she swung her head left and right, searching for signs of the blaze. Ahead, the whoop of a siren shook the night. She surged forward as a burst of adrenaline hit her system.

The reek of smoke reached her

before she could make out the roar of flames. The familiar sound caused a heavy sweat to break out all over her body as she recalled the events at her house just days ago.

By the time she reached the police barricade, she was sick with terror.

“You can’t get through, miss. The block’s closed down to allow the crews to work.”

“My husband’s in there!” she shrieked. She had no idea why those words passed her lips, but it was too late to retrieve them. The police officer looked at her hard. Then he took her arm and led her

through to where the fire trucks were parked end-to-end with nary a space between.

“Stay here!” The police officer’s order sounded close to her ear. He ran up to a group of firefighters. One held a laptop and was issuing orders to another, who barked them to someone unseen.

Maybe Luke.

“Luke!”

Her cry caused two men to jerk around. The one holding the laptop motioned her over. She stumbled across the pavement, which was soaked with water from the hoses. She never removed her gaze from

the blackened building with fire shooting from the now exposed rafters.

Through his mask, the fireman holding the laptop spoke to her in a muffled voice. "You're his woman."

She nodded, her heart surging into her mouth and rendering her speechless. She wanted to plead for this man to communicate with Luke so she knew he was safe. Then again, Luke *must* be all right, or else the atmosphere wouldn't be one of urgency, but of gloom.

"Lucifer, do you have a visual on the victim?" The firefighter wearing a white hat spoke in a

voice that carried above the flames and the rush of water.

Josie locked her fingers together and fought to keep from crying or screaming or shaking someone. The man with the laptop pivoted to her again. "Lucifer, you might want to hurry your ass."

Her heart throbbed in anticipation.

The man threw back his head and laughed. "Why, he asks? Tell him, Caps!"

The firefighter who must be the captain focused on Josie. "We have a woman down here who claims to be your wife." His dark eyes

danced behind his mask.

She didn't know whether to shriek with glee or sob. Luke was far from being safe, and they had so much to discuss. But as long as he was alive, they'd have a chance to make things right.

A deafening crack sounded.

"Get out of there, Puckett!" the captain yelled. The other firefighter followed. The two exchanged a glance that turned Josie's bowels to water.

Hysteria rose in her sharply. She started forward and was snagged back, ripped off her feet. "Dammit, lady, you stay here or I'll have you

placed behind the police barricade!" the captain screamed.

Water sloshed over her feet as she was set down in a puddle. She clutched her head and gave in to her terrified weeping. Tears spurted from her and pain was a hot coal in her chest. Where was Luke? Had the house really collapsed, leaving him trapped?

She stared between her fingers at the inferno. Black smoke roiled from the brilliant flames, imprinting the sight on her eyes as if it were a negative. Colors flashed in her vision and dizziness swept her. Suddenly she felt as if she were

riding the carousel with Maggie again, swooping around and around, trying to pick out Luke's blue jacket with each rotation.

The captain and the other crew members continued to yell for their team member. Apparently he wasn't answering, or worse, wasn't able to. A funereal pall settled over the scene. Paramedics shifted from foot to foot, obviously thinking there would be no victims to transport to the hospital.

What kind of insanity was this? Why would Luke be sent into a situation like this alone? She thought firefighters always teamed

up. She opened her mouth to scream this at the men around her who were doing absolutely nothing to help their fellow firefighter.

Just then, a collective cry rang out. She snapped around and stared at the house fixedly, seeing nothing but violent tongues of fire licking out of the charred shell.

“Where?” she cried frantically.

A man pointed over her shoulder. “There!” Then he rushed past her and met the big figure who was burdened with a man on his shoulders. A sob broke from Josie and she released it, along with a cry of relief as she ran forward.

“Luke!”

He jerked as if he heard her, but how could he? She continued to yell as she zigzagged around the crush of people that now crowded around him and the victim.

Icy blue eyes met hers, and in that moment, they shared a thousand apologies. Understanding was a balm on her wounded soul.

“Let her through,” she heard him say. She studied his face through the mask and saw pain creasing his brow.

She dropped to her knees and reached for him.

“Don’t touch me yet. My

hands.” He held them out. They trembled up and down as if pulsing with his heartbeat.

She plastered her own hands to her mouth to hold back the scream that threatened to tear free. His hands—his precious fingers—were red and raw, already blistering.

“Should have worn gloves, you ass,” the captain said. “Let the medics do their jobs, miss. These men need medical attention.”

With a shock, she looked down at the victim who was now being loaded onto a stretcher and borne off to the waiting ambulance. It was impossible to tell if he was a

homeless man because his clothes were scorched and he was completely covered in soot. His hair was sticking up in thick clumps.

Luke followed the man with his gaze, and then looked at Josie once more. "Don't go far, baby. Morelli, get her a coffee."

The firefighter who had been guiding her wrapped his fingers around her upper arm and pulled her to her feet. As she moved away, Luke's voice reached her, recounting his story.

The floor had collapsed out from under him and the man he'd saved. His communication device had

been lost and he'd scabbled in the flames for it before he'd thought better, burning his hands. As the fire had promised to end his existence, the house had shifted and he'd spied an opening. Taking a chance, he'd jumped through it with the homeless man slung over his shoulders. Luke had been shocked to hit the soaking wet grass in the yard.

The captain's voice sounded. "Well, Lucifer, that's why we send you in there. No one else can do what you do. Your gut drives you and you come out safe every time."

Josie spun around. Through the

bodies circling Luke, her gaze connected with his. His tone was clear and his blue eyes seemed to scorch hotter than the flames. "That's right. My gut drives me." He mouthed "I love you" to her.

A half sob burst from her even as a grin stretched across her face.

Chapter Six

Luke passed through the firehouse as swiftly as possible but his friends kept stopping him to congratulate him. He thanked them and joked about the fact that he would now wear gloves no matter what. But he was dying to get through the firehouse with all haste. He'd just escaped the press outside and wanted nothing more than to be alone.

Well, not exactly alone. With Josie.

He motioned to Morelli with his bandaged hand. "You told her to wait for me?"

"Yeah, she's in the locker room right now." He waggled his dark eyebrows. "If you hurry, I can almost guarantee you twenty minutes alone with her, Lucifer."

Without warning, Luke's cock hardened. Visions instantly rushed up in his mind—of pinning her against his locker, of bending her over the bench...

He quickened his pace. "Twenty minutes?" he called over his

shoulder.

“Yeah. Unless there’s a fire.”

“Oh, there’s going to be a fire.”

As he sped away, Morelli’s chuckle followed him. Luke took the stairs two at a time. Fortunately, the lounge was empty.

Reaching the door, he stared at the handle. With both hands completely wrapped in gauze, he wasn’t going to have an easy time turning that lever. He nudged it with his knee and the door swung inward.

“Oh Luke!” Josie flew at him, blonde hair twitching around the pale oval of her face. He wrapped

her against him, careful to keep his hands off her, though he longed to press on her spine. Popping those blisters right now wasn't a good idea, he'd been advised. In the morning—hell, it *was* morning—he'd return to the burn center to have his injuries tended. In the meantime, he had Josie in his arms and they were alone.

He'd have to get creative.

Burying his nose in her fragrant hair, he gave over to the emotion he'd been holding back for hours. The lump in his throat broke free and he issued a sob.

She cried out in reply and

spiraled her arms around his torso, holding him tight. The memory of their argument returned at once. How had he been so stupid? Of course she hadn't taken an interest in Ryan, and who cared if she had? They were all young. But Josie had never been anything but loving and faithful.

"I've been stupid," he said thickly.

She scraped her fingers through the hair on the back of his head. "I could have lost you—"

"Such an idiot... You're the world to me, baby."

"You are too. I don't know how

to move on without you in my life.”

“You don’t have to.” He lifted his head and stared into her tear-bright eyes. “Will you forgive me?”

“I swear I never had any emotion for your brother—”

He covered her lips with his since his hands were out of commission. “Shh. I was wrong. Ryan said I was wrong then. I don’t know why I wouldn’t listen. I deserve to lose you.”

She moved her lips against his, kissing, nipping and teasing him with her tongue. “No,” she murmured.

He captured her tongue with

his, holding it prisoner inside her mouth. White heat claimed his groin. His cock hardened until the ache nearly drove him mad. The urge to pound into her tight little body was almost too much to bear. But he was smart enough to realize he couldn't just hurt her and then fuck her. He had to provide the things she needed—love words, soft caresses and wooing.

Her chest heaved against his. Damn, he wished he could cup her breasts and trace the ridged edges of her nipples through that little white sundress. Tearing his mouth away, he met her gaze.

“Baby, I want you bad. I want to use my body to show you how much I love you. But I’m going to need some help.”

She glanced around. “Here?”

He nodded, smiling crookedly. “Right now.” He walked her backward until her spine came up against his locker.

“Is this your locker?” Her words came out as a rasp.

He nuzzled her throat and sank his tongue into the soft depression behind her ear. “Uh-huh. Number eleven. Maybe it will become our lucky number. We’ll get married on the eleventh of June.”

“That’s only a month away!”

“Yep.” He continued to bathe the shell of her ear with his tongue. “I’ll make you come eleven times...”

“Ohhh.” A shiver ran through her and her skin lifted beneath his mouth in goose bumps.

He trailed his mouth around to her plump lips. “And we’ll have eleven children.”

She burst out laughing. “What? Are you sure?”

“Well, ten more. We already have one. If you’ll allow me to be part of Maggie’s life.” He wedged his thigh between hers, nudging

them apart.

“Oh Luke. You’re an amazing man. Of course I’d love for you to be part of Maggie’s life.” She kissed him lingeringly, tenderly.

Swiftly, the gentle brushing of her lips escalated to something more. Something feral. He lifted her on his knee, rubbing against the heat of her.

“Christ, Josie, you’re not wearing any panties.”

She sank her teeth into his lower lip and dragged him back to her mouth. “There wasn’t time. I saw you on the news and had to get to you.”

He braced his weight against hers. "It's all right now, baby. We're together." He thrust his tongue deep into her warm, wet mouth. His cock throbbed heavily as he thought about pushing up her dress and plunging into her sheath.

Long minutes of mind-blowing kissing later, he could barely contain himself. "Take my pants off, baby."

Her eyes darkened two shades. "No one will come in?"

"I've got it covered."

"Mmm." She gripped his belt loops and tugged him against the V of her legs again. He ground

against her and she released a ragged moan. His fingers itched inside the bandages to be let loose. The need to touch her was strong. How was he going to endure lovemaking without use of his fingers?

She held his gaze as she slid his work pants over his hips along with his boxers. Fingers dancing over his shirt buttons, she moved to draw the cloth off his shoulders. He stopped her by holding up his hands. "Let's leave it for now, baby."

"Okay. As long as I can do this." She smoothed his chest and down

to his ridged abs, her eyes hooded with desire.

Leaning in, he caught her lips and delivered a searing kiss again. "Pick up your dress for me, baby. I'm dying to taste you."

Josie's body came alive as Luke sank to his knees before her. He dragged his hair-roughened jaw over her sensitive inner thighs. She gasped and clutched his head with both hands, guiding him where she most wanted him. No—needed him.

Juices escaped her folds. With a moan, he captured a bead on his

tongue and lapped it away, stroking up to the crease between her pussy and thigh.

Shuddering now, she fought to control her harsh breathing. She'd never had sex in public before and, although they were secluded behind a door, anyone could walk in on them, with or without Luke's promise to give them privacy.

He dipped his tongue into her seam, simultaneously shoving her thighs wide. She braced her palms against the lockers behind her, the cloth of her dress gathered beneath them, and opened her legs to him.

"Mmm, so wet for me." He

thrust his tongue deep into her pussy.

Convulsing with the sweet torment, she ached for his touch on her breasts and inside her. Luke's touch always sent her spiraling out of control. At this minute, she didn't want to be in control. She needed him to sweep her up. He'd already offered his white horse. She was ready for the wild ride through life with him leading.

He rumbled against her folds as he spoke. "God, I wish I could touch you. You'll have to do it for me. Play with your nipples, baby."

Her breathing hitched. She

stared down at his bright eyes, her pussy clenching around his tongue. Could she do that? Rub herself openly here in the locker room of the firehouse?

He removed his tongue. "Do it."

The forceful command sent her into action. She cupped her breasts through her bodice. Her nipples pebbled immediately, straining outward in demand. Her eyes shuttered as she tugged on them.

Luke flicked her needy button between her legs, sending her into paroxysms of bliss. She clung to the edge of reason, knowing one more nudge and she'd be sailing. She

pinched her nipples more forcefully, crying out as he ground the tip of his tongue into her body.

The sounds he made drove her mad. She rocked against him, seeking more of his heated touch. Her body stiffened and with a cry, she burst. Contractions struck her, stringing her out between the waves of ecstasy. Each rhythmic pulsation stole her control. She was screaming—making more noise than she ever had before. The sounds echoed off the walls and mixed with Luke's grunts of approval.

Hypersensitive now, she folded

around him. He continued to lap at her pussy using light, slow strokes, drawing the last of her cream from her.

When their gazes met, electricity sparked. He pulled his face away, her juices connecting her body to his lips. She quivered.

“See that locker? Number nine?” He was breathless, as if he’d just run into a burning building and hauled out half a dozen victims.

“Y-yes.”

“Reach into it and find a condom. Morelli stores them on the top shelf.”

She inched a few feet to the

right and opened the man's locker. The scents of unfamiliar male and the underlying hint of smoke struck her. She felt like an intruder. Would this Morelli guy be upset with her digging through his possessions for a condom? And why exactly did he keep condoms in the locker room at work? Was it usual for women to be enclosed with them?

She rooted around on the top shelf, shifting several men's magazines, a pair of eyeglasses and a dirty magazine featuring a couple entwined. Finally she located the condoms.

“Find one?”

“Yes.”

“Now come over here, woman, and roll it on to me. I’m aching for you.”

She shut the locker. “Is he going to mind?”

“No. And I don’t plan to use these for very long. As soon as I can prove myself to you, there isn’t going to be a barrier between us.”

She held his gaze as she tore open the packet and removed the condom. He hissed as she drew his length into her hands. Before she positioned the condom, she helped him by unbuttoning his dress shirt

all the way.

“Good, baby. Now pull your tits over the top of your bodice. They need a good tonguing.”

“Oooh.” She tore her gaze from his length, which was bobbing against his hard abs, and did his bidding. Tugging her full breasts over the cloth, she looked to him for approval.

He wore a lascivious grin.

“Good?”

“Perfect.” He dropped his head to them, nuzzling her cleavage. Her body pulsed with renewed lust and passion filled her completely. Having him in her life again was

mind-blowing. She still couldn't wrap her head around it. When she'd set eyes on him again, she knew she'd never really fallen out of love with him. Now her love for him was tenfold. Was it possible to be too much in love?

He swirled his tongue over each nipple until she was writhing. He plucked at them with his lips and teeth.

She reached for his cock, gripping it at the root. His trim curls brushed her knuckles and his scent filled her head.

“Please, Luke. Take me.”

He delivered a tongue-dueling

kiss. She thought she'd die from lack of air, but never wanted to surface. She swayed her hips against his erection, pulling a groan from him.

He tore his mouth away. His eyes were two candles. "Turn around."

She sucked in a sharp breath. Very slowly, she faced the locker. He wrapped an arm around her waist, hitching her against him. Her dress was thrown up around her waist and her tits rested on the shelf of fabric.

Without the use of his hands, he nudged her entrance with his thick

cock. "You might have to guide me, baby, but I don't think so. You're so fucking wet, I'm going to slide right in." It sounded as if he bit off each word through his clenched jaw.

He ground against her pussy. She threw him a pleading look over her shoulder. "Come to me, Luke. I can't wait another minute."

In one solid thrust, he rooted himself deep inside her. A flood of moisture soaked his shaft. She throbbed around him and he groaned.

"Damn, I can't go slow. Not this time, sweetheart." He bucked wildly, pounding her body.

She went on tiptoe, angling her ass to accept him more fully. Each caress stroked the fires of her need. Her heart blossomed with love. Just when she thought she could withstand no more, he pulled out, spinning her roughly using his forearms.

“Wrap your leg around me.”

She did, and he drove into her once more. She threw her head back and he caught it with his arm before she hit the metal locker. He sent her higher and higher, nearing the peak with each sensual roll of his hips.

“Josie, you’re mine forever.”

“You’re my world again,” she rasped, clinging to his body, her breasts chafing his hard chest.

With a final grunt, he came. She pulsed around him wildly as her own orgasm gripped her. Her senses were obliterated and she could only feel each warm inch splitting her perfectly as she soaked him with her come.

He continued to move within her slowly until her mind reconnected to her body. His breath washed over her throat.

“That wasn’t nearly enough, baby. But I couldn’t wait until I got you home or to your hotel room.”

“I know. I had to be joined with you, Luke. I was so frightened when you were in that building.”

He eased out of her and she quickly took care of the condom. She watched the hard planes of his back and his bare ass move away from her, a smile in her soul. She let her dress float down to cover her hips. When she moved to slip her breasts back into her bodice, he stopped her.

“Let me have one last taste. Then I’m gathering you up and we’re out of here. Do you think you can drive my truck? I’m sort of out of commission for a while.”

She stared at his rugged face and knew without a doubt in her heart that she wanted to care for him forever. She stepped into his arms. "Luke, I'm here for you. I have some vacation time from work I can use —"

"No, you need to save that for the honeymoon, baby."

She gulped. "You were serious about June, weren't you?"

A smile graced his full lips. "Baby, we've already spent too much time apart. I wasted so many years of my life, thinking I didn't want this—a woman, a family. Then you walked back into my

arms, and now I can't wait. But let me say this. My job is dangerous. My brother — he never came home."

She made a noise but he stopped her from speaking.

"Though I've walked out of some pretty hairy situations, chances are I'll live to be an old man with you. I can only make one promise, though—I'll love you more each day."

Her heart soared and tears of happiness filled her eyes, and then spilled down her cheeks. Slipping her arms around his neck, she pulled him down to her. "That's all I want, Luke. All I need. And I

swear that above all, I'll be yours. Forever faithful."

He trailed his lips over hers until the first flames of need licked her core. He fed her his words between kisses. "Let's go home, baby. I have a fire I need to douse."

Her smile spread beneath his, her heart pattering with renewed hope in the world. She'd lost so much in the past week, but had gained utter joy in Luke's arms.

About the Author

Em Petrova lives in backwoods Pennsylvania, where she raises four kids and two feral kittens and pays too damn much for utilities. But seeing her sexy husband tromp out back with a chainsaw in hand is well worth the frustration of living miles from a mall. She adores writing sex scenes and anything paranormal. When she has the opportunity to mix the two, she's in

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