



Burned (Ignite #1)

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Prologue

JUST BECAUSE I'M telling you this story doesn't mean we made it out alive at the end. I could be telling you this from the great beyond or some equally crazy shit. Regardless of how it ends, I'm going back to the beginning, back to where it all started.

This isn't your typical love story.

Okay, maybe it is. Boy meets girl, they fall in love and live happily ever after. The thing is, my happily ever after didn't go as planned.

Thank God for second chances.

It all happened in the blink of an eye and, for me, nothing had ever felt more right. Maybe you'll think it happened too fast, that falling in love again doesn't happen like this.

I'm here to tell you it absolutely does.

It happens when you least expect it, when you realize that a part of your heart and soul always remained in the hands of another.

It happens when your past collides with your present and shapes your future.

We found our way back to one another, so it was easy to fool ourselves into believing that time was on our side.

Time to get to know one another again.

Time to fall in love.

Time to grow old together.

The thing about time is, it moves achingly slow when you're doing something you hate and it flies faster than the speed of light when you're doing something you love. Time is a fickle bitch.

I wish I could tell you that this story has a happy ending, but I don't know the answer to that right now. So much has happened so quickly that it all kind of feels like a dream. Maybe it is. Maybe I dreamed every single second of it—the good and the bad.

God, I hope it wasn't a dream. There's nothing I've ever wanted more than forever with him.

I pray we make it out alive in the end, but even if we don't...

Those seventeen days...

Those last seventeen breaths...

Hell, even those seventeen miserable years...

I wouldn't change any of it for the world if the endgame is him.

Everything happens for a reason, but sometimes you don't know what that reason is until it's too late.

Please don't let it be too late.

Chapter 1—Set Fire to the Rain

AS I LISTEN to the sound of dresser drawers slamming upstairs in our bedroom, I wonder why I can't find it in myself to care about what's happening. A few years ago, hell, a few months ago, I would probably have been sitting here at the kitchen table sobbing and rethinking my decision. I might have even run up the stairs, grabbed onto him and told him not to go.

I hear a muttered curse as he stomps down the stairs and I don't even flinch. I listen to him angrily snatch up his keys from the bowl on the table in the foyer and all I can do is count the minutes until he walks out the door, the seconds until I can let out the breath I've been holding since I told him I've had enough. Five years of dating followed by twelve years of marriage means I've spent over half my life loving this man.

In just a few moments, he will walk out the door and life as I know it will forever change.

I've lost track of how many times over the years I've threatened to leave him, how many times I told him as tears streamed down my cheeks that I couldn't take it anymore. He had all of me—my heart, my soul, my body and my life. I've given it all to him and, time after time, he violated my trust. Month after month, year after year, he looked me right in the eye and lied to my face. I've never lied to him, not once in seventeen years, but he played me for a fool each and every time. He knew I was never serious when I made all of those threats, that I needed him and loved him unconditionally. He was my family, my best friend, my soul mate. He knew that no matter what, I would always forgive him. Over and over again, he sucked me right back in with apologies and promises as he begged me not to leave him. His heartbreaking tears always made me forget my anger and disappointment. I think

deep down I was always scared about being alone. I haven't been alone since I was fifteen years old.

I hear the shuffle of his shoes and an irritated breath as he hovers in the kitchen doorway behind me.

"I'm leaving, if you even care."

That right there, that sarcastic comment, reminds me that I'm doing the right thing. He honestly believes that making me feel guilty will change my mind. He thinks he can make me feel bad about the fact that I just don't care what he does anymore, but he has officially pushed me past my breaking point. He doesn't even realize that it's his actions that have brought us here. His conscious choice to allow addictions and bad decisions to rule his life without a second thought to our marriage has turned me into this person I don't even recognize anymore.

I'd like to say that I'm sad about seventeen years of my life going down the drain, that it hurts to let go of the man I vowed to love forever, but the truth is, I don't care. I don't care if he walks out that door, I don't care if I never speak to him again, I don't care if I'm alone and I don't care if he's pissed at me.

I.

Don't.

Care.

When I cross my arms in front of me and continue to stare at clock hanging on the wall above the kitchen window, refusing to turn around and look at him, he huffs again.

“Fine. I’m out of here,” he mumbles.

I count his footsteps as he makes his way to the front door.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven...

Slam.

The silence in the house engulfs me. I close my eyes and breathe for the first time in months.

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Chapter 2—Fire and Ice

JORDAN AND I met the second semester of our senior year of high school when his dad was transferred for his job. I can still recall every single detail about the day he walked into my senior English class. I can remember exactly what I was wearing, exactly what the teacher was saying when the door opened and he walked in the room and exactly the way my stomach flip-flopped when I looked up from the doodles in my notebook and watched him saunter in and take the seat right next to me.

I was only two weeks into my recovery that day. My boyfriend of two years, Collin McDaniels, broke up with me via a note delivered by his best friend and shattered my heart into pieces. Like a typical high school girl, I thought my world had ended and nothing would ever make me smile again. Then, Jordan Castillo sat down next to me, asked to borrow a pencil and my shredded heart was never to be thought of again.

We started dating three weeks later. We were voted Best Couple, Cutest Couple and Couple Most Likely to Get Married. After graduation, Jordan convinced me to hold off on my dream of art school and stay with him, close to home, so we wouldn't have to be separated. Even though I lost some of my passion for art when my old boyfriend broke things off, I knew I had talent and I shouldn't let it go to waste just because my first high school relationship didn't work out. I promised myself that once we were making enough money to be comfortable, I'd take some time off and enroll in art school.

Jordan and I were polar opposites in every way, but there was something about us together that just worked. I was quiet, studious and not really big into partying. He was loud, outgoing and the life of every party. He was the bad boy of every parent's

nightmare and, in the beginning, I think that's what attracted me to him. I wanted to be with someone who didn't remind me of Collin. I wanted someone dark, edgy and exciting and that's exactly what I found in Jordan. Looking back, maybe I should have seen the signs. Maybe I should have realized that someone's core personality never really changes as they get older. We fought many times over the years because of his constant need to go out, his tendency to drink too heavily and come home too late and his refusal to grow up. I thought he would settle down after we got married. I thought he would be content in the life we built together and his need to hang out with people who weren't the best influences would be pushed aside.

I thought I would be enough for him.

Looking back on our relationship, I know that my insecurities are what made me continue to stay with him even though he hurt me. When you've only had sex with one person, when you've only really loved one man your entire life, how can you even think about walking away? How can you even begin to move on when he's all you've ever known? Every time I uncovered another lie and thought about leaving, this is what ran through my mind. We grew up together, we knew everything about each other... how could I ever have that with anyone else and why would I even want to? All that time, all that effort, all the memories and the life we built together... throwing it all away just seemed like the worst possible decision.

The first time I caught him in a lie was a few months after we were married. He was working the night shift at a local manufacturing plant. I knew he was miserable there. I knew this wasn't his ideal job and I constantly felt guilty that he was forced to take it so we could make ends meet. For years, he talked about being a tattoo artist and, initially, I really thought he'd make it work. He was a talented artist and I knew if he settled down and focused, he could make it happen. I let a lot of things slide with his behavior during that time because I knew it was hard for him to go to a job day after day that he hated. He was even working overtime, which he definitely wasn't happy about, but helped our financial situation. Time and a half should've meant that we

were able to pay the bills with plenty of money left over. Yet every week, we were in the negative. He always had some sort of excuse as to why there was money missing from our account. He got a flat tire and had to pay for a new one, he donated money to a charity at work, his friend lost his job and he let him borrow some money. Week after week, the lies flew smoothly from his mouth and I accepted them without a second thought.

Why would he lie to me, after all? What reason would he have to make up things like this?

I quickly found out that reason when one of his friends sent me a text that was supposed to go to Jordan.

The first time I told him to leave was the day I found out that, while I was losing sleep, crying every night wondering how I was going to pay the electric bill and contemplating getting a second job, he was spending hundreds of dollars each week gambling.

The second time I told him to leave was after I found out he was addicted to prescription painkillers.

The third time it was alcohol.

The fourth time it was cocaine.

The fifth time it was everything all at once.

Each time I caught him in a lie, he promised he would never do it again. He promised he was done with the pills and the booze and the blow. He promised he would be honest with me and he promised he wouldn't let me down again.

Promises.

Promises.

Promises.

He broke every single one time and time again and I forgave him. Year after year, I felt myself growing weaker and weaker where he was concerned as he was fired from one tattoo apprenticeship after another. I saw his dream slip right through his fingers and overcompensated by being too sweet, too forgiving, too understanding when I knew, deep down, that he was screwing up these opportunities all on his own. He was going into the shops late or sometimes not at all, he showed up hung over half the time and full on drunk or stoned the other. He couldn't handle the pressure and the realization that his dream might never come true and pretty soon, there wasn't a tattoo shop within a hundred mile radius that would hire him.

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I stood by and watched as he slipped further and further away from me and became more and more bitter.

Even though I'm naturally a quiet person, I believed I was strong and confident and would never rely on someone else for my happiness. Every time I forgave Jordan and believed his promises, my confidence and my strength slowly disappeared until I couldn't imagine my life without him, no matter how bad it got.

I hate myself for allowing him to manipulate me this way. I hate that I gave up on my dream of art school to help him achieve his goal of being a tattoo artist and he pissed it all away. I hate that when I look in the mirror I can't stand the woman looking back at me. I hate that he's always known the hold he's had on me, that he's always known my threats were empty.

Until a month ago.

When I caught him in another lie, I didn't break down and cry like I did in the past. I didn't curl up in our bed fighting tears while contemplating whether or not to even tell him I found out he'd been lying to my face again because I was more scared of losing him than of dealing with his betrayal. I stood in the kitchen staring at a bottle of OxyContin, a razor and a small plastic tube that he used to snort the pills for a greater high and I felt... nothing.

I found the items in a zip lock bag in the back of his sock drawer. I discovered them after I questioned him about money missing from our account and he told me with a straight face that the two-hundred dollars supposedly went to pay a speeding ticket. When he left the house to run to the store, he forgot his cell phone and I'm not proud

of the fact that I went through his text messages as soon as he walked out the door. I didn't even get upset when I saw a text from an unknown number minutes before he left that simply said "\$200 for 20—20mg."

I blindly set the phone down on the counter and started searching the house until I found what I was looking for. When he came home with a gallon of milk, a good effort on his part to make me think he really went out just to go to the store, I tossed the bag of paraphernalia at him and he caught it with a guilty look on his face.

He tried; I'll give him that. He attempted to make up yet another lie. That bag of pills was from months ago. It's not what it looks like. I'm not doing that shit anymore.

I looked at him, this man who had been my whole world for seventeen years, thought about all of our ups and downs and everything we'd been through together and I felt nothing. I wasn't sad, I wasn't angry, I wasn't hurt... I was nothing. I was empty. I'd cried enough over him in seventeen years that I couldn't make the tears come even if I tried. Even though he attempted to make excuses and beg for my forgiveness, I think he could tell by the look in my eyes that this was the final straw. He could continue with his addictions and he could continue screwing up his life, but I would no longer be along for the ride.

It took two hours of me telling him to go before it finally sunk in. Two hours of me ignoring his pleas with a stony look on my face before he finally understood and began to pack his things. When a woman can look you right in the eye and tell you she just doesn't care anymore and can do it without any emotion clouding her features, it's time to take her seriously.

I didn't care if he killed himself with his addictions. I didn't care if I never felt the soft touch of his lips against my own again, I didn't care if we never laid in bed together at night giggling about an old memory, I didn't care if he was the only man on earth who had ever known my body and I'd never feel him inside of me again.

When the tears never came and all I could think about was that I just wanted him gone, I knew there was no turning back.

I was done.

Chapter 3—Slow Burn

“I CANNOT BELIEVE we are at this bar. I suddenly feel really old,” I complain, glancing around the small dive bar in town we frequented in college.

“Oh, shut it, Finnley. We are not old,” my best friend, Phina, scolds.

I watch as she flips her long red hair over her shoulder and scans the room. “Okay, so we’re a few years older than most of the people in this place, no big deal.”

“A few years? I’m pretty sure I used to babysit that guy at the end of the bar,” I tell her with a roll of my eyes.

The guy in question looks over at me and raises his bottle in my direction in a silent toast. I grimace and quickly look away, bringing my beer to my lips and taking a huge swallow.

“He’s hot. Did you seriously used to babysit him? Damn,” Phina says with a low whistle.

“That’s disgusting. The last time I saw him he was ten.”

She shrugs and takes a sip of her rum and Coke. “Well, he’s definitely not ten anymore. The things you could do to him would be completely legal.”

My best friend, Seraphina Giordano, is amazing and the closest thing to a sister I’ll

ever have, but the stuff that comes out of her mouth sometimes makes me question her sanity. We've been friends since the first day of high school. When her name was announced and a few students chuckled at the unusualness of it, she put her hands on her hips and stated, "My name means fiery one. Don't piss me off or I'll burn your ass." Her little outburst earned her an afternoon in detention, but there were no more giggles during roll call. Phina oozed confidence and assertiveness and I wanted to be just like her.

She has been by my side through every one of my joys and every one of my disappointments. In the month since Jordan and I separated, she has been my rock. Instead of telling me I-told-you-so and going on about how I should have left him years ago, she stood by me in companionable silence while I worked through my emotions. After four weeks of pouring myself into my job and ignoring every single text, phone call and voice message from Jordan trying to guilt me into letting him come back home, she finally convinced me to get out of the house and take my mind off of everything.

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“So, I filed for legal separation today,” I tell her as she sips her drink.

She chokes on the liquid and I pat her on the back as she sputters and tries to cough away the shock of my news. When she finally regains control of herself, she sets her glass on top of the bar and looks at me with her mouth wide open.

“I think this is the first time in all the years I’ve known you that I’ve seen you at a loss for words,” I joke.

She immediately snaps her mouth closed and shakes her head. “Sorry, I’m just trying to process what you said. Are you okay? Fuck, that’s a stupid question, of course you’re not okay.”

I shrug and start peeling the label off of my bottle of beer. “The weird thing is, I am okay. At least, I think I am. I thought I would be upset, I thought I would feel something. Sadness, regret, anything. I just feel... numb. Like it’s happening to someone else. Like I’m looking down at some other woman ending her marriage without a second thought.”

Phina reaches out and puts her hand on top of mine, halting my label-peeling process. “Hon, you gave this more than a second thought. You’ve been agonizing over this for years. You just finally got the courage to do something about it. I’m proud of you. I’m proud of you for not giving in to his bullshit anymore. I’m proud of you for putting yourself first for once. God knows he never did that.”

I honestly wanted to feel bad about the fact that I went to the courthouse today and filed the separation paperwork without even talking to Jordan about it. I wanted to

feel some sort of remorse that they would be serving him the paperwork within twenty-four hours and he had no idea it was coming. Even after kicking him out of the house and having no contact with him for a month, he still believes this will blow over, judging from the messages he's been leaving me. He still thinks I'm going to forgive him and this is just a temporary setback.

I don't really care that he's probably going to be hurt and shocked, but I am concerned about how pissed he's going to be that I've done something so drastic. My worry over his reaction is the only emotion strong enough to make it past my indifference. I can already imagine the messages he's going to leave me when he receives those papers, and it forms a thick pool of dread in my stomach. I want this to end peacefully and just move on with my life, but I have a feeling he's not going to make it easy. Jordan was a good husband for a lot of years. He was sweet and attentive and I know he loved me, but struggling with one addiction after another has turned him into a person I don't even recognize anymore. He's quick to anger and even quicker to pin the blame for his life falling apart on everyone but himself. I'm not looking forward to dealing with him when he realizes I won't be his putting up with his roller coaster of emotions anymore.

"Can we change the subject? I don't want to think about this right now. I just want to drown myself in cheap beer and hope I don't run into anyone else I knew from my teenage years," I tell Phina with a smile.

"Got it. No more talk about the king of the douchebags. How about we discuss how hot you're looking tonight? Did you put extra effort into your appearance just for me?" Phina asks with a wag of her eyebrows.

I look down at myself and feel a twinge of embarrassment over the amount of time I spent making myself look good tonight. With a pair of tiny black shorts, killer black stilettos that bring my already tall five-foot seven frame up a few inches and a backless black and white tank top that ties around my neck, I feel good. My long,

wavy chestnut hair is pulled up in a high ponytail, my bangs are swooped down over one eye and I added a little more make-up than normal, giving myself a smoky eye with black eye shadow and bold red lips. For the first time in a long time, I feel sexy. According to the courts, I'm officially separated, but I didn't do this to attract male attention. I did this for me.

I'm not going to lie, though. Seeing a few men in the bar doing a double take when I walked in was great for the self-esteem.

"Come on, let's head out to the patio and get some fresh air," Phina tells me as she picks up both of our drinks from the bar and starts to head towards the front door that leads out to the wooden patio overlooking the parking lot.

When I told her that being here made me feel old, I wasn't lying. We used to come to this place every Thursday night during college as soon as we were of drinking age. We live in a small town where everyone knows everyone else and you were guaranteed to run into a handful of people you knew every time you turned around. In college, it was wonderful. We got to see friends from high school who all went away to college and were home on break and people who moved to another state and came back for the holidays. I always came here with Jordan and it created a sense of pride to walk into this place with him and show everyone that we'd done it—we'd defied the odds and made a high school romance last. Now, walking through this bar that has the same green walls, the same old jukebox in the corner and the same rickety patio, I feel like a failure. Nothing here has changed and yet everything has changed for me. I'm embarrassed to run into someone we might recognize and have them look at me with that knowing look in their eyes that says 'We knew it wouldn't work. High school romances never do.' The fact that I'm more worried about what people will think than I am about my marriage falling apart tells me that I did the right thing.

I follow Phina to the only table on the patio that isn't currently occupied. The barstools have been taken by another table, so we make do with just standing next to

it.

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“Hottie at your six. Don’t turn around,” Phina whispers conspiratorially as she takes a sip of her drink and looks over my shoulder.

“How am I supposed to confirm his hotness if I can’t turn around?”

“Damn, he’s got a great ass. Come on, pretty boy, turn around so momma can see your face,” she mutters, completely ignoring me.

I shake my head at her and signal to the waitress at the next table that we need another round of drinks.

“Oh, shit. Oh, holy f**k. Oh, my God there is no WAY that’s him,” Phina swears.

I look at her in confusion and start to turn around to see what’s got her so riled up when her hand clamps down on my arm. “NO! Don’t turn around. I repeat, do NOT turn around.”

“What the hell is your problem?”

Phina quickly ducks her head and hides her body in front of mine. “Shit. You are NOT going to believe who is at the table behind you.”

At this point I’m a little nervous that she’s going to say Jordan. The fact that he hasn’t shown up at the house is a little disconcerting. Every night, I expect him to waltz through the front door like nothing has happened and every time I leave the house I’m afraid I’m going to run into him. I’m worried that if I see him right now, some part of me will regret the decision I’ve made and forget about all of the damage he’s

done.

“Will you just spit it out? Quit being such a drama queen,” I tell her with a roll of my eyes as the waitress drops off another rum and Coke for Phina and a beer for me.

“Don’t be alarmed, but Collin McDaniels is standing five feet from you,” she tells me with a huge, fake smile on her face as she speaks through her teeth.

My heart starts thumping erratically and I can feel my face heating up. I haven’t heard that name in years. Granted, I’d thought about that name several times since I was seventeen-years-old, but I never expected to be in the same room with the guy.

Collin McDaniels: my first boyfriend and the guy who broke my heart in a note. It might seem silly that I still remember so much about him when I haven’t seen him in over seventeen years, but a girl never forgets her first boyfriend, especially when she was with him for two years during a very pivotal time in her life. Granted, it was a pretty tame relationship in the beginning, filled with trips to the movies that our parents had to drive us to and some heavy petting in each other’s living rooms while our parents made themselves scarce so we could have ‘date night.’ Once Collin could drive, however, we experienced a lot of firsts together in the back seat of his car. I wasn’t really ready to give up the old V card at that point, though, and I’ve always suspected that played a big role in his breaking up with me out of the blue

Collin and I both had a strange fascination with fire and I’ve always wondered if that was one of the reasons I was drawn to him. When most people think of fire, they think of the smoldering ruins of a house or a forest decimated by wildfire. Collin and I looked at fire and saw possibilities. He saw the opportunity to save a life and I saw a chance to make something beautiful. We understood each other’s peculiarities and it was a commonality no one could take away from us. I never thought it strange that he spent many weekends sitting on the curb in front of our local fire station, just staring at the building and he never thought it was strange that I spent mine playing with

gunpowder and matches. I wasn't some freaky, teenage girl with a death wish, I was an artist. Or so I thought.

From the time I was a little girl, I always loved to draw and I would use every medium at my disposal to do it: pens, crayons, food, my mother's make-up or my father's shoe polish. You name it and I picked it up and created art with it. I quickly grew bored with the usual tools and one day, I saw a show on television about a Chinese artist named Cai Guo-Qiang. The man was an artistic genius who created breathtaking pictures by sprinkling gunpowder onto Japanese hemp paper, using his fingers to mold it into a picture and then lighting the whole thing on fire in one big burst of an explosion. I was fascinated by what was left behind after the fire quickly burned out. When the smoke cleared, what remained wasn't charred ashes, but the most brilliant designs I had ever seen in any museum or book.

My parents, being the loving people that they are, gave me the freedom to try my hand at this - on Sundays, as far away from the house as possible, when the neighbors were at church and the two of them were standing by with fire extinguishers and 911 on speed dial. They quickly realized that I had talent and 'only on Sundays' quickly turned into 'only when your mother and I are home and your father always lights the fuse.' My third attempt at creating one of these pieces is how I met Collin. He lived one street over and was outside washing his dad's car when he heard the boom created by the gunpowder. He came running over, expecting to see our house up in flames. When he found my parents and I smiling like idiots in the backyard, he asked with wide, excited eyes if I could do it again so he could watch. From that moment on, we were joined at the hip.

When I wasn't in the backyard exploding canvases while Collin stood by cheering as the final design made itself known, I was inside, curled up on the couch in Collin's arms sketching out new designs for my next attempt.

Collin did everything he could to encourage me while keeping me safe, even going so

far as dragging me to the fire station a few times a month so that the men could look at my supplies and make sure I was taking all of the proper precautions when I created one of my masterpieces. He never complained when my nose was stuck in a sketchpad or my fingers were permanently dyed black from the powder. Even when I hated what I created, he would roll it up, stick it in the backseat of his car and take it home to hang on the wall in his room because he wanted to be the first one to own a 'Finnley Morgan Original.' At the end of our two years together, all four of his walls and his ceiling were completely covered in my designs.

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When our relationship died, so did my love of fire and art. The dream of art school was replaced with settling on a career that would pay the bills and keep a roof over my head while my husband pissed our money away. Whenever I played around with the idea of getting back to my hemp paper and gunpowder, Jordan would roll his eyes and tell me it was a waste of time. After I gave up on my dream, the only time I ever thought about my art was when I thought about Collin and wondered if he was happy. I didn't even realize how much I missed it—or him—until right this very minute.

Collin understood my passion for art more than anyone else in my life before or since. He was my first boyfriend, his lips were the first I'd ever kissed, his hands brought me to my first orgasm and his dick was the first I'd ever had in my hands—and my mouth. These are things a girl just doesn't forget.

“Shit, I wonder what he's been up to over the years. That boy has turned into a fine looking man.”

Not that I'd tell Phina, but I know exactly what he's been up to. Through the power of Facebook on nights when I had a little too much to drink or when Jordan and I were fighting, I might have looked up his profile and kept tabs on him. After college, he moved out of state and became a fireman like he'd always dreamed. When I realized that I was a very married woman fixating on a man I had no hope of ever seeing again, I made a conscious effort to curb my internet stalking. It's been a while since I last looked at his page and I had no idea he was back in town.

“Well, holy shit! If it isn't Phina Giordano!”

Both of us make the mistake of turning around when we hear the shout from the next

table over. Heading our way with a beer in his hand and a smile on his handsome face is D.J. Taylor, best friend to Collin and the guy who had the unfortunate task of handing me Collin's break-up note senior year and dealing with me crying on his shoulder between sixth and seventh period.

"Damn, and Finnley Morgan too? It's our lucky night, Collin!"

Collin turns around when he hears my name and looks in our direction. Our eyes meet and, for a moment, I wonder if he'll even recognize me. I mean, seventeen years is a long time. I haven't changed a ton, but I know I don't look exactly like I did back then. I'm taller and I have curves and boobs that hadn't quite filled out the last time he had his hands on them. Due to his Facebook pictures that I may or may not have poured over a few dozen times, I would recognize him anywhere. Those pictures did not do him justice, though. Phina was absolutely right. He's definitely turned into a fine looking man. He was cute as a teenager, but he is f**king hot as an adult. He's well over six-feet now and the worn jeans sitting low on his hips fit him like they were made for his thighs and ass. He's wearing a long-sleeved navy-blue t-shirt that stretches across his chest, showing off some very well-defined muscles. My eyes trace over the words Franklin FD written in yellow across his chest, confirming that he must still be a fireman. The fact that the city listed on his shirt is one town over means he must have moved back home since the last time I drunkenly stalked him. I can't explain the sudden burst of happiness any more than I can contain the smile that hits my face at the thought of Collin being so close.

I watch a dimple form on his cheek when he smiles back at me and, for some crazy reason, butterflies start rapidly beating in my stomach. I hold my breath as he picks up his bottle of beer and walks towards me.

His eyes never leave mine even as Phina says hello to him and he responds in kind. He doesn't stop moving until he's right in front of me and I have to crane my neck to look up at him. He's standing so close I can feel the heat from his body and, if I move

just an inch, my br**sts will be pressed up against that gorgeous chest hidden beneath cotton. He smells faintly of cologne and soap and it's such a delicious scent that it turns my brain into complete mush.

I hear Phina and D.J. chatting behind us about what they've been up to over the years. I know it's rude that I haven't said a word to D.J. in greeting, but I just can't bring myself to look away from Collin. His blue eyes stare into mine and his smile grows wider as he looks down at me.

"Lee."

He whispers his nickname for me from back in the day and hearing it fall from his lips is like a straight shot of lust right between my legs.

I brace myself for the guilt to take over as I continue to smile back at him. I wait for my brain to remind me that I'm still technically married and that whatever this is I'm feeling is wrong. I wait for the remorse to come, but it never does. It's been so long since a man looked at me like this and maybe I'm just so starved to feel something... anything other than numb that I don't even care.

"Fuck, you look amazing," he mutters.

Every inch of my body warms at his words and I ignore the little voice in the back of my head that is finally waking up, telling me this is a bad idea.

A really bad idea.

Chapter 4—Sparks Will Fly

"WE ARE TOO old for this f**king bar. Everyone in this place is still in college," I complain, tipping back my bottle of beer and finishing it off.

My best friend ignores me, staring at something over my shoulder. I wave my hand in front of his face. “Hey, ass**le. Are you listening to me?”

“Holy f**k, it’s Seraphina Giordano. Damn, her tits look amazing,” D.J. says with a sigh as he gets up from his stool. “I’m going over there. She let me get to second base in high school, maybe she’ll throw me a bone tonight.”

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I glance up at the stars when he yells her name and send up a silent prayer that the poor guy doesn't get punched in the face. Seventeen years since we've been out of high school and D.J. still has the mentality of a teenager when it comes to women. He's been a loyal friend through the years though and when I told him after graduation that I was following my life-long dream of becoming a fireman, he shrugged his shoulders and said "Alright. Sounds like a plan. When do we leave?"

We went into the fire academy together and always made sure we were assigned to the same firehouses, even when it meant transferring out of state after the one we worked for shut down seven years ago due to budget cuts. When D.J. decided he wanted to advance his career a few years ago by becoming a paramedic, I helped him study and made sure the new addition to his profession was utilized wherever we worked. Since both of our families still live in the same houses we grew up in, when a Captain's spot opened up the next city over from them, I came home and D.J. followed right behind me.

When D.J. suggested we go up to Slammers for a drink, it took a lot of cajoling from him to get me to agree. Slammers was our favorite bar when we were younger. We spent every weekend here hanging out with old friends and I spent most of that time staring at the front door waiting for her to walk in. After too many years spent thinking about the one that got away, D.J. finally put his foot down and told me I was being an idiot. What kind of guy still holds a torch for a girl he dated in high school? Someone he hasn't seen or talked to in over seventeen years? I put her out of my mind once and for all when I left town.

The next shout from D.J. has me choking on a sip of beer from the new bottle the waitress just set down in front of me.

“Damn, and Finnley Morgan too? It’s our lucky night, Collin!”

Hearing her name makes me feel lightheaded and I wonder for a minute if someone slipped something into my beer. I turn around slowly, thinking that it’s possible D.J. made a mistake. What are the odds that she’s here tonight, my first weekend back in town?

My eyes zero in on her immediately. It’s hard not to when she’s still the hottest girl in the room even after all this time. I look down and find the sexiest pair of f**k-me shoes I’ve ever seen and I let my gaze slide up her long, toned legs, past hips and a rack she didn’t have at seventeen and finally rest on a face that causes all conscious thought to leave my head. I’d almost forgotten just how beautiful she is. Her full lips are covered in red lipstick and I have a sudden flashback of them wrapped around my dick when we were teenagers. I watch as her brown eyes widen when our eyes meet and a little bit of masculine pride flows through me that she recognizes me. I was a gangly, skinny teenager the last time we were in the same room together. I’m not the kind of guy to pat myself on the back, but regular workouts and carrying a hose that weighs 110 pounds up twenty flights of stairs during drills, along with carrying actual human beings up and down multiple flights of stairs during calls means I’m in pretty good shape.

My legs move automatically and I head in her direction. I can’t take my eyes off of her as I get closer and closer. I always wondered what I would say to her if I ever saw her again. ‘I’m sorry for being a dick in high school’ never seemed good enough. I stop right in front of her and her perfume tickles my nose and makes my dick swell in my jeans. It’s the same scent she wore all those years ago: a little sweet, a little spicy and just enough that it doesn’t make your eyes water, but leaves a lingering reminder of her presence in the air long after she’s gone.

I would never admit it to anyone, especially D.J. because he never lets shit go and would have too good a time making fun of me, but I’ve kept tabs on her over the

years. Nothing creepy or stalkerish and really, the only reason I know anything about her life since high school is because of my mom. In a small town, it's pretty easy to learn things about the people living in it and my mom is the queen of small town gossip. I knew Finnley stayed close to home for college and graduated with a Bachelors in business, working as a marketing manager since she got her degree. I knew she married that f**ker Jordan Castillo, who swooped in like a buzzard right after we broke up, and I knew they still lived in the area. I was always surprised she never went to art school like we used to talk about.

I know it's wrong to be having impure thoughts about a married woman, but I can't bring myself to give a f**k. She was my girl first. We have a history and, even though it was another lifetime ago, there are some things you just don't forget or get over. Finnley Morgan-Castillo is the one thing I've never forgot.

Or gotten over.

“Lee.”

I whisper the nickname I called her when we were together and I watch her smile widen and light up her face.

“Fuck, you look amazing,” I tell her honestly as I make another blatant perusal of her body. Her hand comes up and she tugs lightly on her earlobe and I can't help but smile. She used to do that when she was nervous. Something about the fact that I still make her nervous makes me bold enough to lean down and brush my lips against her cheek.

I slide my hand not holding the bottle of beer around her hip and let it rest on her lower back, keeping my cheek pressed against hers as I speak softly in her ear. “It's really good to see you, Lee.”

I hear her exhale a shaky breath when I move away and let my hand fall from her back before I do something stupid, like grab her ass and kiss her square on the mouth just to see if her lips still taste like the bubblegum lip-gloss she used to wear. For all I know, that dick bag husband of hers is waiting around the corner to interrupt this little reunion and pour a cold bucket of water all over the erection I sprung the moment I heard her name.

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“So, what brings you ladies to this fancy establishment tonight?” D.J. asks them with a laugh.

Finnley turns away from me and I move in next to her at the high top table, resting my elbows on top of it and watching her sip her beer out of the corner of my eye. When she licks her lips after she pulls the bottle away, I have to shift my legs to keep my hard-on under wraps.

“Oh, nothing much. Just needed to get out of the house and do some celebrating,” Phina replies, sharing a pointed look with Finnley.

Some type of weird, silent, chick communication thing goes on between them and, if I weren’t staring so intently at Finnley’s profile, I would have missed the almost imperceptible shake of her head. Before I can contemplate what that could possibly mean, D.J. takes Phina’s explanation as an invitation to celebrate with them.

“Well, shit! I think that calls for some shots. Who wants tequila?!”

Phina cheers and Finnley and I both share a groan. She looks at me and we both laugh.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asks with a tilt of her head.

I’m pretty sure she’s not thinking about how great it would feel to have her body pressed up against mine again, so I move my train of thought away from that dangerous territory and think back to the party D.J. threw the summer before senior year.

“If you’re thinking about the time we polished off a bottle of tequila two days before school started and we were still puking during first period Spanish, then yes,” I tell her with a grin.

I watch as she grimaces and shakes her head to try and clear the memory from her mind. “Tequila es no bueno.”

We reminisce about the party and the food poisoning story the four of us told the nurse to explain why we were all sick as dogs on the first day of school. A few minutes later, shots are placed in front of us along with a plate of sugarcoated lemons.

Our small group each takes a shot glass and a lemon, raising them up in the air.

“I’m probably going to regret everything about this night, aren’t I?” Finnley asks Phina with a laugh.

Forgetting about dick bag husbands who may or may not kick my ass, I slide close enough to Finnley that our arms are touching, leaning down until my lips brush her ear to whisper, “Hopefully you won’t regret everything about tonight.”

Chapter 5—Let the Flames Begin

I’M DRUNK.

I lost count how many shots of tequila I tossed back after number three. As the night wore on, the four of us continued to reminisce about high school and Collin and I moved closer and closer to one another until we were pressed together from shoulder to wrist. After who knows what number shot, my head fell to the side until it was resting on his shoulder. He never acknowledged that it happened or moved away, so at least I didn’t have to be mortified about moving into sloppy drunk girl territory and making him regret coming over here.

I lift my head off of his shoulder when I realize the conversation has gone silent because Phina and D.J. are making out across the table from us.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I blurt, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable with the scene unfolding in front of me. Since all I’ve been able to think about after Collin walked over here is kissing him, I’m feeling a little jealous of my best friend and I don’t like it at all.

“I’ll go with you,” Collin quickly states, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me away from the table.

He’s obviously not too keen on watching our friends stick their tongues down each other’s throats, either. As we make our way through the throngs of people on the patio, Collin keeps his arm wrapped firmly around my waist, only releasing me once we’ve reached the end of the hallway where the bathrooms are.

Locking myself in the bathroom, I lean against the door and calm my racing heart.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Pushing away from the door, I step up to the sink and rest my hands on the countertop, staring at myself in the mirror. Under normal circumstances, I would blame my flushed cheeks and bright eyes on the tequila. It’s definitely the cause for the slight spinning of the room and my unsteady feet, but the pink on my cheeks and the sparkle in my eyes is all Collin. Every time he touched me tonight I got goose bumps, and just thinking about going back out there and standing next to him makes the hair on my arms stand up. I can’t get over how good he looks, how great he smells and how he still has this kind of affect on me after all this time. Shouldn’t I be holding a grudge that he broke my heart? I don’t care how long ago it was, I let him stick his hand down my pants and he thanked me with a note that said ‘it’s just not working out between us.’

I want to blame my overactive libido on the fact that it's been months since I had sex and years since I had good sex. It's hard to get in the mood when you're constantly angry with your husband. One week without turned into two, two turned into five and soon we were only having sex because I felt guilty for not having sex with the man I was married to. I can't even remember the last time I had an orgasm that wasn't assisted by my own fingers or the arsenal of vibrators we bought to spice things up.

Jordan is the one and only man I've ever had sex with, but that doesn't mean I've never thought about what it would have been like with someone else—namely, Collin. He's the only other person I had any kind of sexual experiences with. I really don't know why I always turned him down, other than the fact that I just didn't feel ready until I met Jordan. Seeing him tonight has brought all of those thoughts to the surface. I wonder if he kisses the same and if he'd fumble around in my underwear not really knowing what he was doing. I wonder if my brain would be able to shut off long enough to even let him try something or if thoughts of Jordan would interfere, reminding me that, even though our marriage is over, he's still the only man I've ever been with. Sex was always something special and sacred between us. No one ever really believed it when we told them, but I was his first and only, as well, and that was one of the things we were the most proud of. Would I even know what the hell to do with another man if given the chance? And why am I standing here in the bathroom contemplating this right now? I ran into an old high school boyfriend. Just because he's hot and he seems to be doing everything he can to get close to me tonight doesn't mean he really wants anything to do with me. He's probably just waiting for me to throw up on him like I did the last time we drank tequila together.

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I am such an idiot.

I've been out of the game for far too long. Hell, I was never even really in the game. After Collin, I jumped right into a relationship with Jordan and I eventually married him. With a disgusted shake of my head, I quickly rinse my hands and head back out into the hallway.

I stop short when I see Collin leaning against the wall across from the bathroom with his hands in his pockets. He looked up as soon as I opened the door and now we're both just standing here staring at each other. I jump when the bathroom door pulls shut behind me with a bang.

"You didn't have to wait for me. I'm drunk, but I'm pretty sure I can still walk," I tell him with an uncomfortable laugh as I lean back against the closed door.

He pushes himself off the wall and closes the distance between us in two steps, his arms coming up on either side of my head and caging me in.

"I need to ask you something," he tells me seriously, his eyes staring down at my lips as he speaks.

My tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip that suddenly became bone dry when he moved in close to me and I hear him groan softly.

"Okay," I whisper, not really sure if I'm telling him 'Okay you can ask me a question' or 'Okay you can f**king kiss me already.'

Collin moves forward until his hips are pressed up against mine. I keep my hands down by my sides, flattened against the cold steel of the door to try and cool down the heat flowing through my body at his nearness.

“Are you still married?” he asks with a raise of one eyebrow.

Of all the things I thought he’d ask me, this definitely wasn’t one of them. How in the hell does he even know that I was married?

“I’m... I... we’re separated,” I stutter.

I thought saying the words out loud would make my heart hurt, but I still feel nothing. If anything, saying them has lifted a huge weight off of my shoulders and helped to drive home the reality that my marriage is over.

Collin doesn’t say anything for a few minutes, just continues to stare down at me while I watch a muscle tick in his jaw.

Standing this close to him has turned me into an idiot and I feel like if I don’t say something, this silence is going to stretch between us until it’s uncomfortable. I open my mouth to say who-the-hell-knows-what, but before I can utter a word, Collin nods his head slightly and smiles down at me. “Good.”

I start to ask him what’s so good about me being separated when his hands suddenly drop from the door, wrap around my waist and pull me tight against his chest. He halts my gasp of surprise when his lips crash against mine. I immediately open my mouth to him and it’s my turn to groan when I feel his tongue slide into my mouth and tangle with my own. My hands immediately fly up to his head and I slide my fingers through his short, black hair, pulling his mouth harder against mine. In all the years I thought about kissing him again, I pictured it exactly like it was in high school—clashing teeth, sloppy tongues and wiping the drool away from our chins

when it was over. This kiss is nothing like that. His lips are firm and his tongue moves boldly as it swirls around mine. He tastes like peppermint and beer as he gently sucks my tongue into his mouth. His hips press harder against me and I slide one of my legs around the back of his thigh until I can feel his erection rubbing against the thin material of my shorts between my legs. His tongue begins to move through my mouth in tune with the motion of his hips against me.

Push.

Push.

Push.

He pushes his tongue deeper and slowly grinds himself between my thighs. He takes his time exploring my mouth and, with each jerk of his hips against me, I can feel myself getting wetter and wetter, the throbbing in my clit growing stronger every time the rough denim of his jeans rubs against my bare thighs and his tongue circles mine. His hands glide down my back to cup my ass and help move my lower body against him. He continues to roll his hips into me as he uses his grip on my ass to slide me up and down over his hardness. I'm moving jerkily against him, not caring how desperate I seem or how needy I sound each time I whimper when I feel another burst of arousal shoot through my core. There isn't an inch of space between us, our bodies pressed so tightly together that I'm surprised I even have the ability to move against him. My body shakes with the need for release and Collin instinctively knows how close I am to coming, kneading his hands harder into the cheeks of my ass and moving me faster against him. I don't know how many times we did things like this when we were dating, but it was never this intense and it never had me close to coming this quickly. I can feel my orgasm tingling just beyond my reach...

"Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom."

A female voice right beside us pulls me out of my hormone-induced stupor and I break off the mind-numbing kiss. When I try to push myself away, Collin tightens his hold on me, maintaining the contact in the lower halves of our bodies as he moves us away from the door. The woman gives us a dirty look before disappearing inside the bathroom.

With as much strength as I can muster in my lust and alcohol fueled high, I bring my hands up to Collin's chest and push him away. I look down at my feet, trying not to let the embarrassment I'm currently feeling show on my face. I'm suddenly very conscious of the fact that I was dry humping a guy I haven't spoken to in seventeen years in a public hallway, a guy I kind of thought I hated until I saw him again tonight. Bringing my hands up to my cheeks and holding them there to cover up the redness I know is prominent, I struggle to calm my racing heart as it threatens to burst out of my chest.

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Without a word, I turn away from Collin and rush down the hall, pushing my way through the crowd that has doubled in size since we walked to the bathroom. When I get back to the patio, I walk as fast as my high-heeled feet will allow, pull Phina out of D.J.'s arms and tell her we need to leave. She takes one look at my face and scoops up her purse, blowing a kiss to D.J. and giving him a wink before whisking me down the steps of the patio and into the parking lot, where she shoves me into her car and quickly pulls away from the bar.

Wanna know why Phina is my best friend? Please tell me how many women would walk away from a make-out session with a gorgeous fireman without a single protest.

We're a few miles down the road before she finally breaks the silence.

"You were gone for an awfully long time. Does that have anything to do with your flushed face and the guilty look you're currently sporting?" she asks, not taking her eyes off of the road.

Letting my head fall back against the seat rest, I close my eyes and bring my fingers up to my lips, the feel of Collin still there and the ache between my legs a reminder of how close to release I was before we were interrupted.

"He kissed me," I finally admit after a few seconds, turning my head to stare at Phina's profile.

"Hot damn, he doesn't waste any time, does he? He totally still has a thing for you."

I throw her a look of disbelief even though she can't see it in the dark car. "It's been

seventeen years, Phina. I highly doubt he has any sort of thing for me aside from a case of blue balls at this point in time.”

She laughs and shakes her head at me when she stops at a read light and turns to face me. “Come on, you know he’s regretted breaking up with you every day since he did it.”

“I know nothing of the sort. You’re delusional.”

She cocks her head at me and narrows her eyes. “This is a small town, my dear, and everyone has a mother with a big mouth. I know for a fact that Collin asks about you practically every time he talks to his mother.”

I knew it for a fact, too, mostly because my mother, who had never been Jordan’s biggest fan, mentioned it dozens of times over the years. I never paid it much attention, seeing as I was married and all. Sure, I thought about Collin from time to time, but I didn’t really think we’d ever see each other again and I certainly never expected to be kind of single when it happened. I always figured that when I ran into him again, Jordan would be at my side and we’d be blissfully in love and I could rub it in Collin’s face that the guy who picked up the pieces of the broken heart he left behind turned out to be the love of my life and we were living happily ever after.

Clearly, that is not going to happen.

Everything about tonight has me confused and I know tomorrow will bring a headache that’s equal parts tequila and emotional distress over what I’m fairly sure was the huge mistake I made tonight.

I mean, it was a mistake, right?

This was the first time I’d laid eyes on Collin since graduation and I’m sure it will be

another decade and a half before I see him again. We can probably just chalk this up to a lapse in judgment due to an overabundance of alcohol.

Right?

Chapter 6—Playing With Fire

IT'S OFFICIAL.

It's done. Jordan has been served the separation papers and my cell phone has been ringing non-stop since it happened. I know I'm being a coward by sending his calls to voicemail, but I really don't give a shit. He's had plenty of years to change, plenty of years to be the man I needed him to be.

Too little, too late.

There's not one single thing he could say to me now that would make me change my mind. This wasn't a rash decision. I took these four weeks away from him to really sit down and think about our life together. I was with him for so long. We grew up together and he's all I've ever known. It's a scary thing to realize that I stayed for so long because I was in love with the idea of our relationship, not with him. I was seduced by the idea of showing everyone that we could defy the odds, that a couple who met and fell in love in high school could live happily ever after. Walking into the courthouse today, I knew I'd made the right decision when I didn't mourn the future we might have had if things had been different. Instead, it made me sad to think about all the time I wasted trying to fight for something that was clearly never meant to be.

After a few hours of work, I suck it up and head into an empty conference room to listen to his voicemails. The first couple of them were just as I expected. Jordan pleading and apologizing for screwing up, promising that he'll get help and he'll make it up to me. Each one grows increasingly more desperate until I can pinpoint the

exact moment when he stops being upset and just gets angry. He calls me every insult he can think of, curses and yells and then apologizes for his behavior the very next message. It's an emotional tidal wave that I've dealt with from him for years. His words cut like a knife and he thinks that an apology can staunch the bleeding. He has no idea that those words have piled up until the scars on my heart are so jagged there is no sewing them back together.

I feel like a fool for the guilt that's consumed me since Collin's kiss and my almost-orgasm Saturday night at the bar. Once the residual effects of tequila overload dissipated, I was filled with regret over my response to Collin on what was my first night out without my husband. Even though I feel nothing in my heart anymore for Jordan, he was still my best friend and the man I'd loved for half of my life. I was more than a little ashamed at having let things get so out of hand with Collin, even though I knew the combination of tequila and nostalgia were mostly to blame. Seeing him again brought back a lot of memories and took me back to a time when I was young and carefree and had my whole life ahead of me. It made me remember what it felt like to get butterflies in my stomach during a first kiss and how exciting it was to experience all of those firsts.

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Listening to Jordan berate me and call me a heartless bitch almost makes me wish I would have dragged Collin into a dark, empty room at the bar and let him f**k me up against the wall. Hearing Jordan's last voicemail announce in a threatening voice that he spoke to his attorney and I can't keep him out of his house has me storming out of the conference room with my phone clutched so tightly in my hand that I'm surprised it doesn't snap in half. The loud, high-pitched shriek of the building's fire alarm starts to blare through the office right before I make it to my desk. I look around to see everyone grabbing his or her things and making a hasty exit towards the stairwell. Usually, we get some sort of notice from building management when we're going to have a drill. The shocked look on everyone's faces has me quickly snatching up my purse from the bottom drawer of my desk and following behind them, down four flights of stairs to join the few hundred other people out on the sidewalk from various companies throughout the building.

Moving away from the small group of work friends I usually hang out with, I find some shade under a tree down on the corner and lean my shoulder against the trunk. I knew Jordan would behave this way. I anticipated it and yet, it doesn't make it any easier. Maybe it's cruel of me to just want him gone from my life when he so obviously has a problem with addiction. Maybe I should be helping him instead of shutting him out completely. At this point though, I just can't find it in myself to care. It's been too many years of the same thing, too much time dealing with one addiction after another. All of my emotions where Jordan is concerned have long been dead and buried.

I make a conscious decision not to spend another second beating myself up over his failures and my guilt. As I close my eyes and take in a few breaths of fresh spring air, my thoughts immediately turn to the hallway at Slammers and the feel of Collin's

body against mine. I can still recall the sensation of his warm tongue gliding through my mouth and how it felt to have another man moving between my legs. Despite the warmth of the air blowing across my skin, a shiver races up in spine as I wonder just how much further things would have progressed in that dimly lit hallway with the music from the jukebox blaring all around us. If that woman hadn't interrupted us, would he have slid his hands up the bare skin of my thigh wrapped around him? Would he have edged his fingers inside the hem of my shorts and slid them across the lacy edge of my thong to feel how wet he'd made me with just one kiss? My ni**les harden through my white lace bra and the thin silk of my white blouse and I clench my thighs together beneath the black pencil skirt when I think about how exciting and illicit it would have been if he'd pushed his fingers inside me and brought me to orgasm just a few feet away from the crowds of people who could have seen us at any time.

“You're thinking about me, aren't you?”

I jerk away from the tree and my eyes fly open in shock at the sound of a deep masculine voice right by my ear.

Like some sort of twisted dream come true, the object of my current fantasy is standing right in front of me, one muscular arm extended above my head so that his hand is resting against the tree as he looks down at me and smiles.

“Collin! Wh-what are you doing here?” I stutter, trying to hide the quiver in my voice at the sight of him and hope the thoughts I was just having aren't written all over my face.

He stares down at me, his eyes taking me in from head to toe, stopping briefly when he gets to my br**sts and I almost bring my arms up to cover my traitorous ni**les. Jordan's voice calling me an uncaring bitch flashes through my head and I force myself to keep my hands down by my sides, my anger at his attitude pushing a

newfound boldness through me.

“Small electrical fire in the basement of your building,” Collin finally answers, moving his body closer to mine. “I’m training the new captain for your town’s fire department so I’m going out on all their calls with them today. The men have it under control now, so you should be able to get back to work in a few minutes.”

I finally take the time to look him over myself. He’s got on a short-sleeved version of the shirt he was wearing at Slammers, the thin cotton material clinging to his skin and the cut of his biceps on full display. I watch the muscles in his upper arms tighten under my gaze as I check out the tattoo on his left bicep and it takes everything in me not to reach up and trace my fingers over the ink. My eyes wander down his abs to his tapered waist where his shirt is tucked in to a pair of belted cargo pants before moving back up to his face. The smirk that turns up the corner of his mouth should make me feel mortified that he’s standing here watching me ogle his body, but it doesn’t. It pushes my confidence up a few notches and makes me want to do whatever I can to wipe it off of his face and see if I can make him trip over his words.

Aside from that make-out session on Saturday night, he’s only ever known teenage Finnley, a girl who had no clue what she was doing when it came to pleasing a man. He’s definitely proven that his skills have matured over the years, and I feel like it’s only fair to reciprocate.

At this point, I don’t even care about his reasons for kissing me the other night. I don’t care if it’s some misplaced infatuation he’s had for me all these years (which is highly unlikely) or if it was just the excitement of seeing each other again after all that time. I want to watch his pupils dilate with desire and I want to see him try and hide his erection behind those cargo pants when he goes back to work. I’ve been in a near-constant state of arousal since Saturday night, unable to stop thinking about the feel of his lips or what it would be like to have any part of him inside my body.

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If I have to suffer, dammit, I want him right there with me.

Glancing around to make sure no one is watching, I step closer until my br**sts are pressed up against his chest, sliding my hands up his bare arms until my fingers are wrapped around the hard muscles of his biceps. Even in four-inch stilettos, I still have to stand up on my tiptoes to bring our mouths together. I realize he's holding his breath when I don't feel it against my lips. When I feel the muscles under my fingers tightening as Collin attempts to hold himself perfectly still, I realize I'm not alone in my attraction.

Using just the tips of my front teeth, I gently tug on his bottom lip, bringing my tongue out afterwards to gently slide over and soothe the spot I just nipped. He's statue still, the only indications that my ministrations have any affect at all are in the slight narrowing of his eyes as they bore into mine and the movement of his Adam's apple as he swallows thickly.

I slide my hands up across his shoulders and down to his chest, stopping when I can feel his heart thumping against my palms and the heat from his skin burning through the material of his shirt.

"You're playing with fire, Lee," he growls as I shift my hips against him until I can feel the hardness of his obvious arousal.

It's my turn to smirk at him before I slide my cheek against his until my lips are ghosting against his ear. Back when we were teenagers, he used to turn into a boneless mass of horny boy whenever I did anything to his ears. Wondering if that still holds true, I do the same thing to the soft skin of his earlobe that I just did to his

bottom lip, gently biting down on the sensitive flesh with the tips of my teeth before sucking it into my mouth and letting my tongue swirl around the skin against my lips.

A low, muttered “fuck” comes out of his mouth, so deep and gravelly that it sounded like it had been ripped from the depths of his chest. The arm braced against the tree comes down to wrap around my waist as Collin holds me tightly against him.

I place my lips right into the hollow of his ear and puff out a warm breath of air before I speak. “Lucky for me, you’re a fireman and you can put out the fire.”

His arm tightens around me until I’m molded to his body from hips to shoulders. I haven’t felt this wicked or sensual in a long time. At this point, I’m not sure if I’ve ever felt like this. This raw, all-consuming need flowing through my body makes me forget about everything going on in my life. My thoughts are filled with visions of us naked and the feel of his smooth, hard body against my own. I have a brief flash of what him taking me would look like, of gazing down between our bodies and watching him thrust inside of me, of seeing my wetness coating the skin of his c**k as he takes me hard, pushing into me until I’m screaming his name and clawing at his back.

The shouts of my co-workers in the distance break me out of my lust-induced stupor and I reach behind me to remove Collin’s arm from my waist, stepping back a few inches so I can think rationally.

Turning away from him, I begin heading back into the building. I only make it a few feet when I hear him call my name and, without turning back, I quickly rattle off my address. I put a little extra swing in my hips as I make my way down the sidewalk, confident in the fact that he’s most likely staring at my ass as I go.

I have no idea when or even if he’ll actually show up at my house. The only thing I’m certain of right now is that if I don’t find out what it feels like to have sex with Collin

McDaniels, I'm going to spontaneously combust from desire.

Chapter 7—Burn With You

I COULDN'T BRING myself to care that Finnley was still technically married. When she told me Saturday night at the bar she was separated, it was the only confirmation I needed to stop feeling guilty about wanting her so much I ache with it and take the kiss I'd been thinking about ever since I saw her again. One kiss, that's all I told myself I wanted, just a single taste of her lips to see if my memory had served me well. As soon as I felt her tongue against mine, I was thrown back in time seventeen years, my dick hardening in my jeans immediately when she opened her mouth and let me in. It started off as a test to see if she had the same affect on me. We've been apart a long time and we've grown and both changed. Just the sight of her got my blood pumping, but who knew if kissing her would still have the same results? I quickly found out that my memory of Finnley was total bullshit compared to the real thing. She'd always been tall and slender and I remember loving the feel of her thin hips in my hands and her smooth skin beneath my palms. All those years changed Finnley for the better. She had curves now that made my head spin and tits that I knew would be more than a handful.

When the truck pulled up to the office building, I jumped down from the back giving orders to my men, more than a little surprised when I caught a glimpse of her leaning up against a tree not far from the building. My mom had given me regular updates on Finnley throughout the years, so I knew where she worked, but in the sea of people milling around the area, I never expected to run into her.

She ran off so quickly after that kiss Saturday night I figured I'd scared the shit out of her. I always thought the first time I saw her again would be spent apologizing for my dick behavior when I was young and dumb, not pushing her up against a wall in a bar, wishing she was wearing a skirt so I could slide it up her thighs and f**k her hard enough to make the ache go away. I wanted to kiss her just once as an adult to

see if I could finally put all of these obsessive thoughts I'd had about her for seventeen years to bed once and for all.

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Unfortunately, that kiss only ignited the flame and now I just want to take her—on the floor, against the wall, in my bed—anywhere and everywhere I could finally experience the heat of being inside the body she'd always denied me when we were younger.

I'm not going to lie, it's always pissed me off that we spent two years together and all of my attempts at seduction were turned down because she wasn't ready, only to find out she jumped right into bed with that ass**le Jordan not long after we broke up. I know we were young, I know we definitely weren't ready for the heavy responsibility that comes with having sex, but I never understood what he had that I didn't.

I'm thirty-three years old and I'm still pissed off about something that happened when I was seventeen. D.J.'s right, I'm a f**king idiot.

Once the guys had the electrical fire under control in the basement and I knew the building wasn't going up in flames, I made my way over to where Finnley stood with her eyes closed, deep in thought, to apologize for what happened Saturday night. I didn't want her to think I was some pathetic guy who was still pining for his high school girlfriend after almost two decades, even if it was basically true. As soon as I got close to her and smelled her soft, fruity perfume and saw the outline of her hardened ni**les through the thin material of her top, my good intentions left my body and were replaced by a rush of need. I wanted to put my mouth over the silk of her shirt and suck her ni**les into my mouth. I wanted to stare down at the wet spot left behind that would showcase the rosy color of her ni**les and then go back in for another taste, running my tongue in a circle around the tight buds.

I watched as a beautiful pink spread up her chest and across her cheeks after I spoke,

silently praying that blush was a result of my interrupting memories of what happened between us a few nights before. Hope quickly turned into arousal when Finnley looked up at me with a gleam in her big brown eyes, standing up on her toes and leaning forward to bite down on my lip. She obviously remembered how sensitive my ears have always been and it almost made me come in my pants when she ran her tongue right along the edge. It took every bit of self-control I could muster to remember that our co-workers were just a few yards away and I figured pushing up the black skirt that molded to her hips and thighs and f**king her up against the base of the tree would be frowned upon. I don't know what this thing is happening between us. Right now, I'm chalking it up to residual lust and curiosity about what it would be like to have Finnley Morgan beneath me, something I'd always dreamed about. Thoughts of her regretting what happened were quickly tossed aside at her bold behavior and the flippant way she tossed out her address without a second look back as she walked away from me. I didn't bother taking my eyes off of her ass as I watched her walk along the sidewalk, hurrying to catch up with her co-workers before disappearing inside the building. This is not the Finnley I remember from high school. That girl was shy and sweet and never initiated anything physical between us. This girl, this woman, radiates sex with just a smile and the husky sound of her voice when she speaks against my ear.

After a quick shower at the station at the end of my shift, I didn't think twice about turning my truck in the direction of her house, ignoring the fact that this was probably wrong on so many levels. Even though I wasn't dating anyone seriously, she was still a married woman, regardless of whether or not her husband was out of the picture. I should probably feel bad that one of the main reasons I'm currently pulling into her driveway is because I'd like nothing more than to f**k with Jordan Castillo's life, figuratively and literally. I never liked him as a teenager and the things I've heard about him as an adult prove that my opinion of him was spot on. There have been a ton of rumors about his bad behavior through the years. I don't know the cause of their separation, but I hope to God she finally found out the truth about the scumbag she married. I don't even care if she's just using me to get back at him, or if their

separation isn't permanent. All I know is that right now, she's free and clear and she obviously wants me. I couldn't pass this up if my life depended on it.

Pulling into the driveway of the address she gave me, I take a minute to stare at the house in front of me. It's an older two-story colonial with flower boxes attached to the first floor windows and a neatly landscaped yard with an American flag hanging on a pole off of the front porch. This is the home she lived in with her husband, the place where she built a life with another man and never gave me a second thought. Am I really going to waltz in there and defile all of her memories with a quick f**k?

Remembering the feel of her br**sts pressed up against my chest and her warm breath skating over my ear, I think about the way her moans of pleasure vibrated through my mouth as I kissed her. My dick stirs with arousal as I recall the way she rubbed the heat between her thighs against me and I quickly open the door to my truck, slamming it behind me as I stalk up to her front porch.

You bet your ass I'm going to taint this f**king house.

I'm going to erase every single memory of Jordan from every single room until she can't walk into the kitchen without thinking about my c**k buried deep inside her. I'm going to f**k her on every available surface and then I'm going to do it again just for the hell of it. I'm going to take what should have been mine years ago before I f**ked it all up and then I'm going to walk away and finally put this woman out of my head once and for all.

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The front door opens before I can ring the bell and, seeing Finnley standing in the doorway in nothing but a towel, droplets of water dripping down between the valley of her br**sts and her long brown hair curling naturally from the shower she must have recently taken, I quickly realize that walking away from her when this is all said and done might not be as easy as I thought.

Without speaking a word, I push my way into the house, backing her up and kicking the door closed behind me. I don't give her time to change her mind, not one single second to rethink her decision to give me her address this afternoon. I charge forward and wrap my arms around her towel-clad body, lifting her up until she can wrap her legs around my waist. If she showed any signs of fear or apprehension on that gorgeous face of hers, I would have stopped immediately. Fortunately for both of us, there's nothing but need in her eyes as she stares down at me, her chest rising and falling quickly with each breath she takes.

With one hand under her ass holding her against me, I quickly use the other hand to tug on the edge of the towel tucked in between her br**sts to hold it in place. The material parts and I stare at her naked br**sts right in front of my face. They're larger and fuller than the last time I'd seen them and my mouth waters as I think about sucking every inch of them into my mouth. Her fingers slide through the hair on the back of my head and pull me closer, urging me to taste her. I immediately comply, latching my mouth onto one nipple and sucking it into my mouth.

Finnley tosses her head back and moans softly, her thighs tightening around my hips and her hands pressing me harder against her as I continue to pull her nipple into my mouth and swirl my tongue around and around it, over and over until she starts grinding her hips against me.

I move a few blind steps forward, stopping when her back crashes into the wall next to the door. I pull my face away from her breast to rip the towel the rest of the way off of her body, impatient with the desire to have her completely naked in my arms. Tossing the towel aside, I use my hips to anchor her in place against the wall, bringing my hands up to frame her face before I slam my lips against hers. I swallow her cries of need as I plunge my tongue into her mouth. Her hands move away from the back of my head and quickly go to the hem of my t-shirt, clawing and tugging on it in an attempt to get it up and off my body. I move away from her lips long enough to help her, tossing my shirt in the general direction of the towel that covered her body before going back in for another taste of her mouth.

When I pull back a few seconds later, I can't help but grin at her sounds of protest. I chuckle as she grabs onto my head and tries to pull me back in, outright laughing at the look she gives me when I resist.

"I love your mouth, baby, but there's something else I'm dying to taste right now."

I watch her eyes flare with equal parts arousal and curiosity as I move my hands away from her face, slowly sliding them down her neck to skate over her collarbones and cup her breasts, lightly pinching her nipples before I resume my downward path. Her legs slide down from around my hips until her feet rest on the floor, her breathing growing more and more erratic as I use my fingertips to lightly trace the skin around her belly button. Breaking eye contact, I follow my hands down her body until I'm kneeling in front of her. I wrap my hands around her hips and pull the lower half of her body forward until I can smell her arousal and practically taste it on my tongue.

I glance up at her through hooded eyes and see her staring down at me, her skin flushed with desire as her tongue darts out and licks her lips in anticipation of what I'm about to do.

"I've always wondered what you taste like. You have no idea how badly I wanted to

drive my tongue into this tight little pu**y all those years ago, but I had no idea what I was doing.”

My eyes travel down the beautiful woman in front of me, stopping when I meet her waxed, bare sex. Sliding one hand away from her hip, I trace a solitary finger up and down either side of her swollen lips, teasing her by refusing to dip it in between them to pull out her wetness and spread it around. Her hips move against my fingers, begging me for more. I look up at her as she bites down on her lower lip, closing her eyes and letting her head fall back against the wall.

I slowly drag my finger between her inner lips and circle it around her clit until I hear her moan.

“Open your eyes, Lee. I want you to watch me suck your clit into my mouth and push my tongue inside you,” I tell her with a low voice.

With a shaky breath, she opens her eyes, her eyelids fluttering as she struggles to focus before looking down at me. When I’m sure she’s not going to look away again, I close my own eyes and the distance between us, preparing to do exactly as I promised. I tighten my hand on her hip as she writhes against me, wrap my lips around her clit and pull it hard into my mouth.

“Fuck! Oh, my God.”

She lets out a strangled curse and it takes everything in me not to shout with her as I get my first taste of her sweet pu**y on my tongue.

Chapter 8—Sex on Fire

“OPEN YOUR EYES, Lee. I want you to watch me suck your clit into my mouth and push my tongue inside you.”

I'm a little embarrassed by the fact that just those simple words from Collin are almost enough to make me come. It's only when he buries his face between my legs and I feel his lips and tongue wrap around my clit that I realize the words were nothing compared to the feel of him working me into his mouth.

I'm only half aware of the curses flying from my mouth as his tongue circles my clit. When his hand joins his mouth between my legs and he quickly thrusts two of his long, thick fingers inside of me, the sensation becomes almost too much to bear and I have to force myself to keep my eyes open like he asked. I must admit that the sight of him sucking my clit past his lips as he f**ks me roughly with his fingers is almost as hot as feeling it happen.

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I bring my hands to the back of his head and pull him in closer, thrusting my hips against his face as he works me over with his lips and tongue and his fingers curl inside of me. Our eyes meet as he looks up from what he's doing, his mouth moving away from me but his fingers continuing their deep push and pull.

“Lee,” he moans my name, the hot breath from his words tickling against my sex. “You taste so f**king sweet, baby. Like sugar and honey.”

I've never been much for dirty talk. Jordan and I were both virgins, so our initial attempts at sex were awkward and fumbling at best. Once we learned each other's bodies and figured out what worked and what didn't, we had a pretty good sex life for the better part of our marriage. I've always been a little on the shy side, so Jordan was usually the aggressor when it came to our sex life. When he attempted a little dirty talk, it always felt weird and it never turned me on. I was satisfied with our routine and, even though we experimented here and there with different positions and toys, I'm realizing now just how much I've been missing. The strength of the response this man wrings from me with only his tongue and his fingers and a handful of words borders on cataclysmic.

As Collin dives back between my thighs, sliding his tongue inside me with his fingers, a part of me wonders if I'm reacting so strongly because I'm with someone new and different or because Collin instinctively knows my body like the back of his hand. Even though what's happening right now is new territory for us, he knows the exact pressure I need from his mouth and he knows the perfect way to curl his fingers inside of me as pulls them out. Even after over a decade of marriage, Jordan still needed instruction when it came to giving me pleasure. I moved his fingers when they rubbed in the wrong direction or grasped onto his hips to slow him down when

he f**ked me too fast. The man worshipping my pu**y has no such problem. Collin works my body like he's spent years getting intimately acquainted with it.

His mouth is hot and wet on my clit and he continues the motion and pressure of his tongue as it circles me, realizing that if he changes up what he's doing too quickly the orgasm that's hovering right there, waiting for me to fall over the edge into oblivion, will slip out of my reach. He pushes his fingers so deep inside of me that I feel his knuckles pressing against the sensitive skin of my inner lips. My hips roll against his mouth, his tongue never slowing its assault on my clit and I bite my lip to keep from crying out. When the tips of his fingers brush against my g-spot seconds later, his demand to keep my eyes open is forgotten as the first wave of my orgasm washes over me. I squeeze my eyes closed, my fingers clutching so tightly to the hair on his head that I'm afraid he'll have bald spots when I'm done as my legs shake and my hips thrust frantically against his hand. I come against his lips and tongue and he drinks me in, sucking down every last drop and prolonging my orgasm with little flicks of his tongue until my body feels like jelly.

I lean heavily against the wall, attempting to recover as he climbs to his feet, unbuckling his jeans and pushing them down just enough to free his c**k from behind the zipper. I stare down at the thick, long length of him as he glides his hand from base to tip, my eyes widening in surprise at his size. My memory is a little fuzzy, but I'm certain the dick I delivered awkward handjobs and clumsy blowjobs to as a teenager was never this big.

Damn. He grew all over.

I realize I must've said that out loud when he chuckles. I tear my eyes away from the vision of him stroking himself to gaze up at him through my lashes. "I want to touch you, Collin," I whisper in deference to the intimacy of the moment, my hand inching forward to join his.

A noise somewhere between a growl and a groan escapes his throat as he leans down until his lips are pressed against my ear. "I won't last a minute if you touch me right now and I f**king need to be inside of you."

He raises his head and I nod in agreement before he bends his knees and uses his hand to guide his c**k through my slit, coating the tip with my wetness. I remember the vision I had earlier of looking down between our bodies and watching as his c**k disappeared inside of me, glistening with my juices. I feel another clench of arousal thrum between my legs, completely shocked that I'm ready for another orgasm while I'm still reeling from the aftershocks of the first one.

"You're killing me, Lee," Collin says with a groan as he continues to slide the tip of his c**k up and down and around my clit. "I've never f**ked anyone without a condom but I can't stand the thought of not feeling every inch of you on my cock."

If it were possible to come from words alone, that right there would have done it.

"I'm on the pill and I've only been with him," I whisper, not wanting to say his name out loud and break the spell that's crackling in the air between us.

"I swear to f**k I'm clean. I would never do anything to hurt you, you know that, right?" he asks, looking up from what he's doing between us to stare into my eyes.

I realize trusting a man I hadn't spoken to in seventeen years until just a few days ago probably isn't the best idea in this day and age. I used to know everything about Collin and I trusted him wholeheartedly, but that was a long time ago and we're both different people. I don't know where he's been or who he's slept with, but something about the conviction in his voice and the way he looks at me lets me know I can still trust him. Even though he's not the boy I once knew and I know very little about the man he's become, I know with everything inside of me that he's telling me the truth. He would never do anything to hurt me.

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Leaning towards him, I rest my forehead against his and speak the words I know to be true. "I know. I trust you. Please, Collin. I need you."

With one hand still holding his c**k right at my entrance, he uses his other hand to slide down my hip and grasp the back of my thigh, pulling my leg up around his waist.

"Do you want me to f**k you up against this wall, Finnley?" he whispers, running his hand back up my thigh until he's clutching my bare ass.

I'm at a loss for words when he speaks, pushing just the head of his c**k into me and holding still. I try to push myself forward and bring him inside my body, but he holds himself away from me, teasing me with a swirl of his hips while he denies me the pleasure of his complete penetration.

I clasp my hands together behind his neck, my forehead still pressed against his as I look down between us and see just how much hard length of him there is that still needs to fit inside me. I briefly wonder if it's even going to work, but Collin speaks again and all semblance of worry flees from my mind. The wetness he's creating between my thighs with his words alone is certain to ease his passage.

"Tell me what you want, Finnley. Say it. I want to hear you say it."

He makes the tiniest of movements, easing forward just enough to push a little more of his c**k into me and have me panting for all of it, begging him for more.

"Fuck me, Collin. Jesus, just f**k me," I whisper harshly.

He lets out a guttural groan and slams into me with one hard thrust, filling me so completely that I shout in pleasure, tossing my head back. His other hand smacks down on my ass and the sting of his palm is a surprising blend of pleasure and pain. He grips the cheeks of my ass tightly with both hands and lifts, forcing me to curl both of my legs around him and hang on for dear life. He begins a pounding rhythm against me, f**king me so hard and so deep that I hear the photos on the wall behind me rattle in their frames each time his hips slam into mine. Just like the other night at the bar, he clutches my ass and moves me against him, lifting me almost completely off his c**k when he glides out and slamming me back down when he thrusts inside me.

I feel his teeth at the skin of my neck, lightly nipping as his hips piston against me over and over until I'm pretty sure he's going to push both of us right through the wall. I can probably count on one hand the number of times I've had back to back orgasms, a feat Jordan only accomplished with the assistance of a vibrator, so I'm caught off-guard by the telltale tingle of pending release that courses through me each time Collin's groin slams against my clit.

"Come for me, Finnley. I need to feel you coming around my cock," Collin whispers against my neck as he picks up the pace, slamming into me so hard I'm sure I'm going to have bruises on my back. His hands tighten on my ass, gripping almost to the point of pain as he impales me over and over again on his cock. My body goes rigid, preparing for release, at the thought of wearing the marks from this man's hands on my ass tomorrow.

Everything in the lower half of my body ignites and I hook my ankles together behind his back, using the muscles of my thighs to move against him faster and harder until I feel the rush of my second orgasm explode through my sex, shouting his name as I shatter around him.

"Fuck, baby, I can feel you coming. Goddammit, you feel so good," Collin mutters,

kissing his way up my neck until he gets to my lips, where he plunges his tongue inside my mouth with the same, deep thrusting motion as his c**k inside me.

His thrusts lose their rhythm and his breathing becomes more erratic as he f**ks me faster and faster, breaking the seal of our lips so he can draw in air. I feel his ass clench beneath my ankles as he slams deeply into me one last time, holding himself still as he comes inside of me.

“Fuck, I’m coming!” he shouts against my lips as he grinds his pelvis against me. I feel his c**k pulse inside me with each spurt of his release and I squeeze my kegel muscles, milking him and pulling each and every drop into my body.

His grinding abruptly ceases as his body slumps against mine and he buries his face into the side of my neck. I take a deep breath in and hold it, trying unsuccessfully to slow my racing heart. I can still feel his c**k inside of me, twitching with the last remnants of his orgasm and I wait once again for guilt to overwhelm me, for the rush of shame over what I’ve just done to take hold and the tears start to fall.

I’ve just taken another man inside my body. I let him come inside me and it was better than anything I’ve ever felt in my life. I’ve only allowed one other man to do this to me and it should feel like a betrayal of everything we meant to each other. I should be ashamed that I just tarnished the one and only perfect thing that was left between us. I can no longer say that Jordan is the only man I’ve ever had sex with. I can no longer hold my head up with pride knowing that, no matter what went wrong between us, there was one thing that neither of us would ever dare damage.

For reasons beyond my comprehension, the regret I’ve braced myself to deal with never comes.

I feel nothing right now but exhaustion and satisfaction...

And the slow stirrings of arousal when I think about repeating what just happened between us as soon as possible.

Chapter 9—Fuel the Fire

I STARE AT myself in the full-length mirror behind my bedroom door, gazing in open fascination at the flush that colors the skin that runs from my br**sts up to my cheeks and the wild tangle of chestnut curls that hangs around my face. Twisting my body and turning my head to look back over my shoulder, I see red marks along my upper back, a stark reminder of the force of Collin's thrusts as he pummeled me into the wall. Dropping my gaze lower, I'm confronted with further evidence of his possession in the form of his fingerprints dotting both cheeks of my ass, and I find myself unable to stop the satisfied smile that takes over my face as I recall the way he dug his fingers into me and slammed my body against him

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Jordan left his mark on me only once during the course of our marriage, smacking my ass so hard that it brought tears to my eyes. After I punched him in the arm and threatened to cut off his balls, he swore he'd never do it again. Rough sex is not something that ever held any appeal for me. I certainly never thought being f**ked against a wall so hard it left marks would turn me on, but I find myself staring at the results of what we just did and feeling that familiar stirring between my legs again.

I hear the water shut off in the bathroom across the hall and turn away from the mirror before Collin sees that I've been obsessively eyeing all the things he did to my body. I'm not fast enough, though, and the dimple in his cheek stands out when he smirks at me as he strolls naked into the room,

"Checking out my handy work?" he asks, coming to stand behind me while I rummage through my dresser drawer for a pair of underwear and a tank top, trying to pretend like that wasn't exactly what I'd been doing.

"Don't get so cocky, Mr. McDaniels," I warn, glancing at him over my shoulder.

He presses his body against my back and I feel his cock, hot and hard between the cheeks of my ass.

Jesus, how in the hell is he already hard again?

"I'm pretty sure I earned the right to be a little cocky," he whispers close to my ear.

I can't even think of a sufficient comeback because he's right. He definitely went above and beyond tonight and I won't deny him his right to gloat. After giving me

two mind-numbing orgasms, he's certainly earned it.

The heat of his body is suddenly gone as he moves away from me, his fingertips trailing down my spine and then circling each little red mark. I close my eyes as he leans in and kisses each spot.

"I'm sorry I was so rough, Lee," he whispers as he squats down and presses his lips against the area on my ass that's still pink from his handprint.

He stands back up, bringing his body flush against mine again and I lean my head back against his chest as his arms wrap around my waist.

"I like having your marks on my body," I tell him honestly, because it's the absolute truth.

I like that those marks will serve as a reminder of Collin's possession for days to come, but, more than that, I love what each of those marks mean. Never in my life have I experienced the absolute feminine power of having a man want me beyond all reason, the thrill of having him need me so much that he couldn't hold himself back, nor did I think I wanted to. I never had any desire to push the boundaries of sex with Jordan because deep down, I didn't really trust him. I didn't trust him enough to take care of me or explore that dark side of my sexual needs I've kept buried inside. I also know in my heart that I wouldn't have been able to let go like that with any man other than Collin. I want it all, the dark and the sweet and everything in between, and I want it with the man standing behind me. I never felt comfortable telling Jordan what I wanted or needed from him, but I know I don't have to be afraid with Collin.

"Open your eyes and watch," he demands softly as he slightly turns both of our bodies.

Damn, what is it with him and making me watch?

I comply with his request and when I see that he's turned us to face the mirror, I suddenly understand why he wants me to look this time.

I watch as the palms of his hands flatten against my stomach before they move in opposite directions, one going up to cup my breast and the other going down to cup my sex.

His thumb begins to trace a circle around one hard nipple while the other thumb slowly circles my clit. I let out a gasp as I watch his middle finger slide between my folds before dipping inside of me. He holds his hand still and seeing his finger completely disappeared inside of me is the most erotic thing I've ever seen. He continues to circle both my clit and my nipple with the same achingly slow speed all the while keeping that long, thick finger perfectly motionless inside my body.

"Slide your hand down here, baby," he orders quietly. I manage to tear my eyes away from the sight of his hand cupping my sex, meeting his gaze in the mirror with a puzzled look on my face. "I want you to feel this, Lee. Push your finger inside you with mine."

I have no idea who this man is saying such delicious things against my ear and I can't believe I ever worried that adult Collin's sexual skills would be a repeat of the awkward, bungling attempts of the boy I knew in high school. Seventeen-year-old Collin couldn't bring me to the edge of release with a bit of dirty talk or play my body like he owned it. He's grown up in more ways than one and I couldn't be happier about that right now.

Resting my hand on top of his forearm, I slide it down until my palm brushes over top of his hand and our fingers are almost interlaced. I can feel the knuckle of his middle finger and I move my own until I'm doing as he asked and pushing it inside myself right alongside his. He pulls his hand away from me slowly, sliding both of our fingers out to the tips and holding them there until I can't take the torture any longer.

I push on his hand so we both slide right back in, my wetness coating both of us.

We continue the push and pull of our fingers while his thumb brushes back and forth over my clit, his other hand still working my nipple with the exact same speed and pressure.

“You’re so wet, Finnley. Do you like watching our fingers f**k you?” he asks, staring at my face in the mirror.

“I like anything you do to me,” I reply with a shaky breath as he picks up the speed of our fingers until the only sound in the room is the wet, sucking noise our fingers make as they sink inside me over and over.

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He bends his knees behind me and I see the tip of his c**k between my legs as I stare into the mirror, our fingers continuing to move in a blindingly fast pace.

In one perfectly executed move, he pulls our fingers out of my body and immediately replaces them with his cock, sliding deep inside of me with one slow push.

His hand stops its ministrations on my nipple and instead, bands tightly around my ribs right below my br**sts to hold me up. Thank God for that because I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to stand on my own. As he works himself in and out of me, using two fingers to rub my clit, I reach behind me to grasp his hips, curling my nails into his flesh as he slowly f**ks me. He takes his time with me, each plunge deep and precise and so completely unlike our earlier encounter. Being taken up against the wall in a rush of slapping bodies and bruised skin was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before, but this slow burn with its sensual intensity is just as good.

The fingers circling my clit move maddeningly fast while his c**k plunges into me deep and slow, the opposing sensations melting together until I'm nothing but a burning pile of need. It's a struggle simply to stand here and try to help him keep my body upright when my thighs start to shake as my body hovers at the brink of orgasm. My hands clench his hips tighter and I lock down my muscles, afraid to move for fear of losing my hold on the feelings coursing through my body—

The need to scream.

The need to come.

The need to keep him here so he can do this to me every single day.

Forever.

That thought should scare the hell out of me, but it doesn't. This time is impossibly better than the first and I can only imagine that it will continue to get better every single time.

My release comes swiftly and without warning, my pu**y clamping down on his c**k as I continue to watch what he's doing to me in the mirror, my mouth open on a silent scream of pleasure. I gasp and pant through my orgasm until my throat is so dry it feels like it will crack. As I come down from my high, Collin turns us away from the mirror, grabs my hands from his hips and places them on top of the dresser in front of me.

"Hold on, baby," he warns.

I have just enough time to brace myself against the smooth surface of my dresser before he pulls his c**k completely out of me and immediately slams it back in to the hilt. I cry out in pleasure as he resumes the same pounding rhythm as earlier, his hips slapping into my ass as he grips my hips tightly and uses my body to find his release.

I lift myself up on my toes and arch my back, giving him easier access and allowing him to drive himself inside me, as deep as he can go, again and again. I feel the heat of him behind me and the length of him inside me and I've never felt more completely overwhelmed. I love the sound of him losing control, growls and curses that are rough and foul and so f**king sexy that I feel my pu**y tighten down on his c**k in an involuntary spasm. I love that I can already tell when he's getting ready to come just by the way his movements become jerky, like he can't control what he's doing and his only thought is of coming inside me.

"Fuck, Lee. FUCK!" he shouts, slamming deep one last time before he lets go, his hips grinding against my ass as he comes.

We both collapse on top of the dresser, my br**sts flattening against the cool wood and his warm chest pressing against my back. He shifts his hips, slipping out of me and I feel his come drip down the inside of my thighs.

Collin wraps both of his arms around my waist and peppers my back with kisses while I try and catch my breath, wondering if I'll ever get enough of this man.

“Jesus, I can’t get enough of you,” he mutters against me, voicing my own thoughts. “I’m already thinking about f**king you again.”

I smile to myself as he runs his hands over the skin of my upper back.

“Fuck, the things I want to do to your body should be illegal.”

Lifting my head, I look over my shoulder at him. “I’m perfectly fine with that. As soon as I recover, you can do anything you want to my body.”

His eyes darken and I know he’s contemplating all the things he wants to do to me. I’m fairly certain that most, if not all of them, will be new experiences for me and I shiver in anticipation.

The distant sound of the front door opening and slamming shut brings me out of my orgasm-induced euphoria and I jerk up from the dresser, pushing Collin away from me in the process. He gives me a strange look, clearly confused for a moment, and I realize he must not have heard what I did.

There’s only one person who has a key to this house, one person who would be walking through that front door right now.

I shouldn’t have ignored his calls. I should have acted like an adult and talked to him. I knew that going radio silent would piss him off and eventually he’d ignore

everything I said to him the day he left about how I couldn't stand to look at him and I never wanted to see him again.

The separation papers obviously weren't enough for him. Seeing me freshly f**ked from another man and that man still in our home, a man who he's always hated for the simple fact that I dated him first, is going to be one big wake-up call for him. Part of me wants to grab Collin's hand and drag him out into the living room without a care about our nakedness and shove it right down Jordan's throat. The other part of me, the more logical, less bitchy side, wants to hide Collin in the closet and keep what we just did a secret. Not because I'm ashamed, or I feel guilty, but because bringing this out in the open will make it real. Making it real means it can be taken away at any moment and I'm not ready to let this go just yet. I don't know if this is rebound sex, a way to get back at Jordan sex or something more than sex. It's too new and too fresh and I haven't had time to process it yet. I'm still in a little bubble of bliss and I'm not ready for that bubble to be popped.

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“Finnley? Babe! I’m home!”

I cringe when I hear Jordan’s shout. Judging by the angry look on Collin’s face, my bubble of bliss just exploded and Jordan was holding the sharp pin of destruction.

Chapter 10—Powderkeg

I CANNOT BELIEVE this is f**king happening right now.

“Please, just stay in here,” Finnley begs for the third time as I watch her quickly throw on a short, black robe she grabs from the end of the bed.

I cross my arms in front of me, silently fuming, as she rushes towards the door. She looks back over her shoulder at me, her brown eyes filled with worry and sadness.

“Please,” she whispers brokenly one last time before turning away and rushing down the hall, the door pulling closed behind her.

I hear her footsteps as she races down the stairs followed by the sounds of murmured voices before I finally let the anger that’s been simmering just under the surface since I head him speak her f**king name boil over. Picking up a pillow from the end of the bed, I bunch it in my hands and then chuck it as hard as I can at the mirror hanging behind the door, equal parts pissed off and grateful that it wasn’t something harder. Gripping my hands in my hair so tight my eyes start to water, I pace around the room while the voices down below get increasingly louder.

I should have made her tell me what the hell was going on with Jordan before I

started any of this shit with her. Fuck, separated could mean anything from him staying in a hotel for a week while they worked out their problems to her getting ready to leave his ass for good. I was a complete and total dumbass for immediately assuming the latter. My thoughts had been centered on Finnley, on getting inside her sweet body with the hope of sating my curiosity and removing all traces of her from my heart and mind once and for all. I'd planned on leaving here today with all traces of my infatuation with Finnley wiped from my mind and without another look back. I didn't expect for one taste of her to turn into an addiction, never imagined that f**king her would only solidify my obsession. This woman, who's spent years dominating my headspace, is suddenly under my skin and in my blood and now I can't imagine not f**king her every day for the rest of my life. I'll be damned if that f**k head Jordan Castillo is going to ruin my chances with her once again.

Snatching up my jeans and t-shirt from the foot of the bed where I'd tossed them before our second round of mind-blowing sex, I quickly get dressed and walk over to the door. I quietly pull it open just a crack and crane my neck to listen, not giving a shit that I'm eavesdropping right now.

"I'm sorry, Jordan. I'm so sorry."

The broken apology from Finnley makes my blood boil and I grip the handle of the door so hard I'm surprised it doesn't break off in my hand.

Is she taking him back? Is she forgiving him for whatever the f**k he did and taking him back when I'm standing right here after she just spent the past hour and a half letting me f**k her?

My smell is still on her skin and my come is still pooling inside her body and she's taking that f**ker back. This woman has completely f**ked me in more ways than one. The day I let her go, the memory of her and what we had together took root and it grew and grew until she became a fantasy in my mind. I placed this perfect,

amazing woman so high on a pedestal in my mind that no other woman could even come close to reaching the ideal of her, but I'm quickly realizing that dreams are much better than reality. I built her up so high in my mind that there was nowhere else for her to go but crashing down.

"YOU CAN'T KEEP ME OUT OF MY OWN FUCKING HOUSE, YOU STUPID BITCH!"

The bedroom door slams against the wall and I'm racing barefoot down the stairs before I even realize what I'm doing. I completely disregard the bullshit promise I made to Finnley to stay hidden in the bedroom when I hear the fury in Jordan's voice. I'll be damned if I'll sit here and hide like a little bitch while he screams at her.

I'm filled with blind rage when I walk into the living room and see Jordan's hands wrapped tightly around Finnley's arms as he shakes her like a ragdoll, spit flying from his mouth as he screams at her.

I fly across the room, clutching the front of his shirt in my fists and dragging him away from Finnley, stopping when his back slams against the wall beside the door—the same wall I just f**ked his wife up against. I ignore Finnley's shouts from behind me as I press him as hard as I can into the wall and get right in his face.

"Don't you ever touch her or speak to her like that again," I growl.

"Collin, please!" Finnley begs, her hands grabbing onto my shoulders as she tries to pull me off of Jordan.

"You fking WHORE!"** Jordan screams as he looks over my shoulder at his wife.

I press my forearm into his neck, watching his eyes bulge out of their sockets and his face turn red as I cut off his air supply. **"Call her a whore again. Go ahead. Say**

something else, please. Give me a f**king reason to beat the shit out of you.”

Jordan claws at my arm while Finnley tugs on my shoulders and I let my anger slow to a simmer while I shoot daggers at the worthless piece of shit in front of me.

“Collin, he can’t breathe!”

Finnley’s strangled cry forces its way into my conscience and I finally ease up, pushing my forearm into this throat one last time before backing away. Jordan’s hands immediately wrap around his neck as he bends over, coughing and sputtering pathetically like a Goddamn pu**y.

When he can finally breathe normally again, he stands up to his full height, puffs out his chest and glares at me, his nostrils flaring like an angry bull. I can tell he’s thinking about charging, that he’d like nothing better than to punch me in the face. I can see it in the way his chest heaves and his hands clench and unclench into fists at his sides. Aside from the tattoos covering both of his arms from wrists to shoulders and the strung-out look in his eyes, he looks like the same punk from high school. He’s taller and has a few more muscles, but I can still wipe the floor with his ass. I silently dare him to punch me. Outside of taking his wife back up to their bedroom and f**king her brains out, I can’t think of anything I’d love more than to put him on his ass. I’ve always hated him, knowing he poached what should have been mine. I’ve spent many years wishing I could be alone in a room with him just once so I could show him who the better man is.

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“I can’t believe you would do this to me,” he finally says, staring right at me, but I know his words are for Finnley.

He finally looks away from me to Finnley. I can feel the heat of her body right behind me. I can smell her skin and I can hear her breath stutter with every word he speaks, but I can’t bring myself to turn around. I refuse to see the look of anguish and regret on her face that I’m sure he’s putting there.

“Seventeen years, Finn. Seventeen years and you’re going to throw it all away by sleeping with him?” Jordan asks in disgust.

The fact I just came running downstairs from the bedroom and she’s standing here in nothing but a robe makes what happened between us pretty obvious. She doesn’t say a word to confirm or deny it, but even Jordan isn’t that stupid. I want her to choose me, to tell him that even though she married him, it’s always been me. I want her to tell him to leave and pick me. Pick me, dammit!

“Did you f**k him in my bed?”

I take a step in Jordan’s direction and once again, Finnley’s hand comes out and grips onto my shoulder.

“Collin, you need to go. Please, just go.”

She practically sobs the words and my heart drops all the way down to my feet, so completely removed from my chest that I could drop it on the floor and kick it across the room.

I'm such a f**king idiot.

"I'm not leaving you alone with him."

I speak my words with conviction even though I want nothing more than to run out of here with my tail between my legs like a wounded f**king puppy. I feel like a Goddamn kicked puppy and I have to fight the urge to rub my sternum to ease the pain in my chest. Fuck, this woman is lethal. No matter how much it hurts, though, I will NOT leave her alone and let him hurt her again.

"Fuck you! She's my wife and this is our house!" Jordan argues.

Finnley steps between us, placing a hand in the center of my chest to push me away from Jordan, and I finally see her face. Just like I assumed, she looks beaten down with guilt and sadness.

"Collin, please. I can handle this; it's fine. I just need you to leave," she tells me softly.

I can't even stand to look at her right now, so I turn away from her and leave the house without another word.

As I drive away, I pray to God that I don't regret leaving her alone with him. Even though I'm pissed and I'm hurt, I would never want something bad to happen to her. I would rather die than even think about any harm coming to her, no matter how broken I feel right now.

Instead of going home to my empty place, I head to the bar. I need to get drunk. Maybe an entire bottle of whiskey will wash away the singed ashes of my heart.

Chapter 11—Eyes on Fire

I CAN'T STOP crying. For over a month, I didn't shed a single tear about making Jordan leave, not one. Now, I'm sitting on my couch sobbing so hard I can barely breathe while Phina passes me a box of tissues.

"He doesn't hate you, hon. He's probably just a little pissed at how it all went down," she reassures me.

The funny thing is, I can feel in my bones that Collin hates me. I should have never treated him like a dirty little secret and I should have never told him to leave, but I didn't know what else to do. I knew him and Jordan being in the same room together for even a minute longer would have resulted in bloodshed and I didn't want the situation to get any uglier than it already had. I didn't have time to explain to Collin my reasons for wanting him to stay in the bedroom and I didn't have time to explain to him that I would much rather Jordan leave than him. No time, there was never enough time and now I feel like there's been a shift in my universe that I'm never going to be able to set right.

Everything between us happened so fast and I didn't have any time to process it before it all blew up in my face. Did I make a mistake? I jumped right into another relationship, if that's what you can call it, before the ink terminating the previous one was even dry. I took a chance, I took a leap and I did something completely out of character. It doesn't feel like a mistake and it certainly didn't feel wrong at the time. Shit, it still doesn't feel wrong. Actually, it's the most right I felt in a long time.

"God, I feel like such an idiot. What the hell am I even doing?" I ask Phina as I grab a Kleenex from the box and dry off my cheeks.

"You're thinking with your vagina for once instead of your head and your heart. I say it's a win all around," she says with a laugh.

I laugh right along with her but shake my head at the same time. "It's not even that. I

mean, the sex is... Jesus, the sex is something I can't even put into words. But it's so much more than sex and that is the insane part. I mean, I don't even know him. I used to know him. I used to know everything about him, but it's been seventeen years! Why do I feel worse about him walking away than I do about Jordan?"

I let my head flop to the back of the couch and stare up at the ceiling. "I feel this strange connection to Collin, like he was always meant to be in my life one way or another. I never told you this, but I've thought about him so much over the years and seeing him again feels almost like we were never apart. We just fit so well and it feels so right, but I felt that way about Jordan for the longest time, too. He was my best friend and I couldn't imagine my life without him."

"But he f**ked everything up and threw away your trust," Phina reminds me. "Trust is the most important thing in any relationship, you know that. Do you trust Collin?"

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I sigh and turn my head to face her. “In some ways I do, but I don’t even know him. I mean, I know his family, I know how old he was when he got into his first fight, I know he made honor roll every year in high school and I know he hated the purple cummerbund I made him wear to prom junior year. I know the basics about what he’s been doing with his life since then but what about everything else? Does he still like the same junk food, is Full Metal Jacket still his favorite movie, who did he lose his virginity to and why the hell didn’t he ever get married and have kids? I’ve spent less than five hours with the man since I was seventeen years old and we spent most of that time f**king like rabbits. Maybe it’s just the thrill of something new and exciting or a way for me to purge Jordan from my mind and my heart once and for all. The final nail in the coffin, so to speak.”

Phina raises an eyebrow and stares at me. “Does it really feel like that? Did you really just have sex with the guy to step out of your comfort zone and take a new toy for a test drive? Jordan is the only man you’ve ever had sex with. Ever. You have always been firm in that conviction and I really don’t see you jumping into bed with the first man who comes along. Even though technically you did jump into bed with the first man who came along.”

I swat at her arm when she laughs.

“What I’m saying is, you’re not the type of woman that has sex with some random just to get your mind off of your troubles. You stayed true to Jordan for seventeen years even though he continued to f**k everything up and f**k everything else in sight. You wouldn’t have sex with someone unless there was something there and that something was much more than just hormones.”

My head flies up from the couch and I feel bile churning in my stomach.

Phina's eyes widen when she realizes what she just let slip. "Shit, shit, shit."

I lean forward on the couch and put my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands.

"Don't throw up, okay? I don't do well with vomit," Phina says in a rush as she rubs her hand in circles on my back.

I've always wondered if Jordan cheated on me. He broke every other marriage vow, so why wouldn't he have broken the most important one? He was always so proud of the fact that we'd only slept with each other, always the first to brag about it when someone brought up the topic. When the lies started to outnumber the truths, though, and I began to realize just how deeply he was mired in addiction, him f**king other women didn't seem like such a stretch, but I could never bring myself to ask him about it. The simple fact is, I never really believed he would do it because I knew I would never do it.

I lift my head and look at her worried face. "I'm not going to throw up, don't worry. I might pile the rest of his shit in the yard and light a bonfire or start chucking breakable objects, but I'm definitely not going to puke."

"Might I suggest starting with your wedding china? I've always wanted to throw a few of those God awful pieces his mother picked out and watch them shatter."

I shake my head at her and sigh. "So, do you know this for a fact or are you just assuming?"

"Well, part of it is assumption, but most of it is rumor. I'm so sorry I never told you. You were always so forgiving of him and every time I wanted to say something, you

guys were always doing so well that I didn't want to ruin your life, especially if it wasn't true," she admits. "Even though he pissed me off on a regular basis, I just wanted you to be happy and I wanted it to work between you two. When you finally decided to leave his ass for good a month ago, I swear I was going to tell you. I was waiting for the right time. I didn't mean to just blurt it out like an ass**le."

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and pull her close to me. "You're not an ass**le. I'm a little pissed that you didn't tell me, but I get it. You didn't know for sure and you didn't want to make things worse."

I've spent too much time over the years being angry, and there's no way I could hold a grudge against my best friend for doing what she thought was best. No matter how much she hated what Jordan did to me, she stood by me without judging me for the choices I made and I know it couldn't have been easy for her to keep something like this to herself. If the tables were turned, I honestly don't know what I would have done. Her not telling me before now is actually a blessing. I hate to think that I've been one of those women who's had her head in her ass when it comes to her husband's infidelity, but I can admit that a small part of me didn't really want to know. If I'd found out something like this a year ago, it would have completely broken me and I never would have gotten over the hurt. I don't think I would have been able to move on or trust another man ever again. A year ago, I still believed Jordan could change and that he would change because he loved me enough to be the man I needed him to be. Finding this information out now, when I'm stronger than I've ever been and one hundred percent firm in my belief that our relationship is over, makes it easier to handle.

After Collin walked out the door earlier, I finally spelled it out for Jordan. He told me he was going into rehab and he told me he made arrangements for us to go to marriage counseling. I laughed in his face. It probably wasn't the best reaction, but I was still raw and upset about the look on Collin's face when I asked him to leave. I was pissed at Jordan for waltzing into the house and screwing everything up. Hearing

that he's most likely been cheating on me for years, I don't feel bad at all for lashing out at him.

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“We’re not going to marriage counseling, Jordan. Our marriage is over. You got the separation papers, right?”

He huffed and crossed his arms in front of him. “You’re just pissed at me, I get it. I screwed up. We can just go up to the courthouse and tell them you made a mistake.”

“I didn’t make a mistake. For the first time in seventeen years, I did something right. I’m happy you’ve decided to go to rehab, but frankly, I don’t give a shit, Jordan. You need to leave. If you want, I’ll pack up your things and drop them off at your mom’s house, but you can’t just come over here whenever you want and think that it’s okay.”

He took a step towards me and, for a moment I wished I had never asked Collin to leave. Jordan has never physically hurt me before, but there’s always a first time for everything.

“Need I remind you again that this is my house, too? You can’t keep me out of my house. I already called the police and this house is half mine. I’m staying here and you can f**king leave,” he told me angrily.

He said those exact same words to me before, years ago when I tried to get him to leave. Like a coward, I believed his shit and I was the one that packed a bag and spent a week at a hotel. Then, just like always, he begged and pleaded and I came running back to him, the vicious cycle continuing over and over.

Until now. I finally grew a backbone and I’ll be damned if I’m leaving MY house.

“Fine,” I told him easily. “I’ll leave and you can have the house. You can also pay the mortgage, the electric bill, the gas bill, the property taxes, the home owner’s insurance and everything else that comes along with owning this house. In case you can’t do the math, that’s around twenty-five hundred dollars a month, give or take.”

The cockiness on his face immediately died and he stared at me in shock, his mouth opening and closing wordlessly like a fish gasping for its last breath.

I knew he couldn’t afford to pay the bills on his own. He couldn’t hold a job for more than a few months. His most recent bartending job wouldn’t even cover half of the mortgage alone. It was a low blow reminding him that his career potential was shot to shit but I didn’t care. I’d been paying the bills practically on my own for years. If he wanted the house and the responsibilities that came along with it, he could have it.

“You are making the biggest f**king mistake right now,” he tried to threaten.

“The only mistake I made was trusting you. Believe me, I’ve learned my lesson. Now either get out, or I’m going to call the police you supposedly spoke to and have them remove your ass.”

He threw in a few more idle threats about how he was never coming back if I let him walk out the door and a last ditch attempt at guilt by telling me he couldn’t believe I would ruin everything we had by sleeping with someone else. Thank God I didn’t let his words get to me and make me second-guess anything I had done with Collin.

“So, what are you going to do about Collin?” Phina asks, bringing me back from my thoughts.

With a heavy sigh, I push myself up from the couch. “I have no f**king clue. There’s still that little problem of me kicking him out of the house right after we had the best sex I’ve ever had. Oh, and jumping into whatever this thing is between us without

knowing anything about him.”

Phina gets up from the couch stands next to me. “So? Get to know him. Ask him every single question you can think of until it’s all out in the open.”

“You didn’t see the look on his face when he left. He was hurt and he was angry and I don’t think he’s going to forgive me for pushing him away. He doesn’t even know what’s going on with Jordan and me. For all he knows, I took Jordan back after he left.”

Phina shrugs. “Well then, put on the hottest piece of lingerie you own, storm into the fire station and explain it to him. He’s a man, Finnley. Just show him your tits. That will distract him long enough for you to speak your piece.”

While I work out the details of the plan brewing in my head, Phina and I go into the kitchen, filling our arms with dishes, bowls, serving platters and coffee cups before making our way outside. In the middle of my driveway at ten o’clock on a Monday night, my best friend and I laugh and cheer as we break every single piece of wedding china I own. Sure, I’ve got a mess to clean up when we’re done, but I feel much better than I did an hour ago.

My heart is brimming with the need to discover everything there is to know about Collin and my body is burning with the desire to feel his hands on me again. I think about the black lace push-up bra, matching thong and garter belt with black lace thigh-highs that has been sitting in a Victoria’s Secret bag in the back of my closet for over a year

I think I finally found the perfect place to wear it. Hopefully, Collin lets me near him long enough to show it to him.

As I slam a salad bowl on the driveway and watch the pieces scatter, the anticipation

of seeing him again, of having him inside me, is hard to ignore. I can already feel his hands sliding up my legs to unhook the garter belt and his face between my thighs, his warm breath seeping through the lace of my thong.

Please, God let this plan work.

I've already become addicted to him and I'm pretty sure there isn't a rehab facility anywhere in this world that could cure me.

Chapter 12—Let the Sparks Fly

THE LOUD, EAR-PIERCING screech of a whistle next to my ear sends a bolt of pain straight to my temples. I turn to scowl at D.J. as he smirks at me, the whistle still dangling from his lips.

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“Sorry, Captain. Was that too loud for you?” D.J. asks with an innocent look.

I should have known better than to drink the night before weekly drills at the station. As the captain of Franklin Ten House, I’m not required to run the drills with my men, but most of the time I do. Under normal circumstances, I’m out there with them in the bay running advancing hose drills, shoulder carries with two-hundred pound test dummies, cradle carries, ladder sprints and a multitude of other drills designed to keep the men in shape and provide a little healthy competition. Today, however, I’m perfectly fine holding the stopwatch and letting D.J., our Incident Commander, run things. If he blows that whistle anywhere near me again, though, I’m not going to be responsible for my actions.

“Alright, boys, that’s a wrap!” D.J. shouts to the group of guys bent over, gasping for air after the last timed run. “Martinez and Johnson, you guys had the slowest times tonight so you’re on kitchen duty. Get your asses inside and make me a pot pie!”

The two men groan and everyone else starts a little good-natured ribbing as they all make their way inside.

When it’s just the two of us left outside, D.J. turns to me, crossing his arms over his chest and staring me down. “Alright, out with it. You never drink the night before a shift and you sure as hell never give up a chance to whip everyone’s ass with your stellar ladder climbing skills. What’s been going on with you this week? I’m pretty sure you’ve been hung-over every f**king day since last Monday.”

As we slowly make our way back inside the station, I take a deep breath before coming clean with him.

“I slept with Finnley.”

He doesn't even bat an eye at my breaking news. “Jesus, it's about f**king time. Now that you've gotten THAT out of your system, can you stop being a pu**y and move on?”

I want to be pissed at him for his attitude where Finnley's concerned, but I can't. He knows how much I've thought about her over the years. It was basically his fault I broke up with her in the first place, a fact that I've never let him forget.

“Dude, we're seniors. We're the kings of this f**king school. Why the hell do you still want to be tied down with a girlfriend? Especially one who isn't putting out?”

I've never wanted to punch my best friend before, but he's seriously testing my patience right now. I should have just lied and told him we finally had sex after prom night. It's not like I didn't try to get laid, it was prom night for f**k's sake. Everyone gets laid on prom night. But Finnley still wasn't ready and I'm not the kind of ass**le who pushes his girlfriend to do something she's not ready for. Even though I've been ready since the first time I saw her covered in gunpowder in her backyard when we were fifteen years old, I don't want her to think that's the only thing I want from her. I'm perfectly fine with all the other stuff we do and I'll wait as long as she wants me to. I'm just getting sick and tired of being questioned about it from my best friend.

As the night wore on and I consumed a seriously unhealthy amount of beer, the things D.J. continued to spout off about started to sound pretty damn good. It didn't help that Finnley wasn't at the party with me. She had plans with her girlfriends to go to a movie. If she was here right now and I could kiss her and touch her and be physically reminded about all the reasons why I'm with her, I wouldn't be having all of these stupid thoughts.

“Do you have any idea how much pu**y you could be getting right now if you were

single? Think about it, are you really going to go off to separate colleges and plan on this working out? I've got news for you, that shit never works," D.J. tells me, tossing me another beer.

Finnley and I only had one conversation about college and it didn't go very well. She wants me to go to the fire academy that's close to home and the art school she plans on attending and I want to get the f**k out of dodge. I've been in this town all of my life and I want to see new things and go to different places. I don't understand why she can't just go with me, but she's adamant about staying close to her family.

"I love her though, man," I slur drunkenly.

"You only think you love her. She was your first girlfriend. How the hell do you even know what love is? Stop being a pu**y and go out and GET some pu**y!" D.J. cheers before chugging an entire beer.

Shit, he's totally right. I'm seventeen years old. I care about Finnley, but am I really in love with her? Sure, we've said the words to each other plenty of times. She's sweet, smart, funny and sexy as hell. What's not to love? Aside from D.J., she's one of my best friends. My family loves her and they've pretty much already started planning our wedding. I suddenly feel slightly nauseous and I'm not sure whether it's the cheap beer or the idea of marriage that has my guts churning.

I'm not ready for that shit.

Two years is a long time to have a girlfriend in high school. It's almost unheard of. Why the hell shouldn't I be single and finish off my senior year with a bang?

"Fuck, how the hell do I even break up with someone? Do I just call her and tell her it's over?" I ask, popping the top on my can of beer and downing half of it in one swallow.

“No, man. You can write her a note. I’ll even hand deliver it at school tomorrow so you don’t have to deal with that shit. HEY! Someone get me a f**king pen and a piece of paper!” D.J. yells to no one in particular.

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“I’m pretty sure I don’t get the choice about whether or not I should move on. Her husband came home when I was there last week,” I tell D.J. as he holds the door open for me and we make our way to my office at the back of the first floor of the station.

D.J. whistles and shakes his head. “Damn, dude. Is she still married? I thought you said she was separated?”

When we get inside my office, I close the door behind us and take a seat at my desk while D.J. flops onto the folding chair in front of it.

“She told me she was separated. Hell, she f**king invited me over to her house for the sole purpose of having sex. I don’t know if it was some kind of game to her or what. I don’t have a f**king clue because she kicked me out.”

D.J. winces. “Ouch.”

“Yeah, right in front of that piece of shit Castillo. It was bad enough I walked in the room and he had his hands on her. I get him away from her, he calls her a bitch and a whore and I’m still the bad guy,” I complain angrily.

Shit. Even a week and a gallon of liquor later, I’m still just as pissed as I was when it happened.

“She’s had seventeen years with that guy. There’s a history there that you can’t erase even if you do have a bigger dick than that f**ker,” D.J. tells me with a laugh.

“I’m not an idiot, I get that. I didn’t expect to just waltz back into her life and

obliterate everything she's been through since I last saw her. Fuck, I didn't expect to walk back into her life, period," I tell him. "Even though I hate everything that dick she's married to stands for, being with him made her who she is today and that's not something I want to f**k with."

I know it's asinine and everything I'm thinking right now is crazy. We spent a few hours together for the first time in seventeen years and after a week without her I already felt like I was going insane.

A loud tone suddenly sounds through the station's alarm system. A few seconds later, the crackle of the speakers wired to every room of the house cuts off the tone and we listen to the voice of dispatch.

"10-41, Code 1. Engine 10. 5182 Butternut Road. I repeat, 10-41, Code 1."

D.J. and I share an annoyed look when we hear the address.

"Sounds like old man Wilcox fell asleep in his barn again with a lit cigarette in his mouth and a bottle of homemade moonshine in his hand," D.J. laughs with a shake of his head as he gets up from his chair.

"That dumbass is going to burn the entire county down one of these days. That's the third call this month."

I start to get up from my chair when D.J. holds up his hand. "Sit your ass back down, I can handle this one. You've got that meeting with the new fire chief in an hour to give him a tour of this place. You don't want to piss him off by not being here."

Staying seated, I watch as D.J. hustles out of the room and starts shouting orders to the rest of the men. A few minutes later, the rumble of the diesel engines along with their sirens fill my ears, fading in the distance as they head out to Wilcox Farms,

where they'll most likely drag a drunk Mr. Wilcox out of his barn and put out the bale of hay he accidentally set on fire.

I try to keep my mind occupied with the pile of evaluation paperwork on my desk, but after ten minutes, I realize nothing is going to take my mind off of Finnley, especially since I'm currently staring at a stack of phone messages with her name scrawled across the top. She's called the station at least ten times since last Monday and I've refused her call each time. I've never been a coward, but I can't stand the thought of calling her back and listening to her tell me what happened between us was a mistake.

Resting my elbows on top of my desk, I run my palms over my face and hold my head in my hands. I'm sitting here like an ass**le thinking about a woman who might be, at this very minute, doing everything in her power to make up with her husband and apologize for her affair.

Goddammit, I hate that word. Affair, fling, quick f**k... no matter how I twist the words, they all mean the same thing—a moment in time where a lapse in judgment causes a lifetime of regret. No matter how angry I am that she dismissed me so easily, I will never regret it. I will never regret touching her body, making her come so hard she screamed or finally sating the need I've always had for her.

Too bad all I did by screwing her was royally screw myself in the process. Once wasn't enough. Twice wasn't sufficient. Every day until I die wouldn't stop the burn. All I did by taking what I've always wanted is light a match to the pile of kindling and make it explode. Now I'm stuck here with nothing but memories to keep me warm while she lives the rest of her life with someone else. Spending the last seventeen years constantly thinking about her was bad enough. Having to go another seventeen now that I've been inside her will be damn near impossible.

“Yo, Captain, there's someone here to see you.”

Pulling my head away from my hands, I see Martinez standing in the doorway.

“Go ahead and take him upstairs to the weight room. Might as well start the tour with the new treadmills we just got in,” I tell him, grabbing the phone messages and crumpling them into a ball.

“But it’s-”

“The weight room, Martinez,” I cut him off.

“I don’t think you-”

“Jesus Christ, just take him to the weight room!” I argue, glaring at the rookie.

The poor guy runs from the room like his ass is on fire and I toss the crumpled phone messages into the trashcan next to my desk. I’ll apologize to him later. Fuck, I’ll have to apologize to the entire house for my short fuse the past week.

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Pushing aside all thoughts of the woman who f**ked up my life, I storm out of my office and make my way upstairs to the weight room. A tour of the house and a meeting about protocol is just the distraction I need right now.

Chapter 13—Hearts on Fire

STARING AT MYSELF in the wall of mirrors in the dimly lit room, I nervously fuss with my long hair, smoothing the soft layers over my shoulders as I take in my outfit. I'd paired a short black miniskirt with a form fitting grey cotton shirt, an ensemble that hugs my curves and highlights my best assets. It's what I have on underneath my clothes that has butterflies flapping around in my stomach, though. The lace at the tops of the black thigh-highs is just barely hidden under the hem of the skirt. If I sit down, cross my legs, bend over or shift more than an inch, the garters and lace will peek out and make themselves known.

I try not to trip in my five inch black stilettos as I turn away from the mirror and slowly walk around the room, running my hand over the exercise equipment. The guy who let me in here couldn't keep his eyes off of my legs, so I can only hope it has the same affect on Collin. I need him unfocused and seething with lust so he'll give me a chance to talk before he throws me out on my ass. Considering he hasn't returned any of my calls this week, I'm pretty sure it's going to take everything in my limited arsenal of seduction to get him to listen to me right now.

My plan of attack didn't really make it beyond what I would wear when I showed up at the firehouse. Everything I want to say to him is a jumbled mess in my mind and I pray to God it doesn't get even more screwed up the minute I see him again.

I can't count the number of times Collin made me trip over my words when we were teenagers. He was the cutest guy in our school, incredibly sweet, smart and funny and I never fully wrapped my head around the fact that he chose me to be his girlfriend. Two years together didn't cure me of my nerves where he was concerned. Now, after having taken him inside my body and sharing something so shockingly intimate, those nerves feels a thousand times stronger. I want him to see me as something more than the teenage girl he once knew or the woman who f**ked him within days of finding him again. I want him to know me and I want him to like the person that I've become. I know I'm completely contradicting myself by coming over here with the intention of seducing him to get what I want, but I don't have it in me right now to care. There's nothing I won't do to make him understand.

I'm standing in front of a speaker that's roughly the size of a coffee table, wondering about boys and their need to blast music so loud the windows rattle as they work out, when I hear the door on the other side of the room squeak open. I look up at the mirror in front of me and, just like the other day, my eyes meet Collin's in the reflection. His eyes widen in surprise when he sees me and I catch a faint glimpse of appreciation in his eyes as they roam over my legs before it's hidden behind a mask of irritation.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He stops short in the doorway, stubbornly refusing to come any closer, and his voice thunders across the room. I try not to cringe at the venom in it as I slowly turn around to face him.

“You haven't returned any of my calls.”

My voice comes out raspy and shaky and I silently will my nerves to go the f**k away as I clear my throat.

“I’m pretty sure we have nothing to say to each other. Feel free to let yourself out,” he tells me as he turns to leave.

My determination begins to wilt under his quick dismissal. Maybe this wasn’t meant to be. Maybe he’s decided the baggage that comes along with me is more than he’s willing to take on. Maybe...

No. To hell with maybe. I’ve spent seventeen years building a life on f**king maybes.

As I stand there watching him walk away from me, I huff out the breath I’m holding and remember who the hell I am. I’m not this woman any more, this woman who sits in silence and lets life happen all around her. I’ve spent years keeping my feelings inside and not standing up for myself. I’m not about to take ten steps back when I finally feel like I’m right where I’m supposed to be.

“So, you’re just going to walk away like a coward?” I shout to his retreating back.

I watch as his footsteps falter and the muscles in his shoulders tighten. I hit a nerve by calling him a coward and I know it. A man who races into burning buildings on a daily basis is anything but a coward. Even back in high school Collin was courageous and strong, always the first to fight for what he believed in, and the years apart haven’t changed that. If anything, following his dreams and doing what he was always meant to do only amplified the characteristics he was born with. He’s a proud man who knows exactly who he is. There is no way he’s going to walk out that door without trying to prove me wrong.

He slowly turns around and stares at me. “You’re calling ME a coward? That’s rich coming from you.”

His voice is low but filled with enough heated anger to burn this place to the ground.

I take a deep breath and place my hands on my hips, standing tall and swallowing all my pride.

“I’m sorry about what happened last week. It was a complicated situation and I needed to handle it how I saw fit. I’m sorry if that hurt you or you felt like I was pushing you away.”

He laughs cynically and crosses his arms across his broad chest. “You don’t know a damn thing about me, sweetheart, OR what I’m feeling.”

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“That’s just it! I DON’T know anything about you!” I fire back. “What was I supposed to do? Just take a chance on something when I have no idea what’s going on in your head?”

He takes a few steps in my direction and stops again. “Don’t make this out to be more than it is. You got what you wanted: the perfect payback for your loving husband. Now you can go back to living in your perfect little home with your perfect little life and you can push me out of your mind like you have for seventeen years.”

I don’t let his words upset me, mostly because I can see the hurt written all over his face. Collin wanted me to pick him. He wanted me to throw Jordan out and choose him. He has no idea how much I wanted to do just that—or how much I regret allowing fear to hold me back.

“You think my life was perfect?” I argue. “It was a mess. From almost the very beginning, it was all a lie. I did think about you. I thought about you so much it made me question everything I thought was right. I didn’t ask you to leave because I didn’t want more time with you. Think about it. There’s no way Jordan would have listened to anything I had to say with you standing right there, ready to beat his ass if he said something wrong. You have no idea how much I wanted you to stay, how much I wanted to drag you back to my bed and forget about the outside world.”

Collin’s arms drop to his sides and he stalks towards me, stopping when there are only a few feet separating us.

“If you wanted me so f**king much, explain why it took you five days to come here, making me wonder if it meant absolutely nothing to you. I don’t like feeling like a

chump, Finnley.”

I reach my hands out to him and he flinches, but I don't let that bother me. I keep moving until my hands are flat against his chest and I can feel his heart beating against my palms.

“I left you ten messages,” I remind him. “I should have come to you sooner, I know that. I didn't stay away to torture you or to make you question what we shared. I did it to protect you.”

Collin narrows his eyes and bites out, “I'm not afraid of f**king Jordan Castillo.”

I manage to tamp down my irritation over his macho bullshit. “I wasn't insinuating you are. Besides, this has f**k all to do with Jordan. I was trying to protect you from me.”

Collin stares at me, clearly confused, so I explain. “This is all new for me. I've slept with one man my entire life. One. I needed to get my head on straight and make sure I didn't just do it to get back at Jordan. I needed to make sure that what I felt didn't go away as soon as I wasn't in the same room with you. You cloud my judgment, Collin. You make me feel alive for the first time in years and that scares the hell out of me.”

He sighs and I can see the fight he's waging within himself slowly start to die away.

“Also, I needed to do something I never thought I would have to do. It took a little longer than I thought it would, but it was important to do it before I came to you.”

He gives me that adorably befuddled look yet again and I move closer.

“God, this is so embarrassing,” I mutter, looking away from him.

I see his hand move out of the corner of my eye and, seconds later, I feel his fingers on my chin. I don't resist when he turns my face back to his, his eyes imploring me to keep going.

I rush through the most important part of my explanation in one breath. "Jordan and I never used condoms. I was on the pill and obviously I never thought my husband would be a cheating sack of shit. He f**ked around on me, Collin, and I had to get tested before I talked to you again. I needed to be sure that I hadn't done something to hurt you. I would never be able to live with myself if I knew I put you in harm's way without even knowing it. I'm clean, by the way. Phina is a phlebotomist and she was able to put a rush on the blood draw. So, aside from a complete mistrust of men and a failed marriage, at least that ass**le didn't leave anything else behind when I kicked his ass to the curb."

Collin is quiet for so long that I'm a little afraid I freaked him out with my babble. I had to put everything on the table, though, because he deserves to know the truth. I don't want any lies between us. I've dealt with that enough in my life.

"Are you really done with him?" Collin finally asks quietly, breaking the silence.

"I've been done with him for more years than I care to count. I've spent my life doing what I thought was right instead of doing what I wanted. I don't want to live like that anymore," I tell him honestly.

He leans his body into mine without touching me.

"What do you want, Finnley?"

I take a deep breath and lay it all on the line.

"You. I just want you, but it scares the hell out of me," I whisper.

He moves forward until the toes of his boots are touching the toes of my heels. Bringing his arms up, he cups my face in his large hands and I feel like I can finally breathe again. One week without him and I missed his touch, I missed his closeness.

“What are you so afraid of?”

I look up into his bright blue eyes and I wonder how it’s possible to feel such a strong connection with someone in such a short amount of time. Years and distance separated us for so long, but right now, being close to him, feeling his hands on my skin, makes it feel like we were never apart—that my marriage with Jordan was just a dream and Collin has always been my reality.

“This, all of this,” I tell him. “I’m scared by how much I need you even though I barely know you anymore. I spent seventeen years with someone I thought I knew and look how that turned out.”

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He chuckles and shakes his head at me. “Lee, you’ve always known me. You’re the only one who ever really has.”

I shake my head right back at him and scoff. “It’s been a long time, Collin. I might have known everything about you back then, but it’s all a mystery to me now. I know your mom was a manager of Hills Department Store, your favorite Nintendo game was Super Mario Brothers, you listened to ‘Closer’ by Nine Inch Nails on repeat in your piece of shit Ford Escort and you always ordered mint chocolate chip ice cream when we went to the Dairy Twist. We’re thirty-three years old and the things I knew about you are still written in the diary I kept when I was fifteen, but they really don’t do much for me at this point in time. We’ve spent almost two decades apart and I have no idea who you are now.”

Collin leans forward, resting his forehead against mine.

“My mom is retired from Hills and is happy to stay home and annoy my father on a daily basis, I prefer Grand Theft Auto over Super Mario Brothers because the graphics kick ass, I still order mint chocolate chip every time I go to the Dairy Twist, I still watch Full Metal Jacket at least once a month, I root for the Seattle Seahawks now because the Cowboys turned into a bunch of showboating ass**les, I drive a red Chevy Tahoe for work and a black Ford F-250 for personal use, and D.J. is still my best friend, even though he was the one who convinced me to break up with you in a note. In thirty-three years of living, Lee, that’s the only f**king thing I’ve ever regret.”

He pulls his face back and looks down at me. “I’m an open book, Lee. If you want to know something, all you have to do is ask. I know this is fast and everything about it

is f**king insane, but everything about it also feels right. I have thought about you every single day for seventeen years. I don't know where this thing is going with us and I know you've got some personal shit you're working through, but I'm not going anywhere. I will never lie to you, Lee. If you trust anything that I've said, please, just trust that."

He stands here staring at me, pleading with me to trust him and I know without a shadow of a doubt that I trusted him fully from the minute he said hello at Slammers.

"I just have one more question," I tell him softly, my arms sliding around his waist and pulling him closer.

"I told you, I'm an open book. Ask me anything."

Standing up on my toes, I brush my lips against his and speak softly against his mouth. "You didn't say anything about Nine Inch Nails. I never told you this, but I got a little turned on every time you played that CD. I still get hot when I hear it."

He smirks down at me, dropping his hands from my face and moving them to my hips. Pushing lightly, he walks us backwards until the backs of my legs bump into the huge speaker on the floor right behind me.

I grab onto his forearms as he eases me down until my ass is planted on top of the speaker, my skirt inching up as I sit, displaying the tops of my lace thigh highs.

"Fuck me, are you wearing garters?" he asks with a growl in his voice.

I answer him by leaning back on my hands and spreading my legs, forcing the material of my skirt to ride a little higher and the black garters hooked to the lace against my thighs to peek out beneath it.

I watch his Adam's apple bob in his throat as he swallows thickly while he stares down at my legs.

"Don't move," he tells me as he starts to back away.

I look at him questioningly and he stops moving. "Do you trust me?"

Nodding my head at him, I stay completely still as he turns away and walks over to the corner of the room. The room is dark but for a few small track lights in the ceiling, so he's almost swallowed by the shadows and I can barely make out what he's doing in the corner. When I hear the door close followed by the sound of the lock being turned, I decide I don't care what he's doing. The fact that he's locked the door means he doesn't want any interruptions and that can only be a good thing.

I hear a few clicks in the quiet room and a few seconds later, the silence is filled by the low sound of music coming from the speaker right beneath me.

He walks back towards me, coming out of the shadows until he's standing right in front of me with a black remote control in his hand.

Without a word, he sets the remote down on top of the speaker next to me.

"Strip."

The one word from his mouth is spoken softly, but with conviction and I have no choice but to comply.

Without getting up from the speaker, I slide the zipper on the side of my skirt down, lifting my hips just enough to push it past my thighs until it drops to my feet and I kick it aside. I maintain eye contact as I move my hands to the hem of my shirt and slowly slide it up my body and over my head, tossing it so it lands right on top of my

discarded skirt.

I look at him questioningly and watch wordlessly as he pulls his own shirt off of his body and drops it by his feet. My throat closes up and my mouth waters when I take in that deep vee by his tapered hips and the tight muscles of his abs and chest. He lowers his body to the ground until he's on his knees in front of me, sliding one hand up the smooth, silky material of my thigh high until his palm is clutching my hip.

"Spread your legs," he orders quietly.

I do as he asks, spreading my legs until he can inch his large body between my thighs, the bare skin of his stomach pressing against the black lace of the thong covering my sex that's already wet with need for him. Leaning back on my hands again, I push my lace-covered br**sts out, silently willing him to put his mouth on them.

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He leans forward and my thighs clench in anticipation of his warm, wet mouth on my ni**les. I feel his breath skate over my skin but I don't feel his lips on me just yet. His other hand reaches for the remote he left sitting on top of the speaker and he brings it between us.

I look down and watch as his thumb presses one of the buttons. The speaker beneath me slowly rumbles to life and the soft, faint strings of music that surrounded us begin to grow louder and louder.

He presses another button and the familiar drumbeat to the opening bars of the song "Closer" begin to thump through the room.

With another quick press of his thumb, the bass on the speaker is turned up until I can feel the pounding pulse of the music vibrating through my body.

I remember listening to the words of this song back in high school and thinking they were so dirty and hardcore. I remember how Trent Reznor's voice shouting 'I want to f**k you like an animal' made me wish I wasn't so afraid and that one day I'd be brave enough to allow Collin to do just that.

Seeing him kneeling between my thighs, the heat of his body burning against mine while the beat of the song thrums through my core, I realize my silly teenage fantasies completely paled to the reality.

The look in Collin's eyes as he continues to turn up the bass tells me that he is definitely going to f**k me like an animal right now.

And he'll make me love every dirty minute of it.

Chapter 14—Just a Little Heat

I CAN FEEL the beat of the music vibrating through her body as I set the remote down and grab her hips, pulling her to the edge of the speaker.

Placing one soft kiss on her lips, I move to her cheek, then to her neck and down the front of her body, leaving a wet trail with my tongue as I go. I press my palms to the inside of her thighs and push them wide apart until she has to lean slightly forward to maintain her balance. Her pu**y is now pressed against the hard plastic of the subwoofer and I can tell by one look at her face that she can feel the vibrations of the music thumping against her core. She bites down on her bottom lip as I clutch tightly to her thighs, rocking her slowly back and forth, her pu**y bumping against the top of the speaker with each forced tilt of her hips. I tease her, giving her a touch of the vibrating bass before rocking her back away from it, over and over.

Using the tip of my thumb, I pull the scrap of lace, wet from her arousal, away from her body until her bare sex is on full display. Keeping my hands wrapped tightly around the tops of her thighs, I continue rocking her back and forth, reaching over and gently rub her clit with the pad of my thumb.

I move my thumb in time with the beat of the music as I drag it up and down over her clit. I continue the rocking motion with my hands, pulling the lower half of her body forward and watching as her pu**y brushes against the top of the speaker. I feel the muscles of her thighs tighten beneath my hands and watch her hips begin to sway as Finnley starts rocking her lower body, helping me move her. As the momentum of the song picks up, I can feel the tremor of the bass through my tight grip on her thighs and I can only imagine how that vibration feels against her bare pu**y.

I start rocking her hips harder and moving my thumb faster. Her hands come up to

my shoulders and she clutches them so tightly I'm sure she's going to leave little crescent marks behind from her nails digging into my skin.

Leaning forward, I press my lips against hers, not kissing her, just breathing her in as she pants with need against my mouth. I watch her pupils dilate and her eyes glaze over as I push her closer and closer to the release she needs. Even through the loud blaring of music, I hear her scream when her orgasm washes through her moments later. I keep my thumb on her clit and rub out every single drop of her release until she finally eases up on the hold she has of my shoulders.

I don't give her one second to recover. Using the palm of one hand, I press it against her sternum and push her backwards until she's lying flat on top of the speaker. Her head falls off the back of it and her hands smack down to the edge to hold herself steady as I stare down at the sight before me. Her skin is flushed from her release, her chest is heaving as she tries to breathe and the lips of her pu**y are plump and wet, just begging for me to take them in my mouth. It's the most beautiful f**king thing I've ever seen.

Dragging my hand down her body until it covers her sex, I use the heel of my hand to press into her. She arches her back and spreads her legs wider for me.

I'm a little sad that the music blaring through the speakers drowns out her soft moans of pleasure and the sound of my name on her lips when she comes, but I let it pass because all I can think about right now is burying my face between her legs and tasting her on my lips again.

I don't even hesitate. Still keeping her thong pulled to the side with my fingers, I dive forward and wrap my mouth around her clit, sucking her hard and letting my tongue swirl around the swollen bud.

The sweet, musky taste of her explodes on my tongue and I attack her pu**y like a

starving man, licking and sucking every bit of her. I push my tongue inside of her, swirling it around and coating it with her arousal before sliding two of my fingers away from their hold on her thong to rub circles around her clit. Over and over, I push inside of her body, f**king her with my tongue, while my fingers massage her until her entire body is shaking, on the edge of another release.

Flattening my tongue, I slide it through her slit and continue moving up until I can suck that little jewel filled with nerve endings back into my mouth. She moves her hips frantically, f**king my face while I flick my tongue back and forth until I can feel her pulsing against my lips. I look up the length of her body and see her lift her head just enough to watch what I'm doing. With her eyes boring into mine, I move my face away from her pu**y just long enough to let her watch me slide two of my fingers into my mouth. Her lips part with a silent gasp when I pull them out, wet with my saliva, before immediately plunging them inside her as deep as they'll go. Her head falls back again as the tips of my fingers curl against her g-spot and I lean back in, sucking her clit into my mouth and grazing it with my teeth. Her hips come off the speaker, and remain suspended in the air as she comes for a second time. I feel a rush of liquid seep from her body as her muscles clamp down on my fingers while I continue to lap at her. I know I'm not going to be able to wait a second longer to feel her tight, wet pu**y squeezing around my c**k like that.

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I pull my mouth away from her and quickly stand, unbuttoning my pants just enough to free my erection. She lifts her head and stares at my c**k through hooded eyes, licking her lips. I've waited almost half of my life to feel her mouth wrapped around my c**k again, but right now, I want to be inside of that sweet pu**y more. I take a minute to stroke myself while she watches, visions of bringing myself to release with my own hand and coming on her tits clouding my thoughts until I'm so sensitive I need to stop before I do just that.

Pushing that little fantasy into the back of my mind for another time, I grab onto her hands, pulling her to her feet as I switch places with her. When I'm seated, she quickly slides her thong off her body and, placing one knee on either side of my thighs on top of the speaker, she straddles me, rubbing her slit against my c**k while the music of Trent Reznor plays on repeat around us. I reach between us, wrapping my hand around the base of my c**k as she grabs onto my shoulders and positions her body. When her wet pu**y makes contact with the tip, she slowly starts to move down on me, inch by sweet inch until the torture is too much to take.

I smack my hands down on the soft globes of her ass and bring her completely down on top of me, burying my c**k in her pu**y in one hard pull. Her arms fly around my shoulders, the nails of one hand scraping down the skin of my back as the other slides up into my hair, clenching it roughly in her fist.

She immediately starts to move, lifting herself up on her knees until my c**k slides almost completely out before slamming herself back down on top of me. Her eyes never leave mine as she continues to ride my c**k so hard I almost see stars. I keep my hands on her ass and help her move faster and harder, her body taking all of me of me inside of her in a pounding rhythm until I'm so lost in the warmth of her pu**y

that I never want to leave.

She's so tight and hot wrapped around me that all I can think about is f**king her until we both die from exhaustion. Lifting my hips to thrust up into her, our thighs smack together so hard the speaker starts to shake not only from the music blasting out of it but from the frantic f**king that is currently happening on top of it. I'm never going to be able to walk into this room again without seeing her on top of this thing. I'm never going to be able to run a couple of miles on the treadmill without feeling her bouncing up and down on my cock.

I keep one hand on her ass and move the other up to her head, threading my fingers in her long hair and tugging on it hard enough that she tilts her head back so her neck is right in front of my mouth. I latch my lips against her throat and bite down gently, the salty taste of her sweaty skin sliding against my tongue as I continue to pull her up and down on my c**k until I feel my balls start to swell with my release.

Her thighs tighten around mine and she hugs me as close to her body as possible while I continue to suck and nip at her throat. When I feel the noises she's making vibrating against my lips and the sudden gush of fluid from her pu**y, there's nothing I can do to slow down my orgasm. With one last roll of my hips, I explode inside her body, feeling the walls of her pu**y lock down on me like a vise as her own orgasm takes hold, feeding off of mine. She keeps sliding up and down my c**k as she comes, her body milking me and prolonging my orgasm until I'm sure I'm going to pass out from pleasure. My c**k jerks and pulses inside of her until I can feel my come spilling out of her and dripping down between our thighs.

When my release finally subsides, I flop back on top of the speaker, bringing Finnley with me until she's sprawled across me, our chests rising and falling in the same hurried tempo as we come down from our high.

After a few minutes, she shifts her body and I feel her pu**y clench around my c**k

one last time. I grab her hips and hold her in place, afraid if she moves again I'm going to lose my mind. My dick should be softening, completely satisfied by now, but I'm still hard. I can't seem to get enough of her and I'm pretty sure if she moves her hips in the slightest way, I'm going to flip her over and start pounding into her all over again. I'd like nothing more than to do just that, but we need to talk. She said her piece, and now it's my turn.

She told me she was afraid—and I can only pray that what I have to say won't scare her even more.

Chapter 15—Line of Fire

EVERY SINGLE MUSCLE and bone in my body has turned to jelly. Somehow I find the energy to get up off of Collin's chest, leaning down to pick up my discarded clothing while he walks over to the corner of the room and turns off the stereo.

Collin's eyes follow my every movement as I step back into my panties and slide them up my legs, stopping when I see the look of undisguised misery on his face.

Immediately concerned that he's having second thoughts about what happened between us, I feel my eyes tear up as I ask, "Everything ok?"

He crosses his arms across his chest, shaking his head as he growls out, "Fuck, no, everything is not ok. Baby, it's sacrilege to cover that body up."

I can't help but smile at him. He just spent nearly an hour working me over, but I'm suddenly ready to go again. I've never felt this sexy or wanted in my entire life and it's a heady feeling.

I've finish getting dressed and Collin has pulled his shirt back on and buttoned his pants when I hear the faint sound of men's voices on the other side of the door.

“Shit. I have to get back to work. I’ve got a meeting in a few minutes,” he tells me, regret heavy in his voice as he walks over and wraps me in his arms.

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Reaching up, I press my lips against his quickly before pulling back. “It’s fine. I need to get home and start purging my house of Jordan’s stuff.”

A flash of anger clouds Collin’s features at the mention of Jordan’s name.

“It’s okay, he’s not coming back. I told him I’d pack up all of his things and drop them off at his mom’s house,” I reassure him.

He visibly relaxes as he tightens his hold on me. “I have to work the next forty-eight straight hours and then I’m off for a few days. I’ll probably spend the first one catching up on sleep, but after that, you’re mine. Can you stop by my place then? There are some things we need to talk about.”

I try to mask the worry on my face when he says this. I was under the impression that we’d already hashed everything out and that he understood how I felt. I assumed after what just happened in this room that he felt the same. Maybe I misread him and he isn’t ready to jump right into a relationship with me right now. I feel stupid for having these doubts, but I can’t help it. He said he thought about me every single day for seventeen years. That’s got to mean something, right? I hold onto that thought and refuse to let my fear ruin what we’re building once again.

“That’s fine,” I tell him, keeping the smile on my face as I kiss him one last time.

He grabs my hand and pulls me behind him to the door, unlocking it and moving us out into the hall. As we make our way down the stairs to the bay of the station, we pass other firemen and Collin calls out greetings and quick questions about the call they must have just got back from.

I watch his face immediately transform from possessive lover into commanding fire captain. He's serious and all business as he talks to his men, asking questions and giving praise when needed. It reminds me again of just how much he's accomplished since we were together. I'm so proud of him for following his dreams and doing what he was so obviously meant to do. I can't help but feel a sharp pang of regret that I never followed through with my own dreams.

When we finally make it outside, I start to tell Collin how proud I am of him when a loud, piercing tone begins ringing through the bay before a voice announcing a fire emergency blasts through the speakers.

“Cap! We're going to need you on this one.”

Collin nods his head in the direction of the man who took me up to the gym when I first got here, informing him to cancel his meeting before turning back to face me.

“Duty calls,” he tells me with a smile as the men who haven't even had a chance to change out of their protective gear from the last call rush past us into the bay, climbing onto the rig, the rumbling roar of the engine echoing around the room so loudly that I have to shout for Collin to hear me.

“Go,” I yell with a quick kiss on his cheek. “Be careful. I'll be waiting for you.”

His face lights up at my reassurance and I watch him turn and race over to a small closed-door room right off the bay. He races back out a few seconds later with all of his bunker gear tucked under one arm. Jumping easily up onto the side of the rig and holding onto the handle bar as the vehicle slowly pulls out of the bay, he tosses his gear into the open door of the jump seats before pulling himself inside as the truck disappears from sight.

Jesus, he's so damn hot.

Just that little taste of watching him in action is enough to get my blood pumping again. I never thought I was the type of woman to get turned on by a man in the public safety industry, but now I can't shake the image of him stalking towards me wearing nothing but his insulated pants, suspenders holding them up over his bare chest, completely covered in sweat and soot from a recent call. He would be like something right out of firemen's calendar come to life.

Pushing the thought from my mind, I make my way out of the bay and over to my car, determined to get out of there before I get so lost in my fantasies that Collin comes back to find me standing in the same spot he left me.

I try not to think about the things Collin wants to discuss with me as I pull my keys out of my purse and hit the unlock button on the key fob, so lost in my thoughts that I don't even notice I'm not alone in the parking lot. I jump when I feel someone push against my back, reaching around me to slam the door I was pulling open.

Turning around, I come face to face with Jordan.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask in shock.

"I could ask you the same thing, whore."

His words slur and, smelling the alcohol on his breath, I scrunch my nose up in disgust and take a step back.

"What were you doing inside for so long? Fucking the entire house or just giving it up to that ass**le McDaniels?" he continues.

My face heats with guilt and I immediately squelch it. He has no right to be jealous and I'm not about to stand out here in the middle of the street and feed into his bullshit.

“It’s none of your business what I do or who I do it with. Get away from my car and stay the hell away from me,” I fire back.

He’s on me in a second, his body pressed up against mine, shoving me back against the side of my car roughly. His hand quickly comes up, cupping my chin and squeezing my cheeks so hard that it makes my eyes water.

“You are still my wife. People are already starting to talk. They’ve seen you with McDaniels and they all know you’re f**king him. You’re embarrassing yourself and you’re embarrassing me,” he says angrily, his nose pressed up against mine.

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Bringing my hands up to his chest, I shove as hard as I can. Considering he's drunk and can barely stand, it doesn't take much to get him off me. He stumbles away and I quickly glance around, hoping someone from the station is nearby and sees what's happening. Unfortunately, the bay is empty and there isn't any sign of life in the windows of the house. Everyone must have gone on the call with Collin.

"This is the last time I'm going to tell you this. Stay the f**k away from me, Jordan, or I'm calling the cops," I threaten, refusing to let him know just how much he's scaring me right now.

I've never been afraid of my husband physically hurting me, but right now, with the anger radiating off of him and his blood filled with alcohol, there's no telling what he's capable of.

He smirks at me as I yank open my car door and quickly get inside, hitting the automatic lock as soon as I'm behind the wheel. As I start up the engine and peel away from the curb, I can hear him shout after my car through the closed windows.

"YOU CAN'T KEEP ME AWAY, FINNLEY!"

TWO DAYS LATER, I'm still a jumble of nerves every time I walk out of the house to go to work. Collin has called a couple of times a day to check on me and just the sound of his voice through the line calms me down. When he isn't out on a call, I curl up in bed with the phone propped against my ear, listening to his soft, baritone voice tell me stories about the crazy things D.J. did when they were at the fire academy and what his family has been up to since I last saw them. In turn, he listens to me ramble about my friendship with Phina, silly things we did in college and what my own

family has been doing with themselves.

In the quiet of the night when he's lying in his own bunk at the station waiting for the next call to come in, he asks me about my marriage to Jordan and I tell him everything—the good, the bad and the ugly. I tell him about how hard I tried to make it work, forgiving him over and over for the addictions he allowed to rule both of our lives and I admit to him that I don't even know how long ago I fell out of love with him. He listens to it all and he never judges me for the choice I made to try and stick it out for as long as possible before finally reaching my breaking point. He tells me I'm amazing and that he wishes things could have been different.

I don't know how many times I wished for the same thing. I never realized it until now, but everything happens for a reason. Maybe Collin came into my life at this point in time because I was finally ready for him. If I would have run into him again years ago, we probably would have just said a polite hello and continued to go our separate ways.

He's so sweet and understanding as I explain everything to him, I just can't bring myself to tell him about what Jordan has been doing. I don't want to worry him and I certainly don't want him getting into trouble by taking matters into his own hands. Collin is the type of man who would never stand idly by and let Jordan treat me this way.

For the past two days, I've seen Jordan's car parked outside of the house more than once. I've seen it drive by my work when I'm walking out to the parking lot and I know I've seen it in my rearview mirror on my way home or on trips to the grocery store.

When the text messages started coming several times a day, each one telling me what a whore I am or how I'm going to pay for the mistakes I've made, I printed all of them out and put them in a file. When he sends a grainy picture of Collin and I

pressed up against each other by the tree outside my office the day of the electrical fire with a particularly nasty message, I have the proof I need that he's been stalking me. I take everything to the courthouse and file for a restraining order, making sure to install new locks on the house as soon as I got home.

I know this will all blow over eventually and there's no point freaking Collin out about something that really has nothing to do with him. I decided to leave Jordan before we ever saw each other again and I don't want to drag him into this mess any more than I already have. If he wasn't in my life, I'd have to handle it on my own anyway. I'm a big girl and I can take care of my own problems. I know Jordan's irrational behavior is due to whatever addiction that currently has him in its clutches and, even though I don't care about what he does with his own life, I don't want him hurting anyone around him.

I haven't spoken to his parents since right after we separated. Every time his mother called me, she reminded me about the vows I took to stand by his side through the good times and bad. She told me that a wife needs to support her husband and that pushing him away was only making things worse. I stopped answering her calls after that. It was too hard not to scream at her and ask her about the vows HE took. Even though I don't want anything to do with his family and their double standards, I did the right thing and called his mom to tell her about his behavior and the measures I was forced to take for my own safety. I was more than a little shocked to hear that Jordan only spent one week at their house before he moved out. They haven't seen or heard from him since.

I push any concern I might have for him out of my mind when I get a phone call from the court telling me the judge had a cancellation and will see me first thing in the morning. It's silly, but I know having that little slip of paper on file stating that Jordan won't be able to come within a hundred yards of me will make me feel safer.

Hopefully he'll finally get the message and he can get the help he needs so he can

move forward with his own life.

Chapter 16—Hot

IT TOOK EVERYTHING in me not to drive straight to Finnley's house when I left the station, but I know if I don't get some sleep, there's no way I'll be able to function. After a quick shower, I toss on a pair of boxer briefs, flop down on top of the covers in bed and dial Finnley's number.

She answers on the second ring. "How was work?"

Her voice is filled with the rasp of sleep and I feel bad that I woke her up.

"It was exhausting. I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's fine, I was dreaming about you anyway and hearing your voice is much better."

I can hear her smile and the rustle of covers through the line and my dick starts to harden just thinking about her body all warm and soft under the blankets.

"I hope you're naked while you were thinking about me," I tease.

"I wasn't, but that can easily be arranged," she replies with a soft laugh.

My mind fills with all sorts of naughty ideas and the exhaustion of the last forty-eight hours of work quickly leaves my body.

We've talked a lot over the last few days. We touched on important things like her shitty marriage and why she never had children, my failed relationships and our

families. I have loved every second of getting to know her again, but I want to know more. She slept with one man for most of her life and I find it hard to believe he was able to fulfill all of her fantasies. From the brief conversation we had about our past sex lives, I know there are a lot of things she's never experienced. I want to know what she dreams about, I want to know what turns her on and I want to make every single one of those things come true. I've had a pretty adventurous sex life. I've dabbled in bondage and even experienced threesomes. Fucking two women at the same time would probably fulfill most guy's deepest, darkest desire, but nothing turns me on more than the thought of finding out what makes Finnley burn. I could tell by the excitement on her face when my palm connected with her ass that it turned her on and she wanted more, but was afraid to ask for it. I don't want her to ever be afraid to tell me what she wants.

"If you're wearing underwear, take them off," I demand softly into the phone.

I hear her breath catch, but the rustling of fabric through the line tells me she's following my orders.

"Now, put the phone on speaker and set it down on the pillow next to you," I continue.

She doesn't say a word. While she situates the phone, I reach down under the covers and palm my cock.

"Are we seriously going to have phone sex right now?" she asks with a shaky voice before laughing softly.

"If I was there with you right now, what would you want me to do to you, Finnley?" I ask quietly, cutting off her laugh.

"Touch me," she replies quickly.

I smile to myself and realize I'm going to have to work a little harder to pull the information I want out of her.

“Would you want me to f**k you with my fingers?”

She moans and my c**k jerks against my palm.

“Yes. I want your fingers inside me, Collin.”

The sound of her sighing my name has me pushing my hand inside my boxer briefs and wrapping it around my cock.

“Touch yourself, Finnley. You're wet, aren't you? So f**king hot and wet I bet your fingers are just slipping through your pu**y,” I moan as I slide my hand up and down my c**k slowly.

“Oh, my God,” she whispers through the line.

I close my eyes and picture her delicate fingers circling her clit and then pushing inside of her body.

“Fuck, you have no idea the things I want to do to you,” I mutter as I grip my c**k harder and move my hand faster.

“Tell me,” she murmurs through the line.

“I want your fingers inside of you first. Close your eyes and push them inside your pu**y and imagine it's my c**k filling you.”

She whimpers and I immediately know she's done as I ask.

“I want to tie you to the bed and f**k you so hard you scream my name,” I tell her through a groan as I squeeze the tip of my cock.

“Yes,” she breathes through a sigh.

“I can picture you with your arms above your head and your back arched, trying to pull free from the bindings as I slam my c**k into you.”

She whimpers again and I move my fist faster up and down my c**k as I listen to her touch herself.

“I want it all, baby. If I were there with you right now I’d flip you over and f**k you from behind. I’d drag my fingers through your pu**y and get them nice and wet, then I’d slowly push them in your ass while I f**ked you.”

I can tell my gut instinct about her wanting to push the boundaries of sex are spot on when she hears the words I’ve spoken.

“Oh, God,” she breathes with a hitch of excitement in her throat.

My hand moves faster on my c**k as I think about taking her in every way possible. I think about how tight she’d be around my c**k if I inched myself inside her ass.

“Would you let me take you like that, Lee? Would you let me f**k your ass with my c**k instead of my fingers?”

She lets out a low, throaty moan and my excitement builds when I know she’s on board and just as turned on as I am.

“Yes, Collin. Fuck, yes.”

My balls tighten with the need to come when I hear the conviction in her voice.

“Rub your clit, baby. Bring those wet fingers up and circle them around you,” I demand.

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My hips move in time with the jerk of my hand on my c**k as I think about her lying in bed with her eyes closed, legs spread wide while her fingers slip through her pu**y.

“I’m going to f**k your pu**y with my fingers while I take your ass. I’m going to feel you come against my hand as I push into you, baby.”

The sound of her panting and gasping for breath as she fingers herself is the hottest thing I’ve ever heard and I couldn’t stop my orgasm now if I tried. Every single thought in my head is filled with Finnley and the things I want to do to her.

“Fuck! I’m gonna come, Lee. I need you to come with me,” I groan, my hands gripping my c**k so tight I’m afraid I might rip it right off my body.

I can hear the wet sounds of her fingers thrusting into her pu**y and when she shouts a moment later, my orgasm explodes out of me.

“I’m coming! Oh f**k, Collin, I’m coming!”

My dick pulses and twitches in my hand and come shoots out in thick streams against my stomach as I moan Finnley’s name through my release.

A few minutes later, with the phone still tightly clutched against my ear in one hand, my other hand slides out of my boxers, reaching over to the nightstand to grab a tissue and clean myself up.

“I think I just died,” Finnley mumbles a few seconds later.

I laugh into the line. “Well, rest up. When I see you tomorrow, you’re going to need your strength.”

I end the call after rattling off my address and fall asleep thinking about the surprise I have in store for her when I see her again.

I want to make all of her fantasies come true.

First, I need to remind her of her dreams.

Chapter 17—Explosions

“STOP BEING DIFFICULT and just keep your eyes closed,” Collin laughs in my ear as he holds his hands over my eyes, walking behind me as he guides me through his house.

I wanted a tour of his four-bedroom ranch, but he covered my eyes as soon as he opened the door to me, telling me only that he had a surprise.

After what happened on the phone last night, I fully expected to be overcome with mortification the minute I laid eyes on Collin. I’m willing to admit that I’ve thought about anal sex many times over the years. Jordan even broached the topic once, trying to convince me to spice up our sex life. The thing is, there’s an incredible amount of trust involved in the act, and I never trusted my husband enough to guide us through it. If how fast I came and how loudly I moaned last night at the very mention of him taking my ass are any indication, I have no such misgivings about Collin. As a matter of fact, it’s all I’ve been able to think about since the moment he smiled down at me at the front door.

I hear the swoosh of a sliding glass door and I feel the grass beneath my feet as he leads me into what must be his back yard.

He comes to a stop, turning me around as he removes his hands from my eyes. When I start to open them, he quickly scolds me.

“Nope, keep them closed.”

I huff and cross my arms in front of me. “I hate surprises.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned that three times already. Stop being a brat,” he chuckles.

I hear him rustling around with something and the slide of what sounds like plastic against concrete.

“Okay, open your eyes.”

I blink them open and see him squatting down on his patio next to a large, blue plastic tote.

Looking between him and the tote in confusion, he jerks his chin towards the covered box. “Go ahead. Open it.”

With a sigh, I bend down and lift the lid. When I see what’s inside, my hands start to shake and my heart thumps erratically inside my chest.

This can’t be what I think it is.

Swallowing thickly, I slowly reach my hand into the tote and wrap it around a folded piece of Japanese hemp paper and pull it out, holding my breath as I unfold the poster-size piece of paper and lift it up in front of me. My eyes fill with tears as I look at the gunpowder design I created the day Collin and I met in my parent’s backyard. It’s one that I had been working on for weeks and it had never come out right until that very moment. I gaze at my rendition of a Japanese pagoda in a garden,

completely caught up in the past.

Shaking off my memories without a word, I set the paper down on the concrete and begin pulling out page after page of hemp paper filled with every single design I created over the two years Collin and I were together. They are the exact same ones he wallpapered his old bedroom with, the ones I always assumed he trashed after he broke up with me. I never thought I'd see them again or feel this incredible sense of longing until right this moment. My fingers itch with the need to play in a pile of black powder and my heart swells with the notion that Collin kept my work for all these years.

"I can't believe you kept these," I whisper as a tear rolls down my cheek when I get to the bottom of the tote and pull out the one that I was most proud of. It was a silhouette of Collin standing in front of the town fire station like he'd done so many times when we were together.

"Of course I kept them," he says, standing up in front of me. "They're brilliant and I always expected to see ones just like them hanging in a gallery one day."

I swallow down the embarrassment I feel over never mustering the strength to follow through with my dreams like he did. When we broke up, it was just easier to push them aside. Every time I looked at the pile of hemp paper and the bucket of gunpowder my parents stored in their garage for me, it reminded me of him and I could never bring myself to create another one. A few years after Jordan and I got married, my parents brought over a truckload of my old things when they cleaned out their garage. When Jordan asked about my art supplies and I tried to explain to him how it all worked, his eyes glazed over in boredom. A week later, he had thrown everything away because it was taking up too much space in our garage.

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“Why didn’t you do it, Lee? Why didn’t you go to art school and pursue this?”

He’s asked me a few times about my art during the phone conversations we’ve had, but I always changed the subject. I wasn’t ready to look that deeply inside of myself and tell him how much of a coward I was back then. I also didn’t want him to feel bad that he was one of the reasons I let that dream fade away.

“Because some jerk broke my heart when I was seventeen,” I joke.

Collin stands up and takes the last piece of paper out of my hands and lets it flutter back down inside the tote. “That guy was a total ass**le and had no idea what he was letting go. But that shouldn’t have had any bearing on your dreams.”

He rests his hands on my hips and I place my palms against his chest. “Well, it kind of did. You were my fire, Collin. I lost the desire to play with it when you left.”

He closes his eyes and sighs and I can tell he’s going to start blaming himself. He needs to know that there were so many other factors that contributed to my not pursuing a career in art.

“I took a few art classes in college and quickly realized that my unusual skill would never pay the bills as an adult. When I took an internship at a marketing firm, I really enjoyed the work. Not as much as art, but enough. I switched majors and when I graduated, I was offered a good job with the firm in town as a marketing manager. Jordan and I were already living together by then and the bills were starting to pile up. It was good money and I couldn’t turn that down regardless of the fact that I knew I wanted to be doing something else.”

Collin shakes his head sadly. “You were so talented, Finnley. Didn’t Jordan see that? Didn’t he encourage you to do what you’d always dreamed of doing?”

“I tried to talk to him about it a few times, but he wasn’t really interested in my work. He was too busy trying to become an artist himself. He always told me that he wanted one of us to have steady employment and when he was established in his own tattoo shop, it would be my turn. Since his dream never came true, he probably thought mine shouldn’t either. Now that I look back on it, I think he was jealous. He’d heard my parents mention how talented I was several times and I don’t think he wanted to compete with me.”

Collin pulls me into his body and wraps his arms around my waist, holding me tight.

“I would have sacrificed everything to make your dreams come true, Lee,” he tells me softly.

Another tear slides down my cheek as I rest my head against his chest, so overcome with emotion that I can’t find the words to tell him how much it all means to me.

With one last tight squeeze, Collin steps back and smiles down at me. “Don’t be mad, but I have one other surprise. Although, after what you just told me, you might not like it very much.”

Before I can tell him that I don’t need anything else from him, he grasps my shoulders and turns me around to face the backyard.

When I see the set-up at the back of his property line, my hand flies to my mouth and I let out a gasp.

There in the grass is a large sheet of blank hemp paper, held down by rocks at each corner and a few scattered through the middle. Next to the paper is the largest bucket

of gunpowder I've ever seen.

"Watching you work on one of your designs was always the most amazing thing to witness," he speaks softly behind me. "You'd get this fierce look of concentration on your face and everything else around you would disappear. Considering my current profession and the way I was so obsessed with fire back then, you would think lighting the fuse and watching the explosion would have been the best part. You had so much talent, Finnley. It should never, ever have been stifled."

I look back over my shoulder at him and he uses his thumb to wipe away my tears. "Will you make something for me? I want a new Finnley Morgan original to hang in my living room."

I shake my head at him and turn back around to face him. "What am I going to do with you, Collin McDaniels? You make me want things I haven't thought about in years. You make me dream things I never thought possible."

He shrugs and uses the tips of his fingers to brush my bangs out of my eyes. "It's never too late to live your dreams. You just have to want them enough to make them come true."

Collin takes my hand and pulls me to the edge of his yard, lifting the top off of the gunpowder and sliding the bucket closer to me before silently moving away to give me time to myself. I can feel him watching me from the other side of the yard as an image immediately takes hold in my mind and I can picture exactly what I need to do to make it come to life.

Slipping off my shoes, I sink down into the soft grass and dip my hand into the bucket, letting the soft black powder coat my hands and slide through my fingers. Dipping my fingers back inside, I bring out a handful of powder and begin sprinkling it all over the paper, working quickly as I allow the image in my mind to take shape.

Art must truly be instinctual, as I feel every single trick I used seventeen years ago come back to me while I run my palms and my fingers through the black powder on the paper so fast that my hands are a blur of movement.

I have no idea how much time has lapsed and I'm too caught up in my vision to care. I move the powder around until the design is exactly how I pictured it in my mind. When I finally finish, I stand up to admire my work, wiping a bead of sweat off my brow with the back of my wrist, careful not to get black powder all over my face.

I'm almost overcome with excitement and pride as I look down at the paper. I sense Collin's presence and a spark of desire shoots through me when I feel the heat of his body. Collin being directly responsible for the release of the creative juices I've kept bottled up for so long is almost enough to make me want to forget about finishing the project and just take him inside the house and strip him naked.

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He hands me a towel and I slowly wipe as much of the powder off of my hands as I can.

“You ready?” he asks as he holds a lighter up in front of him.

It’s possible that he’s more excited about this than I am and I can’t help but smile at his exuberance. I think he might have been lying before when he said watching me work was the best part. He’s like a toddler right now, bouncing back and forth on his feet waiting for me to give him the okay.

I nod my head and laugh at him. “Yep. Let’s do this.”

With remnants of gunpowder still clinging to my hands and splattered across my clothes, I know I need to move as far back as possible. I walk back to the safety of the patio and watch as Collin sets up the fuse that attaches to the paper and gunpowder, holding my breath as he flicks the lighter. When the fuse ignites, he runs across the yard until he’s by my side, grabbing my hand and pulling it up to his chest. He holds my hand in both of his right against his heart as we listen to the ssssssssss of the flame as it flows down the five-foot length of fuse. We both stare with wide, excited eyes as the spark gets closer and closer to the paper until the hissing suddenly stops as the fuse gathers enough energy to ignite all of the gunpowder. Two heartbeats later, a loud pop fills the air and the paper bursts into flames. Within seconds, the fire burns out and all that’s left behind is a cloud of smoke and puffs of powder.

Our heads turn towards each other and I can’t stop the excited grin that lights up my face when I see the same look mirrored in Collin. We take off running, his hand still clutching mine as we race across the yard laughing at how silly we’re both acting.

We stop in front of the hemp paper and wait until the smoke clears. Collin doesn't say a word as he stares down at the burnt design, each piece revealing itself slowly as the smoke floats away. I start to get a little nervous that maybe it's not as good as I thought since I'm so out of practice. He lets go of my hand and bends down closer to the paper, his eyes taking in every detail as I watch him.

"Holy shit, Finnley," he whispers after a few seconds.

I finally turn away from him and look down at my creation. It's another silhouette of him, this time wearing a fireman's hat with a rolled up hose slung over one arm and a wall of fire surrounding him.

"This is absolutely f**king amazing," he mutters in awe.

Pride rushes through me with his words and my long dormant dream of doing something with my talent becomes forefront in my mind. Staring down at Collin admiring my work, I'm amazed that that it's even possible to be this happy after everything I've been through with Jordan.

Chapter 18—She Keeps Me Warm

IT'S STILL HARD to believe Finnley and I only found our way back to one another fifteen days ago. I've spent fifteen days learning everything about her all over again and fifteen days discovering every inch of her body. We've talked, we've laughed, we've f**ked on every available surface in both of our houses and we've only stopped long enough to order take-out before going at it again. I've set up countless sheets of hemp paper in my backyard and sat in a chair by the house, quietly watching her work whenever inspiration hit her. It's amazing to see the passion for her art shining in her eyes with each and every new picture she creates. It's my damn house, so I'm not limited to wallpapering my bedroom with Finnley Morgan originals this time around. I've hung each one of her designs on the walls in my home, much to

her embarrassment. I want her to be proud of her talent and I want her to see how much pride I have in her every time she walks through my door.

I know that rediscovering her ability has lit a fire inside of her to go to art school like she always wanted to. As much as I want to tell her to quit her job and do what she wants, I know I can't do that. This is her dream and I want her to find her own strength to make it a reality.

"Oh, my God, I'm so full I think you're going to have to roll me into the house," Finnley jokes as I pull my truck into my driveway.

I wanted nothing more than to keep her naked and tucked away in my bed forever, but I thought it was time I took her out for a real meal. I surprised her by taking her to the Italian restaurant where we had our first date. It was kind of nice not having to bum a ride from an older friend this time since neither one of us had our driver's licenses back then.

I make my way around the front of the truck and open her door, holding her hand as she steps down from the cab. My dick has been hard since I picked her up at her house earlier and she opened the door wearing a red, wrap-around dress that hugged her curves.

Her matching red heels click against the pavement as she jumps down and the vee in the front of her dress gapes open, showing off even more of the creamy skin that I've been staring at all night across the candlelit table.

I move our clasped hands behind her back and rest them right above her ass as I trail the fingers of my free hand down her collarbone and over the exposed skin of her br**sts.

"I need to be inside you," I tell her softly, staring into her eyes as I move my hand

lower until I'm cupping one breast in my palm.

I run my thumb back and forth over her nipple through the material of her dress, lightly pinching it after it pebbles

“How fast can you unlock that door and take your clothes off?” she whispers as I kiss my way across her cheek until my lips are right by her ear.

“About as fast as I can make you come. What's the record now, thirty-five seconds?” I tease.

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She laughs, swatting my hand away from her breast. “Let’s see if you have it in you to make it twenty.”

AN HOUR LATER, I’ve got her right on the edge of her third orgasm. She’s sprawled across my bed, her body glistening with sweat. I’m on my stomach between her thighs, pressing my dick into the mattress in an attempt to calm myself down. In my line of work, patience and control are critical, and it’s taken every vestige I have of both not to drag her down the bed and f**k her so hard we both pass out, but I have something else in mind. I’ve been thinking about our phone sex conversation a week ago and I want her as ready and pliant as she can be.

Pulling my fingers out of her, I slide them into my mouth and clean her wetness off them with my tongue. She’s up on her elbows watching me, her hips lifting slightly in an unconscious request for more. Moving out from between her thighs, I slide up the length of her body, rolling her onto her side so I can curl myself behind her. I pull her hair away from the back of her neck and nip at the skin there while I reach back and grab the bottle of lube I bought the day before.

Placing it on the bed behind me, I slide my hand over the front of her thigh, grabbing her leg and pulling it back over my hip so she’s open to me. Her head is resting on her arm and I scoot closer, lifting myself up on my elbow so I can stare down at her body.

I slowly slide my hand up the inside of her thigh and ghost my fingers through her folds, pulling the wetness pooling there up with me to circle it around her clit. She’s so wet that I’m not even sure I’ll need the lube for what I have in mind, but I’m still going to use it. I want this to be as pleasurable as possible for her.

Her hips shift back and she grinds her ass against my c**k as it slips between her cheeks. I move myself against her, sliding my c**k through her as my fingers continue playing with her clit.

“I want to f**k you here, baby,” I whisper in her ear, emphasizing what I mean by thrusting hard against her ass.

My fingers easily slide through her pu**y as she gets even wetter at my words.

“Oh, God, yes,” she mumbles, her hips moving against my fingers as I push two of them deep inside of her, my thumb flicking over her clit.

I pump my fingers in and out of her, moving my thumb faster until she’s gasping and moaning with need.

“Fuck, I’m going to come. Oh, my God,” she whispers.

I quickly pull my fingers out of her and move my thumb away from her clit, smiling to myself when I hear her whimper.

“Not yet, baby. You’re not coming again until my c**k is inside your ass.”

She groans and I move my hand back between her legs, just barely skimming my fingers over her clit. She’s so swollen and wet that I know just the right amount of pressure will have her exploding against my fingers, but I want to prolong this. I want her shaking with need and ready to take every inch of me inside her.

Her hand moves over top of mine and she tries to add pressure to my fingers as I slide them around and around her clit. I remove my fingers from her slit, grabbing her hand and bringing it up to rest on her breast.

“You can play with your ni**les, baby, but this,” I tell her as I cup her sex in my hand, “is mine. Even when I’m taking your ass, Lee, it’ll still be my fingers f**king your pu**y. You don’t get to touch.”

I hear her sharp intake of breath as my fingers resume the light, teasing circles around her clit and I watch in rapt fascination as she lightly tugs at her ni**les. When her hips start moving faster and I know she’s seconds away from coming, I quickly move my hand down and thrust three fingers inside of her, holding them as deep as they’ll go as I feel her pulse around me and her orgasm slowly ebbs back down to a simmer.

Her thigh quivers around my hip and, as much as I want to continue torturing her, I can’t hold off any longer. I need to be inside of her. I need her to give me that last bit of trust so I can show her I would never hurt her, that everything I do is to bring her pleasure.

Pulling my fingers out of her, I reach behind me and grab the bottle of lube. As I move my c**k away from her ass, I flip the lid on the tube and squirt a generous amount of the silky gel up and down my length. Tossing the tube to the side, I, spread the lube over my c**k until it’s glistening.

“Get up on your knees.”

I palm my cock, stroking it as I watch Finnley roll to her stomach and push herself up on her hands and knees, her ass in the air waiting and ready for me. Getting up behind her, I grab the bottle of lube again and squeeze, letting it slide down the crack of her ass. Using the fingers of my left hand, I rub the slippery wetness around, pushing my fingers gently inside of her to spread the lube there, as well.

She shivers with a combination of excitement and shock at the cold feel of the lube sliding down her body and my fingers pushing inside her ass. I continue slowly pumping them in and out of her, readying her for my cock. When she starts pushing

back against my fingers, I know it's time. Sliding them out of her, I grab onto her hips and pull her towards me until the tip of my c**k rubs against the spot my fingers just vacated.

“Fuck,” she mutters, dropping her head down between her shoulders.

I wrap my hand around the base of my cock, holding myself still as I push just the head inside of her. As much as I want to slide the rest of the way in with one hard thrust, I know I need to make sure she's ready.

I move my right hand away from her hip and slide it around the front of her body, between her legs, finding her clit and working it between my fingers.

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Her hips start moving against my hand and I grit my teeth as the head of my c**k moves in and out of her ass.

“You are way too big for this to work,” she mumbles through groans as my fingers continue to slide around and around her clit.

“Do you trust me?” I whisper, sliding barely another centimeter inside of her as I move my fingers faster between her legs.

“Yes, I trust you,” she moans immediately as I slide in a little further.

“This will work, I promise. If it doesn’t, you tell me right away and I’ll stop. If it doesn’t feel good, promise me you’ll tell me to stop, Lee.”

I silently beg her not to tell me to stop. Her ass is already gripping the hell out of the tip of my c**k and I’m dying to push myself the rest of the way inside her.

“I promise. I trust you. Fuck, keep going,” she begs, pushing back against me until I slip deeper inside.

Sweat breaks out all over my body with the effort it takes to hold myself still behind her and not pound into her ass. She’s so tight and hot and, with every rock of her hips against my fingers, she brings me deeper inside her all on her own.

“Fuck-shit-oh, my God,” she whimpers incoherently as I add pressure with my fingers against her clit.

As slowly as I can, I push myself a little further inside her ass, stopping when I feel her relax around my c**k as her orgasm quickly bubbles back to the surface.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I hold her tightly to me and slowly rock against her without going deeper. I want to pull my c**k completely out and slam fully inside her, but I won't do that her first time. I'm perfectly content letting her dictate how little or how much she can take this time.

"Jesus, Lee. You feel so f**king perfect," I groan as she pushes back against me.

Her ass grips me like a fist and I know I'm not going to be able to last much longer.

"Keep going. Fuck, keep going," she begs loudly.

I hold my breath and squeeze my eyes closed as I slowly push forward until my hips are pressed tightly against her ass. I hear her panting and whimpering as I hold myself still.

"Say something, Lee. Tell me if this is okay," I beg.

When she doesn't immediately reply, I start to pull out of her, my concern for her greater than my need to experience this with her. Her hand flies back and grips my hip, holding me in place.

"It's okay, I'm okay. It hurts, but it feels good at the same time. Just give me a second."

Letting out the breath I was holding, I'm prepared to give her as much time as she needs even though all I want to do is move.

I start circling my fingers around her clit again, slowly at first and then speeding up

the movement. Within seconds, her back arches and she screams as her orgasm bursts out of her.

“I’m coming! Oh f**k, I’m coming!”

Her clit throbs beneath my fingers and her ass milks my c**k with each pulse of her release until my own orgasm explodes out of me. I didn’t even need to move in and out of her, just having my c**k sheathed inside her tight hole and feeling her squeeze around me is enough to drive me right to the edge and tumble over.

My come fills her ass and my fingers continue circling her clit as another tremor wracks her body, this one smaller than the last but just as powerful going by her shouts of pleasure.

When we’re both sated and panting heavily, I pull my c**k out of her and we collapse next to each other in a heap of exhaustion and sweat. With the last of my strength, I wrap my arms around her body and pull her back against my chest. The desire to tell her that I love her overwhelms me, but I bite my tongue and keep my thoughts to myself. I don’t want her to think I’m saying it because of what just happened.

With a kiss to the back of her head, I slide out of bed and make my way to the bathroom. I’ve never used the Jacuzzi tub in my master bath since I bought this house a month ago and now I know why. I was waiting for the right moment and it doesn’t get any more perfect than this. When the tub is filled with warm, soapy water, I head back into the bedroom to find Finnley asleep. I slide my arms under her naked body and pull her up to my chest as she yawns and opens her eyes. She leans up and kisses my chin as I walk towards the bathroom, the look on her face so sated and sexy that I feel my c**k stirring below us. I step into the tub with her still in my arms, sinking down into the hot water as she sighs contentedly, twisting in my arms until she’s straddling my lap.

She cups handfuls of soapy water in her hands and pours them over my chest and shoulders, running her palms over my skin as she goes. Her wet hand skims over the tattoo on my right bicep, staring at it intently. “I’ve seen this before and I know it has a name. What’s it called?”

Removing my hands from the edge of the tub, I slide them into the water and glide them up her wet thighs until I’m gripping her hips.

“It’s called a Maltese Cross. I got it the day I graduated from the fire academy.”

With the tips of her fingers, she traces the design and, even with the heat of the water, I suddenly get a chill from her touch.

“Is there meaning behind it, or is it just the universal symbol for firefighters?”

I’ve heard this story so many times you would think that I’d be tired of telling it, but something about explaining it to Finnley right now makes it feel like the first time. I’ll never forget that first day in class at the academy when our instructor put a picture of the cross up on the chalkboard and told us its history and the meaning behind it. The blood started pumping faster in my veins and I knew, right in that moment, that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

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“It dates back to somewhere in the eleventh century. According to legend, a band of crusaders known as the Knights of St. John were fighting the Saracens for possession of the Holy Land. As the Knights advanced on the walls of the city, the Saracens used a new weapon that no one had ever used in battle before—fire. They launched flaming glass bombs at the Knights, but the Knights never stopped moving forward. They were covered in fire but they kept going to save their brothers. They became the first firefighters in history.”

I look down at my arm and watch her fingers continue to trace around each piece of the intricate design.

“The Maltese Cross became a symbol of protection. It means that the firefighter who wears it is willing to lay down his life for you, just like the Knights of St. John. They say that the cross is a firefighter’s badge of honor, signifying that he works in courage—a ladder rung away from death.”

Her eyes meet mine and the intensity in them overwhelms me. “It’s perfect. It’s exactly the type of mark you should have on you. You were always the most courageous person I ever knew, Collin. The fact that you put your life on the line for strangers on a daily basis doesn’t come as a shock to me at all.”

Tell her you love her, ass**le. Tell her right now.

“I have always wanted a tub like this in my house,” Finnley tells me, quickly changing the subject like she knew I was one second away from making things even more serious.

She reaches for the bar of soap sitting on the edge by the wall and I watch as she dips her hand with the soap pressed against her palm under the water, finding my c**k and sliding her hand gently up and down my quickly hardening length.

It takes me a minute to answer her as she continues to run her soap-filled hand up and down my cock. “Well, now you don’t need one. You can use mine anytime you want.”

She stares into my eyes as she pulls her hand away and drops the soap to the bottom of the tub, quickly bringing her hand back to me. I close my eyes and let my head drop to the edge of the tub, humming in approval as she tightens her fist around my c**k and pumps her hand faster from base to tip.

She continues to work me over with her expert hand until I can’t take it anymore. Lifting my head up, I grab onto her hips and pull her up my thighs. She leans up on her knees and positions my c**k right at her entrance, keeping her eyes locked tightly to mine as she slowly lowers herself onto me. We both groan as she moves her body down onto my c**k until our thighs are touching.

I sit forward in the tub and wrap my arms around her body, pulling her flush against my chest as her palms move to my cheeks and she holds my face in her hands. I press my lips to hers as she begins rocking against me, my c**k slowly sliding in and out of her. She glides her tongue across my bottom lip and I immediately part my lips, pulling her tongue into my mouth. Our tongues swirl lazily around each other while our bodies move with the same unhurried speed. I don’t think I’ve ever ‘made love’ before and I know for a fact I’ve never even thought those words in my head. I’ve always f**ked and I’ve f**ked hard. What we’re doing right now, this slow rocking against each other, is equally hot and filled with so much emotion, I can almost feel it burning a hole in my chest. Our kisses become deeper, our mouths moving faster even as our bodies continue the slow buildup. When I feel her start to clench around me and she moans into my mouth, I break our kiss, pulling back so that I can watch

her. She's f**king gorgeous all the time, but I'll never get over the way she looks when she comes. When I hear her sigh my name, my c**k immediately swells and my own orgasm follows quickly behind.

She opens her eyes and stares down at me, running her hands through my hair over and over. She takes her time, slowly kissing my cheeks, my chin, my nose and my forehead until the water starts to grow cold around us.

I lift her up and out of the water, drying us both off in between more kisses. When I scoop her up into my arms and carry her back into the bedroom, she laughs and I know in that moment I've never heard a better sound. Sliding her under the covers and moving in behind her, I pull her tightly against my chest.

As her breathing slows and she drifts off to sleep in my arms, I know without a doubt that a part of me has always been in love with Finnley. Being with her these last two weeks has only amplified those feelings.

As my own eyelids grow heavy with sleep, I realize that I have plenty of time to tell her how I feel. Now that I've found her again, I have no intention of letting her go. We have nothing but time spreading out in front of us and I have no problem waiting until I know she's ready to hear me say the words that are on the tip of my tongue.

Chapter 19—Boiling Point

I'VE BEEN SO busy the last two weeks with Collin that I haven't had an opportunity to pack up Jordan's things. Since Collin is working another forty-eight hour shift, I finally have the time to myself to get it done.

I still haven't told him about the restraining order, but Jordan has been unusually quiet since I filed it and I don't see the sense in bothering him about it now. All it would do is piss Collin off and I know he would hunt Jordan down and beat the hell

out of him. As much as I think a good, old-fashioned ass kicking is exactly what Jordan needs, I don't want Collin getting into any trouble. For now, I'm going to keep it to myself and hope Jordan isn't stupid enough to break the order.

While I busy myself pulling empty boxes from the garage and start the grueling task of packing up everything that reminds me of Jordan, I make a quick call to my mom and give her an update. I didn't want to worry her about the restraining order, either, but she's been bugging me nonstop ever since I told her I ran into Collin two weeks ago. I want her to know that things are moving quickly with him so it doesn't come as a surprise when she hears it through the gossip grapevine.

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She wasn't the least bit surprised when I told her I was leaving Jordan and she didn't even bat an eye when I told her I was kind of, sort of seeing Collin so soon after I filed for a separation. My parents always loved Collin and she was thrilled to hear that we were in each other's lives again. There was no love loss between her and Jordan. Just like Phina, she never judged me for trying to stick it out and make things work, but she was more than a little overjoyed to hear that I had finally had enough and was moving on.

After letting her know that I'm still alive and promising to bring Collin over to see her soon, I end the call and get busy with my task.

My plan was to just box up all of Jordan's clothes and other personal items that he didn't take with him when he moved out six weeks ago, but once that was finished, I moved on to other things that I no longer wanted in my house. Our wedding album was the first of those items. I didn't even bother to flip through the pages one last time as I tossed it into the bottom of an empty box. I didn't care to see the smiling, hopeful look on my face on what I thought was the happiest day of my life. The woman in those photos was a silly, trusting fool.

On top of the album I stack every single framed photograph of the two of us together that used to hang on the walls as well as three other photo albums filled with snapshots of us throughout the years. I pack away every gift he's ever given me, every card, every note and I shove it all away until I'm standing in our bedroom surrounded by boxes. Seventeen years packed into ten boxes. Seventeen years of memories, promises and hope all hidden away in ten squares of cardboard taped tightly shut for fear they might try to sneak out and worm their way into my life again.

I carry the boxes downstairs and stack them by the front door, my body worn out and covered in sweat by the time I'm finished. I look around the house at the empty nails on the walls where pictures of us used to hang and stare at the DVD case by the TV that now only holds a small handful of my favorite movies since the majority of the ones we owned were his. I sigh in relief, looking forward to dropping these boxes off at Jordan's parents house and finally having him completely out of my life. I have no idea where he's staying since his parents haven't heard from him and I don't care. I just want this stuff out of my house for good. His parents can deal with it however they want.

When I glance at the clock on the wall, I realize that three hours have passed since I last talked to Collin. He was called back into work on an emergency call and a little ball of worry ties my stomach in knots. I have no idea how long a call normally takes, but something tells me three hours is a long time for something non-serious. It occurs to me right then and there just how dangerous Collin's job is. He could be hurt at any moment. I know he's had years of training and he made captain, so he's obviously good at what he does, but that doesn't stop accidents from happening.

To take my mind off of thoughts of him being stuck in a burning building or something equally terrifying, I head upstairs and run a hot bath. When the tub is full and almost overflowing with bubbles, I strip off my clothes and sink into the warm water, resting my head against the bath pillow and closing my eyes. I think back over every time we've had sex and how much better it gets every single time.

I think about that day at the station and how he rocked my body on top of the speaker while the bass vibrated beneath me. I never thought I'd want to own a giant subwoofer, but something tells me I'll be running out to Best Buy and purchasing one as soon as possible. Running my hands up my thighs under the water, I remember how good it felt to have his tongue driving into me over and over and my fingers ghost between my legs. I picture the look on Collin's face when he sucked on his fingers before plunging them inside of me and the small tingling of desire between

my legs turns into full blown need. I quickly push two of my fingers inside me and, even though they don't provide anywhere near as much pleasure as Collin's long, thick fingers, they'll do for now. Seventeen days worth of memories scroll through my mind as I pump my fingers roughly in and out a few times before dragging them through my folds to rub against my clit. I moan in the quiet room and my voice echoes off of the tiles, the house silent but for my sounds of pleasure and the sloshing of the bath water as my hand moves faster and faster between my legs.

I picture his hand wrapped around his c**k that day in the weight room and the predatory look in his eyes as he stared at me while he pumped that hand up and down his hard length. I think about how much I wanted him to make himself come while he stood before me. How his face would have frozen with a look of unabashed pleasure while he palmed his c**k until he came against my stomach. How I would have driven him crazy by sliding my fingers through the mess and then bringing it up to my lips, sucking his taste from my fingers until he grew hard again.

I think about the pleasure and pain of having him f**k my ass for the first time and I know without a doubt I'll want to repeat that experience again.

My fingers move faster and faster over my clit until my back arches and I call out Collin's name as I come.

I MUST'VE DRIFTED off after I brought myself to orgasm and I wake with a start and quickly sit up, some of the now lukewarm water splashing over the edge of the tub. I figure the cold water was the cause for my sudden wake-up until I hear a thump and realize a similar noise is what jolted me out of my bath time slumber moments ago.

Straining my ears, I wait to see if I hear anything else and when another thunk sounds from down below, I quickly pull myself out of the tub and grab the clean towel I threw on the floor. Drying myself off as fast as I can, I grab my short black robe from

the back of the bathroom door and slip it on, tying the belt around my waist. I figure it's Collin downstairs since I told him to just come over as soon as he got off work. In my haste to get down to him, I forget that the front door was locked and he doesn't have a key. Eager to see him again, my nose doesn't register the cloying, faintly sweet, noxious scent drifting around the corner until I'm stepping into the living room and it's too late. The smell is so strong that I almost wonder why I can't see it floating in the air around me.

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When my brain finally registers the scent, fear takes ahold of me like a pair of shackles around my ankles. I jerk to a stop in the doorway of the living room expecting to see a monster straight out of my nightmares standing right in front of me. When I see nothing but the empty room, hope blossoms in my chest. Maybe it's not what I think it is. The front door is standing wide-open, shards of split wood sticking out from the doorframe where it was kicked in. Twenty or so feet to freedom, to fresh air that will clear the fuzziness from my head and the exhaustion I suddenly feel. The fumes filling the room are starting to blur my vision, making the ground look like it's tilting at an awkward angle and the walls look like they're melting. I want to close my eyes to stop the room from spinning. My whole body feels weightless, and I have to fight the urge to curl up on the soft carpet at my feet and fall asleep.

A small voice inside my head starts to scream, shaking me out of the chemical high.

RUN, Finnley. RUN!

I force my feet to move, taking a few slow steps towards the door. I can see the railings of the front porch, the green grass of the yard, the sidewalk at the curb and a car parked across the street. I can make it. In just a few seconds I'll be out there where I can breathe again. I can run to the neighbor's house and call Collin.

The thought of Collin gives me the strength I need to run. I need to get to him.

My feet stumble as the room continues to sway but I keep going. Just a little bit further and Collin will be there. He'll make all of this go away.

I'm sure I look like I'm drunk, tripping and veering from side to side as I hustle to freedom, but I don't care. I need to get out of this house.

Ten feet.

Five feet.

Three feet.

I'm almost there. I can feel a soft breeze blow through the door and a smile lights up my face as I pause to breathe in the fresh air.

I shouldn't have stopped. I should have kept going.

Two feet from freedom and a body steps out from the kitchen doorway, blocking my escape. The fist comes towards my face so fast I don't have time to block it or brace myself.

Pain explodes through my cheek, radiating up to my temple until I see nothing but blackness as I feel my body falling.

Down

Down

Down it goes until it lands on the soft carpet.

The pain in my face and head swallows all of my thoughts and I let the darkness wash over me.

THE SMELL HITS my consciousness first. Something about it tickles my senses and

reminds me that it's wrong. It shouldn't be here and I shouldn't still be breathing it, but I can't remember why.

As I blink my eyes into focus, a stabbing pain on the right side of my face has me slowly dragging my arm across the carpet and up to my cheek, cupping my face in my hand to try and stop the hurt. I can feel my heart beat thumping through the pain in my cheek and each pulse magnifies the ache and brings tears to my eyes.

I move my hand away from my face and press my palms flat against the ground, pushing myself up to my knees. As soon as I'm upright, the pain in my head and on the side of my face intensifies and I whimper.

“Wakey, wakey, Sunshine.”

The chipper voice has me jerking my head towards its sound, the blast of pain shooting up to my head making me instantly regret that quick movement.

Everything comes rushing back to me in a flash of memories. The day outside the fire station, the car following me everywhere I went, the texts, the threats, the restraining order, the unusual silence from him since I filed the restraining order and me stupidly racing down the stairs after my bath hoping the noise I heard was Collin. I should have known his silence didn't mean he'd conceded and would leave me alone. I should have known he was only letting his anger fester, giving himself time to build up to the grand finale.

Standing by the front door, next to the boxes of his things, is the man responsible for the pain in my face and the deadly scent permeating the air around me. When I see the four empty red cans tossed onto their sides by the boxes, the wetness soaking against my legs finally registers.

I watch in horror as Jordan reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a small square

of cardboard. My eyes sting with the smell of gas in the air and the tears burning behind my lids as I slowly start to crawl backwards.

Jordan's eyes are bloodshot and his face is flushed and I know he must be high on something. There's no other logical explanation for what he's doing right now.

“Did you think you were just going to pack my shit up and put me out of your life? Move on with another man? He can't f**king have you! Do you hear me, Finn? HE CAN'T FUCKING HAVE YOU!” Jordan screams.

He punctuates his threat with the swipe of a match against the striker of the matchbook he holds in his shaky hands.

I'm so filled with fear that I can't even find my voice to plead with him to stop. His thumb and forefinger hold the lit match out from the side of his body and the only sound I can make is another whimper.

“Do you have any idea the number of women I've f**ked behind your back over the years? You were so trusting and gullible it was pathetic,” he spits out. “All those women who f**ked ten times better than you and you're the one I want. Now I'm the pathetic one and it makes me SICK!”

I can't stop the tremors from wracking my body but I continue to inch myself further away from him, across the carpet. This isn't happening. It's all a dream. It can't end like this, not when I've finally found what I've been looking for and I haven't even had a chance to tell him exactly what he means to me; what he's always meant to me.

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“Stop moving away or I swear to f**k I will drop this match right now!”

I immediately halt my backward movement while he continues to shout.

“You spread your legs for another man. How in the f**k am I supposed to get those images out of my head, Finn?” Jordan asks, the anguish in his voice ringing through my ears.

The fact that he’s the biggest hypocrite in the world doesn’t even register with him. He just admitted that he’s been cheating on me our entire marriage but he’s so filled with jealousy that he can’t even see it.

“Please, Jordan, don’t do this,” I quietly beg, the tears escaping from my eyes and falling down my cheeks.

The match has almost burned down to his fingers and my only hope is that it will go out and I can get him to put the rest of the matches down before he does something stupid. He stares at my face and I watch as his anger starts to melt away with every tear that burns its way down my face.

“We can talk about this, okay? Please, Jordan,” I whisper brokenly.

Like a switch being flipped, the anger is back and his lips curl up in a sneer.

“We’re finished talking, sweetheart. You’re dead to me now. Might as well make it official.”

The scream rips from my throat as the match drops from his fingers and flutters to the ground, the carpet in front of him bursting into flames in a whoosh of air and crackling of heat as it heads right towards me.

Chapter 20—Raging Fire

GODDAMMIT ALL TO hell I'm going to kill Wilcox.

After two straight days of work and only a few hours of sleep once I got home, I was called back into work because we were short handed. Of course it had to be because of that ass**le Wilcox. I should be at Finnley's house right now, but instead, I'm stuck in a barn filled with the smoldering ashes of the south-side wall.

As I remind him yet again about the dangers of smoking in a barn filled with dry bales of hay, the boys finish loading the hose back on the truck and I keep my temper in check until I'm in the jump seat and we're pulling away from his house.

"I swear to Christ I'm going to just burn that f**king barn down myself and be done with it," I complain.

D.J. unbuttons his insulated coat and slides his helmet off of his head, tossing it onto the empty seat next to him. "Now, now, you'll be home soon enough. I hope to God you're going to get laid tonight because this whole moody, PMS thing you've had going on the last few days is starting to worry me."

I punch him in the arm and give him a dirty look even though he's right. I have been extra bitchy since I last saw Finnley. Being away from her is nothing short of torture. Even though we talked on the phone several times during my recent forty-eight hour shift, hearing her soft, raspy voice and knowing she was curled up in bed while she spoke to me did nothing to ease the ache I had for her. It only made me think about being inside her body and watching her beautiful brown eyes widen as her pu**y

clamped down on my cock. Trying to push my need for her aside during my downtime at work by lifting weights didn't help, either. Just like I predicted, every f**king time I walked in that room and looked at the subwoofer, my dick got hard and I had to lock myself in the bathroom to rub one out.

I feel myself getting worked up again, so I deliberately turn my mind towards the only thing that fires my blood as much as Finnley—my absolute and total f**king hate for her soon-to-be ex-husband. I think about every conversation we've had over the last seventeen days and it makes me want to hunt down Castillo and end his miserable excuse for a life. He had it all. He had the woman who should have been mine and he didn't even care. He treated her like garbage and he smothered her creativity. She should have gone to art school. Her gunpowder designs should be hanging in galleries all over the f**king world but instead, she was forced to take a job just to pay the bills while Castillo blew all of their money on gambling, drugs and God knows what else.

He had a beautiful, smart, sexy, talented woman and he took her for granted every day for seventeen years. I can't even believe the strong woman she's turned into after all the shit she put up with from him. Any other woman would have been beaten down and afraid to trust again, but not Finnley. She put every ounce of her trust in me and I'll be damned if I'm going to let her down. Finally, after several days away from her, I'm going to sit her down and tell her what she means to me. What she's always meant to me every single day, even when we were apart, and just how much my feelings have grown since we got back together. I want her to know that no other woman could ever compare to her. I want her to understand that I will do whatever it takes to make her happy. We can take it slow, we can speed it up, we can do whatever the f**k she wants as long as we do it together.

As the truck pulls into the bay, I hop down and walk into the gear locker room stowing my turnout gear in my personal locker while D.J. does the same right next to me.

“So, is this going to be like high school all over again where you ditch me for a chick and I lose my wingman?” he suddenly asks.

I pause in the middle of taking off my rubber boots and stare at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

D.J. shrugs, refusing to look at me as he shoves his helmet into the locker and toes off his own boots.

“I don’t like this whole you having a girlfriend thing. It makes me feel unloved and neglected,” he jokes.

I shake my head at him as I finish removing the rest of my gear. “You do realize we’re thirty-three years old. It’s okay for one or both of us to settle down.”

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D.J. finally looks at me in horror. “Bite your tongue! There will be no settling down. Why would I settle down with one woman when I could have a multitude of women servicing my every need? The same goes for you. One pu**y, forever and ever. I mean, who does that?”

Sitting down on the bench right in front of the lockers, I start untying my Nikes that I chucked on the ground in my haste to change into my gear before we went out on the call a few hours ago.

“I do that. I still haven’t properly kicked your ass for convincing me to break up her with back in high school. I think it’s way past time for me to punch you in the face for that shitty idea,” I remind him.

“I believe the torture I endured the rest of our senior year every damn time you saw Finnley and Jordan holding hands was punishment enough. I had to deal with your Emo, depressed ass all through finals, graduation and at every party thereafter,” D.J. reminds me, holding his hand over his heart. “I have done my penance and it was harsh.”

I laugh at his serious tone before continuing. “You made me think it was the best idea in the history of the world to break up with her. I had a great girl by my side and, I f**ked it all up. You still deserve an ass kicking.”

D.J. tosses his boots in the locker and they clang against the metal. “Exactly. You had a great girl. You guys were just kids. Now, you have a great woman. Aren’t you glad that the first time you slipped her the D you knew what you were doing? Imagine her horror if you would have tried that shit when you were seventeen? There would have

been crying and screaming and it would have been all over school that you didn't know how to lay pipe. I did you a favor."

I raise my eyebrow at him in annoyance, even though he does have a point. The sex with Finnley now that we're both adults is so hot I almost want to check my skin when we're done to look for burns. My first time having sex was a complete disaster fueled by too many shots of Goldschlager at a college party and a sorority girl who took a bet to relieve me of my virginity in the bathroom of the frat house. It was over before it even started and there were definitely tears, mostly from me since I started throwing up all the cinnamon schnapps and beer I'd consumed through the night ten seconds after I came.

Which, coincidentally, is also the length of time I lasted once I got my dick in her.

It still pains me to think that my first time wasn't with Finnley. Knowing that she ran right into Castillo's arms and slept with him after I tossed her to the side still fills me with so much jealousy and rage even after all this time. I'm not angry with her, I could never be angry with her for something like that. I broke her heart and she found comfort with someone else. My anger lies solely with Jordan Castillo. That f**ker knew what he was doing even back then. Just because he was new to the school doesn't mean he hadn't heard about the two of us and how long we'd been together. Every time I had the unfortunate experience of walking past the two of them in the halls or seeing them together at a party, he would catch my eye and smirk, making sure my eyes were on the two of them as he grabbed her ass or kissed her right in front of me.

"Fine, I will concede to your point that having sex with her now when we both have experience is much better. Just don't try to get me drunk again and tell me to write her a letter. That shit isn't going to fly now," I tell him with a chuckle.

"Come on, that letter was genius. 'Dear Finnley: I'm sorry, but things just aren't

working out anymore. Please don't hate me. Love, Collin'. I'm pretty sure I'm the one who deserves to do a little ass kicking for the fact that I had to give her that note and deal with her crying for a half hour afterwards. Chicks, tears and me just don't mix. I was late to English because of you and I got detention."

I can't help but laugh when he recites the contents of that stupid f**king note. For the first time in years, thinking about it doesn't make me want to kill someone. Finnley and I found each other again and all the bullshit from the past can finally be erased. For years, I tried to lose myself in other women, but none of them compared to the memory of Finnely. I tried to find girls who made me feel even an inkling of what I felt for her, but it never worked. She made me feel ten feet tall and like I could do anything when she was by my side. Other relationships, a marriage and years apart didn't change that part of her. Even though my career consists of running into burning buildings and saving people, I've never thought of myself as a hero. After just a few days of being with her again, I feel like I can conquer anything.

"How are you guys going to handle that one little problem of her still having a husband?" D.J. asks as we finish stowing our gear and head inside.

"I'm trying not to pressure her about that. They're legally separated and by state law she has to wait ninety-days until she can file for divorce. She's already got the paperwork filled out, so now she's just waiting for the date when it can finally be over. She's been through a lot with that ass**le and I will be more than happy when he's finally out of her life for good."

D.J. is unusually quiet as we head inside the house and he busies himself in the fridge without saying a word or looking at me when we get to the kitchen.

"What's with the silence? I don't like it when you're quiet. It usually means you're plotting something," I tell him with a smile.

He finally turns around and lets out a deep sigh. “I don’t want to freak you out or anything, but I heard something about Castillo yesterday.”

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D.J. starts nervously cracking his knuckles and the smile dies from my face.

“Spit it out. What the hell did you hear?”

He runs his hand through his short, spiky hair and I can see that he’s trying to carefully choose his words.

“So, you know my Aunt Connie works as a clerk at the court house, right?”

I nod my head, making a circling motion with my hand to get him to talk faster.

“Anyway, I stopped by her house yesterday after my shift and she asked me if I remembered Castillo from high school. I guess there was a restraining order filed against him about a week ago. She didn’t go into all the details but it has to do with stalking. Dude, Finnley filed for it.”

My heart immediately starts trying to beat its way out of my chest. I know we’ve spent most of our time f**king like animals the last seventeen days, but we’ve also spent a lot of time talking and she never said one word about any of this. Has he been bothering her this entire time? Why the f**k wouldn’t she have said anything to me?

“It’s been taken care of so don’t get any stupid ideas in your head. Aunt Connie said they served him with the order and the guy apologized and said it was all a big misunderstanding. If Finnley hasn’t mentioned it to you I’m sure it’s because there’s nothing to tell,” D.J. reassures me.

I don’t like this at all. I don’t care if there’s been a restraining order filed, a piece of

paper isn't going to keep someone from doing something if they're pissed off enough. I experienced Jordan's anger first hand that day he first caught us together at her house. He's not the type of man to let something like this go. His actions in high school proved that he wasn't too happy about the idea that I'd been with Finnley before him and, after seventeen years with her, I'm pretty sure he's like a powder keg waiting to explode, just like her artwork, knowing that I've been with her after him.

It hurts that Finnley didn't tell me what's been going on but I have to remember that she had an entire life with the guy before I showed back up. She knows him better than anyone and she wouldn't purposefully take a chance with her life. If she didn't tell me, she must have had good reasons.

The familiar tone of an incoming call sounds through the house and I groan in irritation. I was almost home free. I was seconds away from getting the hell out of here and finally going to see Finnley. All I can think about is making sure she's okay after this recent revelation, burying myself inside of her and finally telling her that I love her. Now I'm going to have to put it off even longer to go on another call.

I'm going to kill Schaffer and Bradley for calling in sick this week.

As I drag my feet back out to the bay with D.J. right on my heels, the voice from dispatch blaring through the speakers makes me stop in my tracks. The hair on the back of my neck stands up as my head whips around and I stare at the speaker hanging up by the ceiling, hoping that when dispatch repeats the information I will have heard it wrong the first time.

"Franklin 10, assistance requested in the next county. All available trucks at Carlisle 3 are out on another call. Severe structure fire, possible casualties. 116 Maple Drive."

My blood runs cold and I can't make my feet move even though I need to. Every single bit of training flies out of my head and I have no idea what I should be doing

or where I need to go. My hands are shaking at my sides as I watch my men race around me, getting their gear back on and shouting orders. D.J. suddenly smacks his hand against my cheek a few times and I blink my eyes into focus and stare at him in shock.

“Is that...?”

He lets the question hang in the air and I grab handfuls of hair on top of my head. “It’s her house. It’s her f**king house, D.J.!”

I know I’m shouting like a lunatic but I can’t help it. One of a fireman’s worst nightmares is hearing the address of one of your loved ones come in as a call. I’ve never had to deal with this before. I’ve never had someone I cared about this much in danger and I don’t know what the f**k to do.

D.J. grabs onto my shoulders and shakes me once, getting into my face and speaking to me more professionally and calmly than I’ve ever heard him speak before.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. You are going to snap out of it, grab your f**king gear and get your ass into the truck. We are going to break every single f**king speed limit to get to her house and it’s going to be fine, you hear me?”

I nod my head numbly, doing everything I can to hold it together. I’ve been in plenty of burning buildings and, even after all these years, the heat from the fire, the darkness from the smoke and the crackle of everything burning and falling down around you can fill your body with so much fear that it’s hard to breathe. I think about Finnley in that same situation, stuck in her house while flames eat up the walls and trap her inside of her own personal hell and bile makes its way up from my stomach, getting trapped in my throat.

I move without conscious thought of what I’m doing, on automatic pilot as I grab my

gear and slide into the jump seat of the rig. The sirens are screaming as we quickly make our way to the other side of town, running red lights and taking turns so fast I think we might tip over.

D.J. takes over my job as we go, getting on the radio to call for additional help from other stations and then barking orders and a plan of attack to the six other men in the rig with us.

The fifteen-minute drive to Maple Drive is like an eternity. I try to remember what I'm supposed to do in a situation like this. I know I need to assess the situation before charging inside. I know I have to make sure everyone's protective gear is buttoned up properly and the SCBA tanks are at full capacity before strapping them to the men's backs. I go through the checklist in my mind, but I forget everything I'm supposed to do as soon as we come to a stop and I jump down from the vehicle, not even caring that I never put my own gear on in the truck. Even from the street, the heat from the fire that has engulfed the two-story house is enough to make me shield my face.

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I frantically search the surrounding yards for any sign that Finnley isn't in the house. I hear a neighbor tell D.J. that he was walking his dog when he saw the flame shooting out of the front door and he never saw the woman who lives there come out.

When I see Finnley's car parked in front of the garage, I know in my heart that she's still inside and I forget everything I've been taught. I bolt towards the house, leaving all of my gear inside the truck. I ignore the shouts of warning from D.J. and the other men. My only thought is of getting inside and saving the woman I have always loved.

Chapter 21—Inside the Fire

THE FRONT DOOR is completely engulfed in fire and smoke and, as I run towards the house, I have to cover my face with my arm to protect it from the heat. There's no way this fire didn't have help. The place is going up faster than f**king Wilcox's barn full of dry hay. Being that it's also an older house, I know we don't have much time before the entire thing crumbles to the ground.

I hear a blood-curdling scream from inside the house as I make my way to the side yard and my heart plummets to my feet.

“FINNLEY! FINNLEY!”

I don't even realize I'm screaming her name until a solid band of muscle wraps around my chest from behind, pinning my arms to my sides and pulling me away from the inferno.

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING? DO YOU HAVE A

DEATH WISH?" D.J. screams in my ear as he continues to pull me away from the house, away from Finnley.

"GET THE FUCK OFF ME! GET OFF ME, GODDAMMIT SHE'S IN THERE!"

I struggle against his hold, clawing at D.J.'s arm as I attempt to buck him off while he tries to talk some sense into me as he roughly drags me further and further away from where I need to be. He has no f**king clue. He doesn't get it. I lost every bit of sense the moment that call came into the station. I can still hear the sound of that one, painful scream ringing in my ears. I can't hear anything else but the crackle of the fire and men shouting orders from the front of the yard. Even though the sound of her tortured cry coming from somewhere in that burning house was enough to bring me to my knees, at least I know she's still alive. She's still in there waiting for me to get to her.

"You need to calm the f**k down and use your head! You're going to be no good to her if you go racing in there like a f**king idiot and get yourself killed!" D.J. yells.

He gets me twenty feet away from the house before I finally get one arm free and slam my elbow back into his stomach. His hold loosens just enough that I can turn around, slamming both of my hands into his chest.

"I'm not going to tell you again, D.J. Get the f**k away from me right now!" I shout in his face, shoving him again.

I quickly turn and race along the side of the house, looking for another way in. I spot a large picture window about chest-high towards the back of the house and sprint to it, my legs moving so fast that I barely have time to stop. With a quick glance in the window, I see no signs of fire in the room, but it's quickly filling with smoke. Reaching down into the landscaped flowerbed right below the window, I grab a decorative rock the size of a bowling ball, heft it up over my head and send it

smashing through the window.

I immediately duck down as the smoke that filled the room comes billowing out.

“FUCKING SON OF A BITCH! KEENER! GET THE HOSE ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE HOUSE! MARTINEZ, BRING AN EXTRA AIR TANK!” D.J. shouts from behind me.

Pulling my long-sleeved shirt down from where it was bunched up around my elbows, I cover as much skin as possible before using my arm to swipe along the bottom of the window frame, removing as much of the glass as I can.

I hear a shout from the road about the fire hydrant not working and the blood runs cold in my veins. Being a station in a small town, our trucks are filled with very little water. We rely on the city hydrants for our supply and if that doesn't work, we have to call in a tanker from a neighboring town. If the men can't get water on this house immediately, there will be no saving it. I have to get Finnley out - fast.

Gripping the open window ledge, I heft my body up, swinging one leg over until I'm basically straddling the windowsill, hovering half in the house and half out.

“Goddammit, Collin will you just wait?” D.J. begs again, grabbing onto my arm and attempting to pull me towards him on the ground. “The tanker will be here in a matter of minutes.”

Shaking his arm off of me angrily, I twist my body until my lower half is completely inside the house, my feet finding purchase on the carpeted floor.

“She doesn't have minutes, this house is over a hundred years old. I want you acting as the lead paramedic when she comes out, so make sure you have your shit ready. If anything happens, you make sure Finnley gets out first, do you understand?”

“I don’t—”

“THAT’S A FUCKING ORDER, DRAKE!” I shout, cutting him off.

I watch as all the argument leaves his face. D.J. always used to joke that I’m like one of his parents. The only time we ever use his given name is when we’re pissed at him.

Martinez comes racing up at that moment and thrusts an extra air tank into D.J.’s hands. He quickly lifts it up into the window and I grab it.

“Don’t be a f**king hero, you stupid son of a bitch. If it’s too bad in there, you get the f**k out, you hear me?” D.J. tells me as he slowly starts to back away from the window.

“Yep, you got it.”

We both know I’m lying but at least D.J. has the sense not to call me on it right now. With one last look, we both turn and head in opposite directions.

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I immediately drop to the floor where the smoke is less dense, sliding my arms through the straps of the tank and getting it on my back so my hands are free. I army crawl across the room, poking my head out into the hall to assess the situation. From this vantage point, I can see into the living room. Well, what's left of the living room. It's one big wall of fire and almost every square inch of the floor is up in flames. When I heard Finnley scream moments ago, it sounded like it came from upstairs, so I'm praying to God she isn't in that f**king living room. Luckily, the stairs aren't located right in the living room, but in a hallway a few yards away from it. As it is, I'm barely going to be able to get to the stairs leading up without burning my skin off.

I keep low to the ground and move as fast as I can, pulling the neck of my shirt up over my nose and mouth, cursing myself for not using my head and grabbing my air mask. As soon as I get to the hallway, I feel the heat from the blaze like a punch to the face. It's so hot I can feel it singeing my exposed skin. It steals the breath from my lungs and my eyes, already blurry from the smoke, begin to water even more. Through the wall of fire, I can just barely make out a gaping hole in the front of the house. In an orange, hazy glow I see the guys through the hole scrambling around the front yard. The flames are quickly licking up to the second story and even if they had managed to get the attack line hooked up to the hydrant out front, I'm not sure it would have helped. I watch as a support beam from the front wall comes crashing down over the opening, blocking the entrance. I cover my face and head as ash, sparks and fire shoot towards me like a blast from a firework when the burning beam smashes into the opposite wall. With a quick glance upwards, I see the fire quickly eating up part of the ceiling and I know if I don't hurry, the entire second floor above the living room will go up in flames and come crashing down.

I move as fast as my legs will allow, flying up the stairs and taking them two at a

time, shouting Finnley's name as I go.

“FINNLEY! FINNLEY, BABY, I'M HERE! FINNLEY!”

I'm having trouble breathing by the time I get to the top step. The smoke has filled my nose and lungs and each breath I take feels like knives are being dragged up and down my throat. I know I should stop and take a hit of the air from the tank on my back, but there's no time. I need to get to her. She's been in here longer and she's going to need it more than me. I've done this before. I've been trained to deal with smoke inhalation, I just need to stay calm and keep going.

There are three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs and I head towards the door closest to me, coughing and spitting out smoke and ash-filled saliva as I go. Knowing that I can't touch the doorknob in case there's fire on the other side of it, I step back with one leg and prepare to kick it in. A noise directly behind me gives me pause and I pray with everything inside of me that the small thump was Finnley and she's okay.

I quickly turn and a fist connects with my eye. I hear a crunch and feel my eye immediately start to swell. I don't even bother pressing a hand to the area to try and ease the pain that's radiating right up to my skull.

Jordan laughs as I glare at him, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. As much as I want to beat the shit out of him for what he's done, I don't have time. My only concern, my only thought right now is that I need to save Finnley. I would have been perfectly fine leaving him standing here with that smug look on his face, but of course he wouldn't make it easy on me. As I turn to walk away, he grabs onto the back of my shirt, clutching the fabric in his hands to hold me in place.

What the f**k is it with people trying to stop me? Don't they understand that NOTHING can stop me from getting to Finnley?

Without a word, I twist out of his grasp and quickly turn, the momentum of my body bringing my arm and fist flying towards his face so fast he doesn't even see it coming. With one solid punch to the side of his head, he goes down like a ton of bricks.

As much as I hate him, as much as I want to shove him down the stairs to be swallowed up by the wall of fire, I know I can't leave him out here in the hall. I'm a civil servant and I took an oath, swearing to do everything I can to save every single person whether they are an innocent child or the piece of shit that started the fire in the first place. I will drag his worthless ass out of this burning building because it's my job, but I will absolutely make sure I get to Finnley first.

Figuring there's no way Jordan would have left Finnley alone, I go into the room he came out of when he confronted me, stepping over Jordan's unconscious body as I go. The smoke has gotten so thick I can barely see an inch in front of my face and with only one good, working eye, that's not a good thing. Pulling my leg back, I kick in the door to Finnley's bedroom. The smoke from the hall immediately billows into the room and I drop down on all fours to crawl inside.

"Finnley! Are you in here? Please, baby, answer me!" I shout as I crawl blindly through the room, moving my hands all around me in the hopes that I'll feel some part of her under my fingers.

Coughs wrack my body as I continue moving around the room, feeling my way and coming up completely empty. My heart drops as I quickly turn and make my way back out into the hall and over to the next bedroom.

With a quick glance downstairs, I see the fire has made its way down the hall and to the bottom step. Pieces of the house crash down from the ceiling and walls, completely engulfed in flames, and I know the only way we're going to be able to get out of this house is through one of these upstairs windows. Unfortunately, the fire is

so strong on the first floor that my men are never going to be able to get close enough to put a ladder against the house. They won't be able to reach the second floor and we won't be able to get out. There's no way the floor up here is going to hold much longer considering how fast the fire has spread along the ceiling on the first floor. If I don't find her quick and figure a way out, we're going to come crashing down to the first floor, right in the middle of the fire.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 8:57 am

Grabbing onto Jordan's still passed-out body, I drag him away from the stairs, deeper into the hall in case the fire makes its way up here before I can get back to him.

Bringing the neck of my shirt back up over my nose and mouth, I try to breathe in as little of the smoke-filled air as possible as I kick down the second door. Just like before, I immediately drop to my knees and start feeling around the room, shouting for Finnley.

Right when I start to lose hope and my body starts to shut down, reacting to the amount of smoke I've inhaled and the adrenaline slowly leaving me, my hand brushes against the warm, smooth skin of a leg.

"Finnley! Baby, can you hear me?" I shout as I quickly move my way up her body, my hands sliding up her legs. I wince when I feel rough, blistered skin every so often along the outside of one leg and I can't stop the sob that escapes my lips knowing she suffered burns.

My hands continue moving upward, realizing she's naked and there are more burns peppering most of the skin of her upper thighs, hips and waist. I want to scream and cry for her and what she went through before I got here, but I don't have time. I have to get her out of here. I have no idea how long she's been unconscious and no idea the amount of smoke she's inhaled.

I make it up to her face when I hear a loud creak and the sound of the floor on the other side of the house caving in. I can hear muffled screams and shouts from outside and I know I need to hurry.

Ripping the air tank off of my back, I quickly unhook the mask from the side of the tank and press it down over Finnley's face. The light from the moon coming in the window right above her is enough for me to just make out the features of her face and to see that the clear plastic mask isn't fogging up with the heat from her breaths and her chest isn't moving. These air tanks are demand valve, which means the person needs to be breathing in order for the air to hit their lungs.

"No! Oh Jesus, no! Finnley!" I scream through my tears as I lean down, pressing my ear against her chest to listen for her heartbeat, my own stuttering when I hear nothing but deadly silence.

Just then, the window above my head shatters. I quickly cover Finnley's face as pieces of glass rain down on top of us. I look up just as D.J. sticks his head inside the now open window.

"Can you lift her to me?" he shouts into the room, the sound of the house burning down around us so loud that I can barely hear him.

Getting up as fast as I can, I slide my arms under Finnley's back and legs and bring her up to my chest. I can just make out the red splotches of burned skin all over the lower half of her body as I bring her close to me and I feel something inside me break into a million pieces. I cradle the warmth of her body tightly to me, kissing the top of her head as I lift her through the broken window and into D.J.'s waiting arms. He moves her up and over his shoulder to make it easier to climb down the ladder, her head and arms draped down his back with his hand clutching firmly behind her knees.

Before he disappears from the window, I turn and yank the comforter off of the top of the bed, racing to the window and draping it over Finnley's naked body.

"She's not breathing, D.J.! Fuck! Just hurry!" I yell after him as he moves down the ladder with the ease of someone who has done this a million times. I see men from

two additional fire departments battle the blaze together all around the ladder now that the tanker has arrived. They're able to keep the fire away from this area for now, but I know it won't hold much longer.

DJ looks back up at me one last time before he gets to the bottom. "I'll take care of her Collin, just get your ass down here before the entire place blows."

Once the two of them are safely on the ground and I see D.J. racing towards the ambulance parked in the street, I turn and quickly make my way back through the room, trying not to slam into furniture since visibility in here is nil. The only thing keeping me sane right now is the knowledge that D.J. is a trained paramedic and so f**king amazing at it that I always ask him why the hell he never became a doctor. If anyone can help Finnley, it will be him.

The smoke has gotten impossibly thicker and I know I don't have much time. My lungs burn with every breath I take and I'm starting to get lightheaded from not having any good, clean air in my system for so long.

Jordan is still unconscious out in the hallway and doesn't even budge as I grab both of his wrists, pull them up over his head and drag him back into the room I just came from. As soon as I get to the window and crouch down next to him to heft him up over my shoulder, his eyes suddenly pop open and he shoves me roughly away. My body is so weak that I immediately fall backwards, my ass slamming into the ground.

Jordan begins coughing violently as he crab-crawls away from me, screaming at me as he goes. "STAY AWAY FROM ME! STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!"

I dive forward, grabbing onto his ankle and yank him towards me.

"Stop being an ass**le! I'm not going to hit you again. We need to get the f**k out of this house right now before it collapses."

He kicks his leg out, his foot connecting with my chest and I drop my hold on his leg while he scrambles up to his feet.

“No, no, no! Leave me, just f**king leave me!” he shouts.

I jump up to my feet and charge him. This motherfucker is the reason all of this happened. He started this fire, he hurt Finnley and now he won't f**king cooperate so I can get us both out of here without being killed.

I grab onto the front of his shirt and pull him towards me as hard as I can. He loses his footing and stumbles to the ground. I don't even bother trying to get him back up on his feet. While he screams and struggles against me, his feet digging into the carpet, I pull him towards the window using every last bit of energy left in me.

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“COLLIN! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING, GET DOWN THE LADDER!”

I hear D.J. yell from down below.

“Get your sorry ass up right now!” I shout down at Jordan as he continues to try and struggle away from me.

The sound of a small explosion downstairs rattles the entire house, sending me backwards. I let go of Jordan as my ass slams into the windowsill and I have to throw my arms out to either side of the window to prevent myself from tumbling backwards out to the ground below.

Smoke curls around me as the flames from down below make it upstairs, climbing along the hallway and bursting into the doorway. Jordan turns and stares at the fire, frozen in shock as it inches it’s way across the floor towards him.

“I just wanted you to burn,” Jordan mutters to himself, staring wide-eyed at the fire that’s dangerously close to his legs.

I could tell as soon as I saw him out in the hallway when he first confronted me that something wasn’t right with him. His eyes were unfocused and he had all the telltale signs of someone under the influence of something bad. He’s not making any sense right now and, as much as I want to continue shouting at him to get the f**k out of the house, something tells me he’s so far gone that he doesn’t even care anymore.

I soften my tone just like I would with any other victim I encounter out on a call to do what I can to ease their fears. “Hey, it’s alright. I don’t care about any of that. Let’s just get out of here, okay?”

Jordan shakes his head back and forth as he continues to stare at the flames. “I wanted your heart to blister with the pain of losing her, just like mine did. I know I never deserved her, I know I f**ked everything up, but she was mine. You shouldn’t get to make her happy if I couldn’t.”

The inflection in his voice has a singsong quality to it like he’s reading from a children’s book and that’s when I know he has officially lost his f**king mind.

I want nothing more than to just turn and race down the ladder right behind me and let him burn down with the house, but my conscience won’t let that happen. Everyone deserves to be saved. I push away from the window to try to grab him one more time when he speaks again.

“I never meant to kill her. I never meant for any of this to happen. I deserve this. I deserve to feel the heat and the fire and let it burn every inch of me for what I’ve done,” he mutters.

The fight leaves my body along with my good intentions. The heart that used to beat with the love and hope for the future that was finally within my grasp has been tossed into the fire right in front of me, scalding and melting with the burn of my pain.

“I wanted your heart to blister with the pain of losing her.”

He won. He got what he wanted.

My body slumps backwards until my ass hits the windowsill again.

He killed her. He killed her. He killed her.

Up until this moment, I still had hope that she would be okay. I still believed she could be saved. I knew D.J. would do everything within his power to bring her back

to me. My only goal was to get Jordan safely out of this house so that I could make my way to her.

This weak bastard sitting on the floor a few feet from me with the fire just inches away from his feet, he killed the only thing in my life worth living for. He couldn't handle the idea of her being happy without him, so he masterminded the ultimate revenge. He took her from this world, from this life, from me. I'll never again see her smile, hear her laugh or feel her lips against mine. I'll never get to tell her how much I love her, how much I've loved her every single day since I was fifteen years old. All those dreams, all those plans we made for the future while I held her body against mine and felt her heartbeat under the palm of my hand... ruined, all of it ruined. She's gone and nothing will ever be the same again.

Everything inside of me that I've known to be true, every instinct that told me no matter what he did, I needed to save him, it all disintegrates and I can't find it in me to care. I want him to die. He deserves to die. He took the only woman I've ever loved from me before I even had a chance to tell her.

I've made the decision to get onto the ladder behind me, climb down to safety and leave a man behind to burn. The ethics instilled in me, the ones I've imparted on every single man who has ever come through my firehouse, fade into nothing in the blink of an eye.

I turn my body to the side so I can swing one leg out of the open window until I'm straddling the sill. I look at the back of Jordan's head one last time, knowing as soon as I get on that ladder and leave him in here that I'll never be a fireman again. By turning my back on him, ignoring every single vow I've ever made, I'm saying goodbye to the only dream I ever had until I found my way back to Finnley. It's only fitting that I lose them both in one day.

Jordan's head suddenly whips around when he sees me exiting the window. I can tell

by the wild look of fear in his eyes that he suddenly realized what was about to happen to him. He was going to be left behind; left to burn alive.

Jordan lunges for me.

The entire foundation of the house begins to shake and I hear people screaming down below. I move to get on the ladder and, all of a sudden, a hand grabs onto me and pulls. The house begins to fall and I follow right behind.

Down

Down

Down, until there is nothing more.

Chapter 22—Up in Flames

IT BURNS, OH, God everything burns.

I want to scream in pain but my voice is trapped, stuck inside a throat that feels like it's been ripped to shreds and then lit on fire. Every breath I take hurts so badly that I just want to stop breathing altogether to make the pain go away. I want to open my eyes and see what the hell is going on, but every time I try to blink them open, the sting of tears blurs my vision and I quickly snap them closed.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 8:57 am

The smell of smoke and fire is burned into my nostrils, so strong that I can't stop the vomit from traveling up from my stomach. As I heave and cough and cry, lurching to the side to expel the bile that burns its way up my raw throat, I hear the shout of an unfamiliar voice right next to me.

“SHE’S BREATHING! Get me seventy-five cc’s of oxygen and ten milligrams of morphine.”

I feel a hand rubbing circles against my upper arm as my body is lifted up and onto what feels like a stretcher. I don’t know what’s happening. I want the pain to go away and I want Collin. Every time my body is jostled, I cry out in pain. The burning sensation on my legs and stomach is so painful that I’m certain my body is on fire.

“It’s okay, sweetie. You’re going to be okay. The medicine will kick in soon, I promise.”

I don’t recognize the voice speaking gently by my ear and I cry even harder, trying to block out the fear and the pain.

“Collin, where’s Collin? I need Collin,” I sob, the sounds of chaos surrounding me until I want to curl up into a ball and cover my ears.

“Shit, she’s asking for McDaniels,” the voice whispers.

I feel something hard and plastic pressed over my mouth and the cold air of fresh oxygen is pushed past my lips and into my lungs. I cough against the intrusion, my throat still burning in pain.

“It’s okay, sweetie, just take it nice and slow. I know it hurts.”

I want to scream at her but I don’t have the energy. She has no idea how much it hurts, no idea how much I want to claw and scratch at my own skin just to ease the burning. I feel a pinch in my upper arm and, seconds later, my thoughts begin to grow hazy and even more confusing.

“Collin, I need Collin,” I slur as the pain in my legs and torso slowly starts to disappear.

I feel myself being lifted again and the sound of doors slamming shut, the noise and shouts of people from moments ago immediately cut off. I drift in and out of consciousness, hearing soft voices and the muffled sound of a siren every so often.

“... no way he survived that fall. Did you see the way the house crumbled? I’m surprised D.J. was able to walk away considering he was still on the ladder when it fell.”

I try to force my mind to pay attention when I hear D.J.’s name but whatever they gave me is too strong. My brain is foggy and I can feel myself slowly going under.

“There’s no way McDaniels is still alive. No one could have survived a drop like that.”

As the darkness pulls me further and further away from reality, the blessed relief I should feel since my skin is no longer on fire is erased by the knowledge that I’ve lost him. My sweet, beautiful man is gone.

Gone before I could tell him I love him.

Gone before I could spend the rest of my life showing him just how much.

With one last sob before I let the oblivion consume me, I realize my life is over. I don't want to live one second on this earth if Collin isn't here with me. I don't care what happens to me, I don't care if the pain returns and swallows me whole. I don't care about anything but escaping from this hell and being with the man who saved me.

Chapter 23—Seventeen Seconds

THE DREAM IS so vivid that I do everything I can to fight my way out of it, but nothing works. I don't want to remember. I don't want to feel the pain and fear all over again, but I can do nothing to stop it. I see it all as clearly as if I'm living through it one more time.

The first time was bad enough.

The second time just might kill me.

I watched as the match in Jordan's hand fluttered to the ground, almost in slow motion. If only the fire that spread out between us as soon as the tiny little flame hit the ground moved as slow. I screamed at the top of my lungs, scrambling backwards as fast as I could. My hands and feet tangled together on the carpet and I slammed down onto my back as the fire closed the distance, the gas that coated my legs no match for the beast that latched onto me. I watched in horror as the flames rapidly swallowed my legs like the mouth of a fire-breathing dragon. I screamed in fear and agony as the heat singed my skin and scorched my flesh, the pain so intense I almost wanted to just let it take me.

Jordan stood by the door with a look of horror on his face as I ripped the robe from my body and wrapped it around my legs, smothering the fire as I kicked them across the ground and continued to scream in pain, inching across the carpet that was almost completely engulfed in flames from the gas he'd dumped.

I felt the fire licking against the skin of my side and hips as my back slammed against the corner of the wall. Rolling over onto my hands and knees, I cry and sob in pain as I slither on my belly across the tile in the hallway until I make it to the stairs. I crawl up each step as fast as my burned skin will allow. I've never felt pain like this before and it steals the breath from my lungs. I just needed to make it upstairs, up to one of the bedrooms where there was no smoke or fire. My entire body hurt so badly that I wasn't even sure if my skin was still burning or not. As soon as I got to the top step, a hand grabbed onto my hair and yanked me roughly backwards.

"No! You can't leave!" Jordan screamed as he tried to drag me back down the stairs. "The fire will erase everything. It will make it all go away. We need to make it go away!"

I couldn't go back down those stairs. If he got me back down there, I would die. I would never be able to make it out of this hell and I can't let that happen. I WON'T let it happen. Collin will be here soon. The neighbors must have seen the fire by now and even though Collin's department isn't the one that will respond, he's still on his way here after his shift. Collin will be here. I just needed to hold on for Collin.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 8:57 am

Drawing on every bit of the little strength I had left, I pulled my elbow forward and then slammed it back between Jordan's legs. He immediately released his hold on my hair and fell to his knees behind me. I let out the loudest, blood-curdling scream I could muster as I dove forward and crawled the last few feet into my spare bedroom, slamming the door closed behind me to keep the smoke out.

The burnt skin of my legs and stomach scraped across the carpet as I inched my way closer to the window. I just needed to get to the window. There was fresh air and freedom through that glass. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I bit back more screams of pain as I collapsed a few feet from the window.

It hurt so much. Everything burned. I was afraid to look down at my body, sure that my skin had melted off by now. I was in agony and the coughs wracking my body from the smoke I'd inhaled amplified the pain until I felt my vision start to fade. I rolled over onto my back and stared up at the window above me, willing the pain to disappear. I couldn't take it anymore. I just wanted it to end.

From somewhere far away, I heard someone scream my name.

Collin. He came.

The burning of my skin engulfed me until there was nothing left but pain.

I knew he'd come. I knew he'd save me.

I counted my breaths, each one more painful than the last until I felt my heart begin to slow.

Thirteen

Fourteen

It hurts, oh, God it hurts so much.

Fifteen

Sixteen.

My eyes slowly closed as my last breath escaped my lungs.

Seventeen.

I'm screaming. The pain is so great and my voice is so loud but I can't make it stop, even when gentle hands smooth my hair away from my face and a soft voice tries to quiet me. My eyes fly open and I feel tears pouring down my cheeks as I stare frantically around the stark, white room. An oxygen mask is quickly placed over my face as I'm lightly pushed back down in bed. I sob quietly as the dream comes back to me in flashes.

The fire.

The burning.

The pain.

The words from what must have been my ambulance ride after I'd been rescued from the fire float through my mind over and over and I cry even harder.

There's no way McDaniels is still alive.

There's no way McDaniels is still alive.

There's no way McDaniels is still alive.

Maybe they were wrong. Maybe the drugs they gave me were playing with my mind and I misheard them. It can't be true.

With a shaking hand, I reach up and move the oxygen mask away from my face as the nurse sticks a needle into my I.V. and pushes the syringe down, the pain medicine quickly making its way through the tube and spreading into my veins.

"Collin, where's Collin?" I ask her with a raspy voice.

She looks at me in confusion as she pulls the blankets up around my body and tucks me back in. I remember the paramedics saying something about a fall. I remember hearing him scream my name and I know that wasn't a dream. He was in the house. He came to save me.

"The man who was in the house with me. Is he here?"

I watch the confusion leave her face, quickly replaced with sadness that she's unable to hide. "Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. He didn't make it out."

She moves the oxygen mask back over my face and starts talking about my injuries and how long it will take me to recover. I don't even hear her words. The pain in my chest hurts greater than the throbbing of my scorched flesh. Ignoring my bandaged legs and stomach and the I.V. attached to my arm, I roll over onto my side and curl up in a ball. I never thought my heart could possibly break a second time for Collin, but it does. It shatters into a thousand little pieces when I think of his smile and his touch and how he saved me, in more ways than one. I'll never recover from this pain. I'll never be able to put my heart back together again. I squeeze my eyes closed and

wish that I had died in the fire right along with him.

Chapter 24—Things We Lost in the Fire

“OPEN YOUR EYES, Lee.”

I hear his voice in my dream and I refuse to open my eyes. I want to stay right here in the haze of pain medication so I can hear him say my name over and over. I don't know how long I've been asleep and I don't care. I'm not ready for reality, but I know as soon as I open my eyes it will come crashing down around me. I feel a hand rubbing up and down my arm and I want to scream at the nurse to stop touching me. There's only one person who can ease my pain and he's gone.

I curl my body into a tighter ball and try to will the tears away, but there's no use. They stream down my face and soak the pillow under my cheek.

“Don't cry, baby. Please don't cry.”

The sound of his voice is so real and so full of anguish that I have no choice but to crack open my eyes. When I see Collin's crystal blue eyes filled with tears just inches from my face, I can't stop the sob that flies past my lips. I jerk my body upright, shouting in pain when my bandaged legs brush roughly against the bed. I immediately push the pain away, launching myself forward and into his arms. They wrap tightly around my back as he leans into me, pulling me as close to his body as possible. It's not close enough. It will never be close enough. The tears fall faster down my cheeks as I press my face into the crook of his neck and breathe him in through my sobs.

“I thought I'd lost you,” he whispers brokenly as he moves his arms from around me and cups my face in his palms, pulling me away from his neck so he can stare into my eyes.

“Oh, God, am I dreaming? Please don’t let this be a dream. They told me you were dead. They told me you didn’t make it,” I whimper, crying so hard now that I’m close to hyperventilating.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 8:57 am

“Shhh, it’s okay. You’re killing me, Lee, please don’t cry. I’m okay. I’m right here and I’m okay,” he reassures me, wiping away each tear that falls with his thumbs.

I try to calm down and slow my breathing as I run my hands over every inch of him that I can reach, making sure that he’s real and safe and alive. I slide my hands up his arms, over his shoulders, run them across his face and then back down his arms again, feeling the warm, hard muscles and sighing in relief.

“I love you. I love you so much,” I tell him, bringing my hands up to rest over top of his on my face. I don’t care if it’s too much too soon. I don’t care about anything but not wasting another minute of our time together. I almost lost Collin without him ever knowing how I feel and I’m not going to make that same mistake twice.

“Oh, baby,” he whispers. “I thought I was too late. When I saw you lying there in that bedroom and you weren’t breathing, I wanted to die. You are everything to me, Finnley, everything. I have loved you since I was fifteen years old and I’m never going to stop.”

The tears start all over again with his words and he quickly leans forward and presses his lips to mine. I never thought I’d see him again. I never thought I’d hear his voice or feel his lips against mine and it’s almost too much to take. I’m overwhelmed with emotion and relief that he’s okay. He’s here and he’s alive and I can kiss and touch him whenever I want.

He moves back and that’s when I finally look down and see that he’s in a wheelchair.

“Oh, my God. What happened?” I ask in horror as I see a hard plaster cast that goes

from the tip of his left foot all the way up to his knee as well as a few bandages here and there on both of his arms that I didn't even notice when I was running my hands over them.

"It's just a broken leg and a few minor burns. I'll be out of commission for a little bit but it's fine," he explains. "After I got you out of the house and D.J. took you down the ladder so he could start working on you, I tried to get Jordan out of the house. He fought me and refused to leave. When he told me he'd killed you, I stopped giving a shit if he lived or died and I was halfway out the window when the house started to collapse. Thank God D.J. never listens to a damn word I say. He passed you off to another paramedic and raced back up the ladder, grabbed onto my shirt and yanked me out of the window. He lost his hold on me when the ladder started falling with the house and I dropped two stories and landed on my leg."

My eyes widen in horror as he explains what he went through, but he refuses to let me feel even a moment of guilt.

"Wipe that look off your face right now. It's not your fault and I'm going to be just fine. I'm more concerned with you. How do you feel? Are you in any pain right now?"

The adrenaline that shot through my veins with the news of Collin's survival quickly fades, replaced by throbbing pain in my legs and hips where I sustained the worst burns. Collin winces when he sees the look of discomfort on my face and quickly presses the button on the side of my bed to call the nurse.

She races into the room and immediately fills my I.V. with another shot of morphine, making me lie back down in bed and strapping the oxygen mask back on my face.

Before she leaves, she narrows her eyes at Collin. "You should be in bed yourself, breathing in some of the same nice, clean oxygen Mr. McDaniels."

He gives her a heart-stopping grin as he grabs my hand and brings it up to his mouth, placing a kiss on my palm. “You’re going to have to bring in another tank then, Stephanie, because I’m not leaving my girl’s side ever again.”

She tsks him but can’t hide the smile on her face as she leaves the room.

I can feel the medicine begin to work its magic, the numbness inching it’s way up my legs and hips until there’s nothing but blessed relief and my eyes grow heavy with sleep.

“Close your eyes, baby. I’m not going anywhere, even if Nurse Ratched tries to drag me out of here,” Collin whispers with a laugh close to my ear as my eyelids flutter closed.

I let sleep consume me as I feel Collin’s hand smooth across my forehead and down the side of my face. Everything will be okay. I know that Collin hasn’t told me everything. Based on the way he quickly glossed over the fact that Jordan refused to leave the burning house, I have to assume he probably didn’t make it out alive. I know now that when I asked the nurse earlier if Collin made it out of the house, she naturally assumed I was referring to Jordan. My medical records would still list him as my husband and I’m sure that’s who she thought I was so upset about.

I wonder if it’s wrong that I don’t feel even an inkling of sadness that he’s gone? I built a life with that man. He picked up the pieces of my broken heart after Collin left and he was my whole world for over half of my life.

Seventeen years together.

Seventeen thousand problems.

Seventeen days with a man from my past who is now my future.

Seventeen minutes in hell as the house Jordan and I built together burned down around us.

Seventeen breaths until I took what I thought would be my last.

It turns out, this story does have a happy ending. It wasn't too late. We still have plenty of time to build a new future.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," Collin repeats softly in my ear as I drift off to sleep, dreaming about the future that stretches far and wide in front of us.

Epilogue

FOUR MONTHS LATER...

I watch from across the room as Finnley chats to a group of people, smiling to myself as her hand comes up and tugs on her earlobe.

Quickly making my way over to her side, I wrap my hand around hers and bring it down between us.

“Calm down, you have no reason to be nervous,” I whisper in her ear.

She excuses herself from the group and tugs me a few feet away until we’re out of earshot of other people. “How in the hell did you know I was nervous?”

I smirk down at her and shake my head. “Baby, you always tug on your ear when you’re nervous. You did it right before the first time I kissed you at the end of tenth grade, when I stuck my hand down your pants three months later, five seconds before you gave me my first blow job and-”

“Alright, smartass, you made your point,” she tells me with a laugh, cutting me off. “What’s the deal with D.J. and Phina?”

Glancing in the direction where she’s looking, I see the two of them on the far side of the room, quietly arguing. Phina starts gesturing wildly with her hands and then D.J. points at her and says something that makes her face fall. I hold my breath, assuming he said something really stupid and she’s probably going to smack him across the

face, but it never happens. She says one more thing to him and then turns and walks away. D.J. grits his teeth, shoves his hands in his pockets angrily and then storms off in the opposite direction.

I have no idea what the hell that was all about. D.J. hasn't mentioned one word about Phina since that night at Slammers when he drunkenly made out with her at the table in front of everyone. I hope to God she doesn't have some sort of misplaced infatuation with the guy. D.J. will never settle down, no matter how hot the girl is.

"Shit, I better go see what that was about," Finnley states quietly, pulling away from me.

Grabbing her hand, I bring her back towards me. "Leave it alone for now, babe. This is your night and I don't want anything ruining it. We'll deal with those two later."

She sighs, looking off in the direction Phina went for a few seconds before turning to face me. "Have you seen all the people who showed up tonight? This is insane."

Her hand starts to move back up to her ear as she glances around the room but she quickly drops it when she realizes I'm watching her with a huge grin on my face.

"Can you be serious for one minute? Someone from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation is here tonight. The GUGGENHEIM, Collin, the f**king Guggenheim in New York City! I think I'm going to throw up," Finnley complains, pressing her hand to her stomach.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her close and kiss the top of her head. It's almost hard to believe how much has happened since I first saw her again at Slammers all those months ago. After Finnley was released from the hospital a week after the fire, she moved into my house since there was nothing left of her own. While her burns healed, my broken leg mended and she dealt with the bullshit of filing the

claims for her homeowner's insurance, she poured herself into her art. She worked night and day on new pieces and, when I wasn't helping her light them up in the backyard, she was curled up next to me on my couch coming up with new ideas in sketch pads.

I kept a close eye on her and swore to myself I wouldn't let it get to me if she ever showed even an inkling of sadness about Jordan dying in the fire. Regardless of what he'd done and how close he came to bringing us both down with him, I would never fault her for her grief. Seventeen years is a long time to spend with someone and, even though it didn't end well, I know she had many good years with him and a lot of memories that wouldn't just disappear over night.

Every time she woke up screaming in the middle of the night, I'd kiss away her tears and hold her close. Each time she got quiet and stared off in the distance at nothing, I'd kiss the top of her head, reminding her how much I loved her and that I was right here if she needed me.

I didn't agree with her decision not go to Jordan's funeral, but it was hers to make and I didn't pressure her. It's not that I expected her to go and cry over his casket, I just didn't want her to have any regrets. Even though she's angry and hurt by what he's done, I don't want her to look back ten, fifteen, twenty years down the road and wish she'd said good-bye to him.

I hovered over her that entire day until she finally threw her sketchpad on the table and glared at me.

"If you don't find something to do, I'm going to kick your ass. I'm fine, Collin. I have no regrets about not going to his funeral, I swear to you. I don't need to go to that f**king cemetery and pretend that I'm sad just because people say it will give me closure. I got my closure the day I filed for separation. I'm not going to waste one minute of my life mourning someone who tried to take you away from me."

Seeing her attitude and fiery spirit come back to life was proof enough that she was going to be okay.

The shock came a month after the fire when I brought in the mail that included Finnley's, since she had everything forwarded to my address. When I handed her an envelope with Jordan's parent's return address in the upper left hand corner, she opened it quickly and with confusion. When she pulled out the letter inside and read through it, she let out a small sob and her hand flew up to her mouth.

That was the one and only time she ever cried over Jordan Castillo and his family after he died. Even though he made her life hell off and on for seventeen years and came close to ending it with one swipe of a match and his mother did her best to make Finnley feel guilty for all of their problems, at least they did one thing right.

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Inside the envelope was a letter from Mrs. Castillo. She said she wanted to tell Finnley this information at the funeral, but she understood why Finnley didn't attend and thought it best to write to her instead of upsetting her with a phone call. The letter explained that they had filed a claim for Jordan's life insurance policy and that as soon as it came in, every single penny of the \$300,000 would be Finnley's. With Jordan's never-ending cycle of unemployment, Finnley had just assumed he'd stopped making the payments long ago and even if he'd kept up with them, the money wouldn't go to her since she'd filed for divorce before the fire and his parents would most likely do everything in their power to keep her from it.

Mrs. Castillo explained that she and Mr. Castillo had covered Jordan's payments when he couldn't make them and never let the policy lapse. Finnley was pissed at first, figuring they were only doing this out of guilt because of what their son had done and that they never took her claims of addiction seriously. When I couldn't get through to her that she should take the money, I brought in the big guns and called her mother over. It only took a few words from Finnley's mom to convince her that she should let the Castillo's do whatever they could to try and make things up to her. Losing a child would be bad enough, but knowing that he almost took several lives in the process would be pure agony. If giving her that insurance money eased some of their guilt, why shouldn't Finnley benefit from it? She'd suffered enough at the hands of their son and it was time for her to live her life to the fullest.

With Finnley being off of work for so long to let her burns heal, her bills and those that Jordan left behind were quickly piling up. No matter how many times I told her not to worry about anything and that I would take care of her, she put her foot down. She spent too many years not standing up for herself and it was extremely hard for her to take any sort of handout, even if it was from me. She was fiercely independent

and determined to take care of everything on her own and I can't say that it didn't make me love her even more than I already did. I just hated the fact that she was still stuck in the same place and not able to fully move forward with her life.

With that check and the chunk of change she got from her homeowner's insurance, Finnley was able to pay off every single bill, quit her job and immediately enroll in art school. After a few weeks, her teachers were so impressed with her work that they invited her to showcase some of her art tonight at a local gallery. Every time I look around the room and see one of her gunpowder designs hanging on the walls, my chest swells with pride.

"I've got a great idea to get your mind off of the fact that there are fancy people looking at your art and thinking about buying it," I tell her as she turns in my arms and slides her hands around my waist. "I saw an empty supply closet next to the bathroom a few minutes ago. How about we see if my twenty-second record can make it down to ten?"

She laughs in my arms and stands up on her toes to kiss my lips, peppering kisses along my cheek until she gets to my ear. She runs her tongue along my earlobe and I shiver, my dick hardening in my charcoal dress pants.

"Do you want to f**k me in a supply closet, Mr. McDaniels?" she whispers in my ear.

My hands tighten on her hips and I pull her closer so she can feel how much I want to do just that. Turning my head, I whisper the same words I said to her that day outside of her office by the tree.

"You're playing with fire, Lee."

She takes a step back from me, reaching for my hand and tugging me across the

room, right towards the supply closet.

“It’s a good thing we’re not afraid of a little fire then,” she tells me with a smile as she backs into the dark room and pulls me in behind her, flipping on the light as soon as we get inside.

I kick the door closed with my foot, wrap my arms around her waist and turn, pressing her back into the wall next to the door. She wraps her legs around my hips and I push myself against her.

Making quick work of the button and zipper of my pants, I free my c**k and slide the thong she’s wearing under her dress to the side. In one quick thrust, I’m deep inside of her welcoming heat, right where I belong. She wraps her arms around my neck and locks her ankles together above my ass. As I begin a slow, pounding rhythm inside of her, my hand skims along her upper thigh. She winces in embarrassment and reaches down to try and remove my hand from her leg.

“The scars... don’t, they’re so ugly,” she whispers.

I hold myself still inside of her and look down at her thigh, puckered with scars where they took skin grafts for the patches of second-degree burns on her shins, calves and hips. Running the tips of my fingers all over the red marks on her skin, I lean forward and place a kiss on the tip of her nose.

“They aren’t ugly. Nothing about you is ugly, Lee. These scars are just proof that you’re a fighter and you survived. I’m never going to stop touching them and kissing them and being thankful every single day that you AND your scars are here with me, so you better get used to it.”

She cocks her head and smiles at me, wrapping her hands around the back of my neck and pulling me closer. “You’re crazy and I love you so much.”

I immediately start moving inside of her again, doing everything I can to make her forget her anxiety over wearing a dress for the first time since the fire and the fact that people are right now looking at her art and thinking about buying it to display in their own galleries.

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She has no idea that my own anxiety is threatening to overwhelm me. As I slam in and out of her and bring my hand between our bodies to rub my fingers over her clit, I try not to think about the items in the back pocket of my pants.

As she comes hard and fast around my c**k and I follow quickly behind her, I try not to allow my nerves to get the better of me.

I make sure she doesn't see the tension on my face as we right our clothes or feel how hard my hand shakes as I hold it against her lower back and lead her out the door and back into the main part of the gallery.

When we're standing in front of the first design I ever watched her create, I quickly stop and turn around to face her.

"It seemed fitting to do this right here," I tell her with a smile, tilting my head in the direction of the Japanese pagoda art piece that first brought us together so many years ago.

She looks at me in confusion as I grab both of her hands, rubbing my thumbs across the tops of them.

"Fire brought us together seventeen years ago and fire almost ripped us apart seventeen years later. It left behind a few burns and some scars that will never completely heal, but it didn't destroy us. Nothing can destroy us, Finnley. It's been seventeen weeks since I almost lost you. I can handle anything that life throws at me, but I can't handle even a day without you by my side."

Dropping one of her hands, I reach into my back pocket, pull out a folded piece of paper and hand it to her.

She takes it from my hands, wiping a few stray tears from her cheeks as she unfolds the paper. “If you’re breaking up with me right now, this is seriously the **WORST** break-up in the history of break-ups.”

I chuckle at her and shake my head. “Just read it.”

She looks away from me and stares down at the piece of paper. I can see the exact moment when she realizes what it is. Her mouth drops open and she gasps. With a little help from her parents and a lot of digging through their attic, they were able to help me put this together and do what I can to make up for the biggest mistake I’ve ever made. When she looks back up at me, I slowly get down on one knee and hold the other item from my pocket out in front of her: a black velvet box with the lid popped open so she can see the diamond ring nestled inside.

The note flutters to the ground as Finnley’s hands come up to either side of my face and she stares down at me with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Yes! Absolutely, without a doubt, yes!” she exclaims with a watery laugh before she closes the distance between us and presses her lips to mine. I quickly stand and wrap my arms around her, the crowd that gathered around us erupting into cheers and applause. As I hold her close and we rock back and forth in each other’s arms, I glance down at the note on the floor and smile.