



OVERDRIVE
CHLOE COLE



Dedication

For Mark Simione, for letting me
pick your brain about all the cars.
Hope I got it right!

Chapter One

“Mother calling,” the drone-like voice of Mac’s cellphone announced.

“Shit.” He gripped the wheel tighter, weighing his options. If he didn’t answer now, she’d stalk him all day until he did, and he had a lot on his plate. Might as well get it over with.

“Pick up,” he growled to the device.

A moment later his mother’s voice came on the line.

“Mackenzie?”

“Hello, *Mother*.” He gave a half-smile when he realized he’d been subconsciously mimicking Newman from *Seinfeld* in his delivery. If she caught on to his less than enthusiastic greeting, she didn’t let on.

“I’ve found a lovely young lady to attend the Friedman Benefit on Saturday with you,” she said without preamble.

“I’m well, and yourself?”

She released a long-suffering sigh. “Fine, have it your way. How *are* you, my darling son, future creator of grandchildren, fruit of my loins?” she gushed.

He winced. Men should never have to hear about their mother's loins. Wasn't that a rule somewhere? And the talk of grandchildren was nearly as bad. He wasn't even dating anyone, but that had never stopped her before. It was his fault this time. He should have known better than to bait her when she was clearly on a mission.

"I'm sure you have all day to waste on pleasantries, what with having a schedule like some sort of gypsy, but I've actually got a very busy day ahead of me," she continued, reverting back to her normal, clipped tone.

Yeah, because tennis at the club and making sure that the cook had her dinner instructions was far more taxing than building an architectural firm from the ground up.

“I know this comes as a shock to you, I’m pretty booked today as well. I’m on my way to meet a client. Can I call you tonight?”

“I only need a minute to confirm that you’ll take Melissa Figbert to the benefit, then you can go to your little meeting.”

Mild annoyance heated to anger. He usually managed his mother pretty well, but the patronizing jabs

about his job were wearing on his nerves. “One, it’s not a ‘little’ meeting. It’s actually a very big meeting that could land me an extremely lucrative contract with a new client. Two, I don’t even know who Melissa Figbert is. And three, what the hell kind of name is Figbert?”

She must have recognized she was losing him and backpedaled. “Don’t get all up in arms. I didn’t mean anything by that. I’m sure this is very important. To you,” she amended.

Well played, Mother.

“As for Melissa,” she continued.

“The girl is lovely. Elegant, sweet and very cultured. She went to Vassar and has returned to Rhode Island to start working at her father’s firm. The Figberts are relatively new to the area, but not to the money. She’d be a wonderful match for you. Lovely peaches-and-cream complexion, stunning white-blond hair. The two of you would make gorgeous babies.”

“I haven’t even met her and you’re making our babies?” He blew out a sigh and resigned himself to the inevitable. His mother was on the Friedman board of trustees, and he’d already agreed

to go to the fundraiser. Plus, it wasn't like he had a date.

Sometimes it was easier to sacrifice the battle to save your strength for the war. Nobody knew that better than him. Except maybe his dad.

"Fine. Tell her I'll pick her up at six o'clock. Text me her address."

"Darling, I don't text. I'll call you day of and you can write it down on a piece of paper like a civilized person."

"In one point four miles, turn left," his GPS intoned.

"I have to go, Mother. Talk to you later." He tapped his Bluetooth to disconnect without waiting for a

reply. That would cost him later, but the small rebellion made him smile. At least he wouldn't be the only one annoyed by their conversation.

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. That had to be a record. They'd been on the phone less than a minute and she'd sucked at least twenty percent of the energy from his body. She was like a psychic vampire. How his father had managed to deal with her for the past thirty years, he didn't know. Worse than the whole life-sucking thing, she also never seemed satisfied. She was forever telling

the poor bastard what to do and how to do it. Not that Mac had the right to complain too much. His father had taken the brunt of his mother's crazy more times than not, shielding Mac from her need to control everything around her.

“Turn left onto Wawaset Boulevard.”

He hit his blinker and stopped at the four-way stop sign before proceeding. He rolled forward as he refocused his attention on the upcoming pitch. He hadn't been joking when he'd said it was a very important meeting and he needed to make sure he brought his A-

game.

Halfway through the turn, a flash of red intruded on his peripheral, cutting his musings short. A Nissan was barreling straight at him, showing no indication of stopping or slowing down. He instinctively stomped on the gas, hoping to complete the turn before impact, but the other car was moving too fast. Even as it careened through the four-way stop sign straight for his passenger door, his fear was tempered by one last, comforting thought.

If the crash didn't kill him, he was going to have the *perfect* excuse

to go see Frankie Sepkaski.

A clang ricocheted through the interior of the garage, and Frankie yanked the headphones down around her neck, hitting pause on the AC/DC song blaring from her iPod. She shuffled her feet, rolling the creeper from beneath the GTO she was working on. Standing, she gave her back a quick stretch before walking over to the office door.

“Just a sec,” she called as she wiped her hands on the rag stuffed in the pocket of her overalls.

“No problem,” a male voice

responded through the door.

She closed her eyes and bit back a groan. That husky timbre was so distinct that there was no mistaking it. Mac Galbraith. He'd brought a car by the garage a couple weeks earlier, and she was still having sexy dreams about him. She couldn't handle having him around more than once a month. Her lady parts would literally implode with lust. Granted, she'd taken matters into her own hands to dull the edge a little when the situation became unmanageable. But even at that, her body knew what it wanted and was rebelling against the distinct

lack of Mac.

She resisted the urge to fluff her ponytail and pasted a flirtatious smile on her face as she opened the door. "Hey, Mac. Didn't expect to see you until next month," she said, eyeing the tan cashmere sweater and faded jeans that clung to his backside in the best way.

He turned and sent her a sheepish grin. She gasped as she took in his appearance.

"That bad?" he asked with a chuckle.

"What the hell happened to you?" Her initial fear upon seeing his injuries had faded somewhat

with his reassuring smile, but his face was a total mess. A mottled yellow and purplish bruise circled one warm, hazel eye, and a small but jagged cut bisected his eyebrow.

“Car accident. Guy ran through a four-way stop and hit me pretty hard. I’m fine, but I got this shiner, some bruises and —”

She let out a theatrical squeak and staggered back. “Which car?”

“Frankie.” His face clouded with semi-mock grief as he lifted a hand to his heart. “I don’t know how to tell you this...”

She gave a solemn nod. “It’s

okay, I can take it. Do it fast. Like a Band-Aid.”

His smoky bass held a hint of repressed mirth. “The sixty-nine Trans Am.”

Ouch. That was one of his favorites, and hers for that matter. Smashing it had to hurt more than the shiner. She arched her back and raised two fists to the sky. “Why?” she cried on a melodramatic sob, cursing the gods.

He didn't try to contain it any longer, the laughter bubbling over. He groaned simultaneously and held a hand to his side. “Stop, stop. I'm still a little sore today, and

you're killing me."

She winced. "Aw, sorry about that, pal. You sure you're really all right?"

"Yeah, banged up, but okay. Missed an important meeting, but was able to reschedule, which was a relief."

"And the other guy?"

"Same. Fractured his arm and got some burns from the air bag powder, but nothing major."

She'd figured as much based on his demeanor, but the confirmation eased the remaining tension that had been gripping her neck like a vise since he'd walked in looking

like hot death.

“Glad to hear it, seriously.”

He nodded his thanks and tweaked her ponytail. “I appreciate your concern. I gotta tell you, though, it’d probably go a long way in the healing process if you finally agreed to go out with me.”

Her heart thumped harder like it did every time he asked her out, but she shook her head anyway. “Guess you’re looking at the slow boat to recovery then. I’m sure you’ve heard, I’m the love-’em-and-leave-’em type, and that could be very bad for business relationships. Especially with you

being my best customer.”

“You’ve got to settle down sometime,” he reasoned, his sexy smile never wavering.

“Even if you were the guy to change my wicked ways, now’s not the time for me to settle down with anyone. I’ve got too much on my plate for anything more than a laugh or two.”

Dark brows winged upward, and he let out a snort. “As opposed to any time over the past eighteen months that I’ve asked you? If I didn’t know how much time you actually spent in this place, your determination to crush my

confidence might actually be doing some damage. It didn't hurt that I had to fight eight women off to get out of the grocery store this morning, either. Some people think I'm a catch, you know."

She did know, but she rolled her eyes anyway. "Dude, have you looked in a mirror lately? You're not at your best right now." She was rewarded with a flash of his dimples. He might be kidding about the grocery-store part, but she wouldn't be surprised if it was true. He was a real showstopper, even in his current condition. Too bad she'd sworn off men. "I don't

think I need to worry about bruising your titanium ego. I'm just here to make sure it doesn't run unchecked."

"In that case, thanks. I appreciate your efforts to keep me in line," he deadpanned.

She inclined her head. "No problem."

He grinned again, and her eyes were drawn to his mouth. His lips were so pretty. Firm but beautifully shaped. She couldn't count the times she'd imagined them on her neck. Her breast. Her hip. Her —

"Frankie?" His gruff voice cut into her fantasy. The smile melted

away as his heated gaze snagged hers.

“I-um...when can I see the Trans Am?” she mumbled, cheeks burning. “Is it driveable?”

A long beat passed while he seemed to weigh whether to call her on her obvious preoccupation with his mouth. He shook his head and sighed. “Not even close. It’s in pretty bad shape. I was going to have Tub bring it in on the flatbed later.”

Tub owned the garage down the road. He was the go-to guy for hauling cars around town, and he also fixed most of the family cars in

the area. When her dad had opened the garage right up the street, Tub had taken it personally. It was a couple years before he realized that Big Frank wasn't trying to horn in on his business. Frank's was a specialty shop for vintage cars, and this town was, indeed, big enough for the both of them. Ever since then, they'd enjoyed an easy, symbiotic relationship. Tub had sent many a job their way and vice versa. He and Frankie had continued that tradition for the past year, since her dad's death.

She cleared her throat to ease the sudden tightness. "Meh. Last time,

Tub dragged a sixty-nine Mustang Boss in with a tow truck. I could've killed him. Who slaps a hook on a vintage, sixty thousand dollar car? He's a frigging Neanderthal sometimes. Make sure he actually uses the flatbed this time."

"Aye aye, Captain," Mac barked, snapping off a two-finger salute. "Where's Dan today, anyway?" he asked, peering around her into the garage.

Danny was her body guy. While she made the engines purr, he painstakingly rediscovered the beauty of the old machines and made them sparkle.

“He’s on vacation until next week, but at least I can get started on her innards.”

“Sounds good. Give me a call tomorrow after you have a look. If we’ve got it on the lift anyway, I’m thinking I might want to make a couple modifications.”

He turned to go, and she tamped down a surge of irrational disappointment. “Will do. See ya,” she called after him, wincing at the wistful tone that had wormed its way into her voice.

He stopped and faced her again, eyeing her thoughtfully. “It’s lunchtime. Are you hungry? I could

take you out for a bite.”

She peered down at her filthy clothes and gave her oily-covered fingers a wiggle. “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. Imagine how people would react if you were seen with me? And like this, no less?” She let out a crack of laughter she hoped didn’t sound bitter.

“Who cares what anyone else thinks?”

“Really? Imagine how your mother would react seeing you with the grease monkey from Big Frank’s Garage.”

“It’s no one else’s business, least of all my mother’s,” he said, closing

the distance between them. "I want it to be about you and me."

She'd known a lot of Mimi Fairchild-Galbraiths in her life, and they'd done quite a number on her psyche. She wasn't cultured enough, her father's business wasn't highbrow enough, their pockets weren't deep enough. It wore on a girl after a while and was a big part of why she'd rebelled as a teen. Well, that and the incident with Nicky Melita. After ten years, that reputation continued to precede her, except now, instead of letting it hurt her, she embraced it. Still, the last thing she needed was

to put herself back in the line of fire by being seen with the town's golden boy.

His hazel eyes turned a dark mossy green and she took an involuntary step closer. The minty scent of his warm breath washed over her lips as he tipped his head toward her. Their bodies were nearly touching now, the rise and fall of his chest growing more rapid. If she leaned even an inch in his direction, they'd be torso to torso. She could run her hands over that —

Cashmere. Jesus. She'd almost gotten grease all over his

ridiculously gorgeous and outrageously expensive sweater. That was exactly the reminder she needed to bring her back to reality.

She dragged a breath in through her nose and stepped back. "I can't," she mumbled lamely.

"You know what, Frankie? I think you can. And I also have a sneaking suspicion you really want to."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off before she could. "Not lunch then, but what about dinner? Then you'll have time to shower and change. We don't even have to call it a date. It'll just be

two friends sharing a meal. What do you say?"

His earnest gaze held hers, and she couldn't look away.

"Say yes," he urged softly.

Her fears crumbled under the weight of his stare, and suddenly it seemed silly to deny herself the pleasure of his company. As friends. "Yes."

His smile could have powered a football stadium. She couldn't stop herself from grinning back.

"Not around here, though," she added hastily.

"Deal. I'll pick you up at seven," he said. "Now, I'm leaving before

you find a reason to change your mind.”

The door hadn't even finished closing behind his fine ass when she started to have regrets. Part of her – the wild child she'd never quite managed to squash completely – quivered in anticipation of their non-date. The rest of her dreaded the thought of her name being on the lips of the townsfolk again, and if by chance they ran into anyone, this would surely cause a stir. Times like these she wished her dad was around more than ever. He would've given her his patented helpless stare,

hauled her in for a self-conscious bear hug and said, “You’re young, healthy, beautiful and brilliant, and this is what you spend your time worrying about? Go out there and live your life. Fuck those people if they don’t like it.”

She had no memory of her mom, but based on the TV mothers she’d watched obsessively growing up, she was pretty sure that wasn’t how a mom might have handled it. But like with all the issues he hadn’t known how to deal with, at the end of the day, Big Frank had always managed to say the right thing. So what if the delivery was a

little coarse?

God, she missed him. Tears pricked the back of her eyelids and she blinked furiously to ward them off. If there was no crying in baseball, there was sure as hell no crying in Big Frank's Garage. That had been the rule since she was four years old, and she wasn't about to start breaking it now.

Too bad she wasn't as disciplined when it came to her own rules. She had a strong feeling that by the end of the night the ones she'd created specifically for dealing with Mac Galbraith would go up in flames.

Chapter Two

Mac stood on the third level of his garage and peered around. After spending less than thirty minutes showering, shaving and getting dressed, he'd been looking at cars for over an hour. Most women would appreciate the scent of good cologne or the feel of a hand-tailored jacket. Maybe some flowers. Not his woman. Correction. Not this woman. Frankie wasn't his yet, but now that she'd given him a glimmer of a chance, he was going pedal to the

metal to change that.

He had every intention of starting off on a high note. So did he go with sleek, understated power, a purring engine under the hood with a smooth ride? Or maybe go for some nostalgia, the kitsch and fun of a seafoam '50's classic that made the passengers feel like they should be drinking malts and making out at the drive-in?

He closed his eyes and pictured Frankie, her long chestnut hair swept up into a thick ponytail. Haphazard, practical and dead sexy. The length of her neck was a

constant lure, framed by the vee of her overalls. She wore them tight, almost like a dare, and they clung in all the right places. Her full breasts strained the zipper, and he imagined pressing close, breathing in her scent, laying soft, sucking kisses in the valley between them until she urged him lower. His own zipper grew strained at the thought.

Focus.

What car to set the tone? How did he want Frankie to feel? She'd already seen more than half of his collection. Tonight he needed to wow her.

His wondering gaze lit on the AC Cobra and held. It was like Carroll Shelby had designed the car forty-five years ago especially for this night. Pure, unadulterated power. Four hundred and twenty-five thundering horses with barely enough car between them and the road. This wasn't a car for cruising, this was a car that needed to be driven.

Decision made, he approached the safe on the wall and punched in a series of numbers. When it opened, he selected the keys for bay number eight. He approached the vehicle, running a hand over the

dark red paint with satisfaction.
Frankie was going to love it.

He slid behind the wheel and slipped the key into the ignition. His heart thumped with a boyish glee as the engine snarled to life. The sound of that four twenty-seven side oiler roaring from the pipes would definitely make heads turn. And damn if he didn't want to turn Frankie's head.

Frankie flopped back onto the pile of clothes on her bed and covered her face with a pillow. She should've said no. Again. But,

damn, Mac didn't make it easy on her. Every time he asked, he wore her down a little more. This time was even worse than normal.

Seeing him hurt had hit her hard, and her self-discipline was finite. It seemed like every no she gave him left her with one less in the bank. When she'd scrounged around for one this time, she'd come up empty.

She lifted the pillow away and risked a glance at the clock. After six. He would be there in less than an hour, and she hadn't even figured out what to wear. She should've asked where they were

going. With a guy like Mac it could be pizza at a sports bar, lobster ceviche at an exclusive restaurant or anything in between. She briefly considered calling him on his cell and asking him outright, but vetoed that idea. The last thing she wanted was to seem like some bobblehead schoolgirl with a crush. A confident woman wouldn't sweat it. She'd pick out something that she was comfortable in and be done with it. Besides, this wasn't even a real date. That was the agreement. She was getting all worked up for nothing.

Mind made up, she rolled off the

clothes mountain and jumped to her feet. Pawing through the mound, she stopped when she found what she'd been looking for. The classic-fit Seven jeans had been a splurge a few weeks ago when she'd balanced the books for the month and realized for the first time since her dad died she'd actually made a profit.

It had been a long haul with many of Big Frank's customers still unsure about trusting a girl alone under their hoods. Especially when that girl was troublemaking "Kinky Frankie" Sepkaski. She wrinkled her nose at the stupid nickname.

Teenage boys could be rough, but they were like guppies in a sea of piranha when it came to the girls. It had been her best friend who'd come up with the far worse "Skanky Frankie". Ten years after high school, she hadn't managed to live down the reputation she'd barely had a chance to earn. Not that she'd tried all that hard.

Shaking off the sense of melancholy that had managed to seep in, she grabbed a black sweater set from the pile and a pair of chunky-heeled boots from under the bed. It was the most conservative outfit she owned. In

the event that they did run into someone they knew, she didn't want to embarrass him with her flamboyant, provocative fashion sense. So long as he didn't show up totally decked out, she'd be safe enough with the casual look.

Once she was dressed, she peered into the mirror. She dried her hair and threw it into a ponytail. A slick of peach gloss on her lips, a smidge of taupe eyeshadow and a quick swipe of mascara and she was ready to go. Understated woman on the go instead of sex goddess.

She turned away but faltered,

stopping to pluck a bottle of pear body spray from the vanity. “This is still not a date,” she said firmly as she gave her neck a spritz.

The woman in the mirror rolled her eyes.

“What do you know?” she grumbled.

Before the argument between herself and herself could come to blows, her cellphone buzzed. She crossed the room and grabbed it from her bag.

Mac.

Her heart thundered as her brain concocted dozens of equally panic-inducing scenarios. He wasn't

going to be able to make it. He *was* going to be able to make it. He'd gotten into another accident. He thought he liked her, but that was before he heard rumors that she talked to herself in the mirror like some kind of nutter.

“Hello?” His husky voice put a stop to the whirlwind in her mind, and she realized she had picked up the phone but hadn't said anything.

“Hey! Sorry, new phone. I don't know how to work it yet. I wanted to keep my old one, but my cousin was teasing me mercilessly and I finally caved.” The words came out in a rush, like one babbling

sentence. *Way to sound confident and put together.*

Mac chuckled. "No problem. Listen, I don't want to seem like a weirdo, but...I've been outside of your house for like twenty minutes now. I know I'm early, and I was going to wait out here so as not to rush you, but I think your neighbor might call the cops on me soon if I don't make a move. I think she's worried I'm casing the joint."

The admission sent a team of butterflies fluttering in her belly, and she smiled. He'd shown up way early which meant he was as nervous as she was. She did a little

shimmy before she remembered this wasn't a date.

"That's Mrs. Nussbaum. She likes to know what's going on, is all. She'll come by tomorrow with a pie and twenty questions. Believe me, you made her day showing up. I'm basically ready anyway. Why don't you come on in? The door's unlocked. Have a seat on the couch, and I'll be down in like two minutes."

"Sounds like a plan."

She disconnected, moving to the window facing the empty driveway. *Rats*. She'd been hoping to get a look at him before he came

in, but he must have parked on the street.

She scurried over to the bedroom door and opened it a hair. Closing one eye, she peeked through the crack. A moment later the front door swung wide and Mac stepped in. She bit back a groan. His camel sports coat hugged his magnificent shoulders, narrowing to skim his trim waist. His dark hair was still damp from the shower, and he ran a nervous hand through it. The black eye should have detracted from his allure, but it only added to his rakish good looks. He was downright edible. She glanced

down at her stupid sweater set with a scowl.

“I’ll be in the living room,” Mac called down the hall before stepping out of view.

She backed away from the door. “Okay. Be there in a minute!” She eyed the pile of clothes again and ran over to the bed. What now? No way was she going out dressed like a soccer mom when he looked like that. Besides, he’d agreed they’d go out of town, so no one would recognize them anyway. What was the harm in dressing up a little? She whipped the sweater off and tossed it onto the hardwood floor as other

possible options scrolled through her mind. Bending low, she steadied herself on the nightstand and yanked off one boot before moving to the other. It was stubborn but finally gave with one last vicious tug.

From the corner of her eye, she spied the trailing tie of her green wrap dress in the closet. Perfect choice. She hurried across the room, when her foot tangled itself in the black sweater on the floor. One second she was sliding forward like Kristi Yamaguchi at the Winter Olympics, the next she was airborne. As if in slow motion,

she windmilled, flailing to stay upright, but it was no use. She hit the ground flat on her back, hard. The wind whooshed from her lungs as she stared up at the ceiling in shock.

“Jesus, Frankie, are you okay?” Mac’s concerned voice echoed down the hallway.

She struggled for breath to respond, but her body wouldn’t comply.

“Frankie?” Concern had turned to straight up fear, and footsteps thundered toward her.

She was half-naked, not to mention surrounded by the

evidence of her neurosis. She rolled to her side, ignoring the twinge in her back, and bounded to her feet. Mercifully, her lungs unlocked, and she sucked in a gasp. “I’m —”

Too late. Even as the word left her lips, the door swung open. Mac barreled in, skidding to a stop when he saw her.

“What the hell happened? Are you all right?” To his credit, his worried gaze stayed locked on her eyes.

Her face burned as she folded her arms over her chest and tried not to wither up and die of embarrassment. Donning the big

white bra had seemed like such a good idea at the time. It was sort of her backup plan. So, on the off chance that tonight did somehow cross the line into date territory, and even if Mac did try to charm the shirt off her, it wouldn't go very far. She'd no doubt call things to a halt when she remembered that she was sporting not only the ugliest bra in history, but a matching pair of panties.

Hell, who was she kidding? Underwear that big couldn't be called panties. Those things were bloomers. Thank God she still had on her jeans.

“I’m fine. I oiled the hardwood the other day and the floors are super slippery. I took a little spill, but I’m okay.” She eyed the clothes on the bed longingly. Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink. In order to put a shirt on, she’d have to uncross her arms. There was no way in hell she was giving Mac a full frontal of the Spinster Maker 3000. It was bad enough the thick, unsightly straps were in view.

“Sorry to barge in like that, but the noise was so loud and you didn’t answer when I called.” Now that he’d established she was okay,

it was his turn to look embarrassed. He turned away but paused, catching sight of the bed. His lips twitched as her face furnace cranked even higher.

“I didn’t know where we were going, so I was having a hard time choosing,” she explained hurriedly. “And then you came in the jacket, looking so nice, so I wanted to change.”

He bent to retrieve the sweater on the floor and kept his eyes averted as he held it in her direction. She pulled it on, nearly wilting with relief. Everything was going to be okay.

“How did you know I was wearing a jacket?” he asked.

Not okay. Now she had to tell him she'd been spying on him through the door like some kind of stalker.

“What am I thinking, standing here grilling you?” he said with a self-conscious chuckle, saving her from having to respond. “When I heard that crash and you didn't answer, it shook me up a little. You go ahead, finish getting ready. I'll be in the living room.”

She squeezed her eyes closed and waited until he was gone before she opened them again. This was fate's

way of reinforcing what she already knew. She was better off not even attempting to socialize with men, especially ones as hot and compelling as Mac Galbraith. It wasn't even technically time for them to go yet, and already things had been a disaster. She stood in the center of the room, the seesaw of emotions rolling her one way, then the other. Maybe she should beg off. The thought sent a bitter wash of disappointment sloshing through her. She hadn't been this excited for something since Big Frank had bought her her first car.

What advice would Dad give her

if he were still here? Probably “Are you shittin’ me, kiddo? Great guy. Treats you with respect. Plus, you made a commitment to go. Get your ass in gear and get out there.”

“But what do I wear, Dad?” she whispered miserably. Big Frank, dead or alive, would’ve had no answer for that. That thought alone spurred her on. Life was short. If she got to have one not-date with Mac Galbraith, she was going to enjoy it.

She tugged the band from her hair and ran a brush through until it hung in soft waves. Then, with a renewed sense of determination,

she crossed the room to her closet and plucked the green dress off its hanger. Peering down at her bra, she briefly considered changing that too but decided against it. Having a fun night with a great guy who was totally out of her league was one thing. Letting it progress to sex followed by certain complications was something totally different. She thought of Mac and how gorgeous he looked tonight and wondered if she should've invested in something more sturdy.

Like a chastity belt.

Chapter Three

Mac stared at the bedroom door down the hall, grinning like a fool. He heard a murmured voice and could only assume Frankie was talking to herself. Why that utterly charmed him, he couldn't say. She was like two sides of a coin. Most of the time, she put up that sexy-siren front, all confidence, swagger and raw sexuality. All it took was a couple sincere compliments and she ended up tongue-tied or babbling like a teenage girl with a crush. He never knew what he was

going to get with her, and he wanted nothing more than to solve the mystery. Was she one, the other or both?

Regardless, a huge weight had been lifted from him because no matter what she said, this was most definitely a date. Her nervousness and the sheer elevation of Clothes Mountain were proof enough of that. Now all he had to do was make sure he stayed out of the friend zone and in the date zone.

The door swung open, and Frankie stepped into the hallway. His stomach bottomed out as she made her way to the living room.

The neckline of the emerald-green dress was modest and the length mid-calf, so it shouldn't have been half as sexy as it was. He'd seen more of her skin many times. Even her overalls were more revealing. But this dress, this woman, had his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. The clingy fabric wrapped itself around her like a lover, skimming along the dips and curves of her body as she moved. The stilettos she wore looked like they were made of black lace, and he couldn't help but picture them behind his neck. His heart hammered as he stood to greet her.

“Ready?” she asked, giving him a sassy wink. Confident Frankie had taken the wheel.

He had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Yes. You look absolutely amazing.”

She must have sensed his sincerity because she beamed at him. “Thanks. Back atcha.”

He helped her don a lightweight jacket then led her outside to the car. As they approached, Frankie let out a long, low whistle. “Damn. I mean, *damn*. She’s a beaut, Mac. Rangoon Red. My favorite. Why haven’t I seen this yet?” she demanded.

“Never needed any work,” he said with a shrug. “Plus, with the weather around here lately, I don’t get much of a chance to take her out. Figured we might as well take advantage of this warm spell. Speaking of which, I didn’t even think about the whole hair thing. Usually at the garage, you have it in a ponytail. You want me to put it up?” He motioned to the convertible top.

She shook her head and laughed. “Are you kidding me? That’s half the reason to ride in it. Feel the wind in your hair and all. It’s the perfect night for it too. I can’t

believe I didn't hear you coming."

"It was a while ago. You were probably in the shower."

"Let's crank her up now, then. I'm dying to hear. I'd love to get a look inside, but I don't want to get my dress all dirty." She sent a wistful glance toward the hood.

That dress was painfully hot, so he was in full agreement. If she was going to get it dirty, he'd make sure they found a much more creative way to make it happen.

He opened the door for her, and she slid in. Rubbing the seats, she murmured appreciatively.

"Whoever restored her did an

amazing job.”

“Thanks. It was a labor of love.”

Her gaze snapped back to his.

“Wait, what? You?”

He nodded. “Yep. Took me two years.” He couldn’t stop the note of pride from slipping into his voice. Of the four cars he’d restored on his own, this was his favorite.

She faced him, genuine shock plain as day. “Why do you bring your cars to the garage if you can do work like this?”

“Two reasons. First, I don’t have the time. It’s a fun hobby, but I enjoy collecting as well and could never keep up. I try to pick a

project every couple years, but more than that would feel like work, and I do enough of that.”

She nodded in understanding. “I totally get that. So what’s the other reason?”

He allowed himself the pleasure of looking, really looking, at her. The gleaming dark hair, the curious sherry-colored eyes, the full lips that haunted his nights.

He turned the key and the engine fired. “I think you already know the answer to that.”

Two hours later Frankie’s

stomach was full of good food and her cheeks hurt from smiling as she gazed at Mac across the table. They hadn't stopped talking since they'd gotten in the car. It had never felt forced or weird, and the fact that he was ridiculously easy on the eyes was icing on the cake.

“Believe me when I tell you, I saw the bra. Hard to miss.” He chuckled.

She swatted him playfully, but it suddenly seemed imperative that he know she didn't dress like that all the time. “I wore it as a deterrent,” she blurted before she could stop herself.

He threw his head back and laughed. The sound sent a thrill through her. "If you think that makes me want you even an ounce less than I did before, you're sadly mistaken." His grin faded as he met her gaze and held it. "They don't make a bra that ugly."

They'd been joking and flirting all night, and she couldn't remember enjoying herself more. The wine made her feel like sharing secrets, and she was tired of fighting it. Fighting him. Everything felt so right, so fun, so easy with Mac. She leaned in close to whisper, "It wasn't supposed to

deter *you*. It was supposed to deter *me*."

His pupils dilated in the low light. "Ahhh, I think I'm starting to get it. But that opens a whole new line of questioning, doesn't it?" He mimicked her, leaning forward until their faces were only a few inches apart. "Why would you need a deterrent? This isn't a date. Because you don't want me, right, Frankie?"

His husky voice had dropped even lower, his words sending a bolt of need through her. She swallowed hard. "I-I don't know what I want anymore. It's hard to

explain. I'm not good at men. In fact, I'm so bad at them it's just easier to stay away."

He laid his hand over hers, tracing a thumb over the sensitive skin of her wrist. "I thought you were the love-'em-and-leave-'em type? You always play like you've got a whole team waiting on the bench biding their time for an inning on the field."

His clever fingers were wreaking havoc on her nerves, and she struggled to stay on topic. "Yeah, well, it's been a rough season." She turned away, unable to look at him anymore. Those warm, patient

eyes, the genuine curiosity without an ounce of judgment. A few quiet moments later her gaze was drawn back to his. What was he thinking now?

“It’s bullshit,” she heard herself announce, and once she started, she couldn’t stop. “An act. It’s like those lizards that puff up when predators get close. I’m all show and no go. Maybe it’s lame or whatever, but this persona has gotten me through some tough times.” They hadn’t gone to the same school, hadn’t run with the same crowd back then, so maybe he didn’t —

“You’re going to let what a handful of jerks said in high school keep you from dating a decade later?”

She snatched her hand away and bolted upright in her chair as the warm fuzzy feelings Mac had evoked died in the face of icy dread. So he did know, at least some of it. “What did you hear?”

He drew back and scrubbed a hand over his face, wincing as he rubbed against the cut on his eyebrow. “It doesn’t matter to me. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I don’t care about some tired, old, small-town rumors. The people

around here who have nothing better to do than hang on to some pathetic, mean-spirited gossip aren't people either one of us should care about."

Anger made her voice quake. "That's easy for you to say. You've never had to deal with anything like this. It affects my business, it affects my personal life." She picked up her glass with a trembling hand and took a measured sip, trying to regain some control.

Mac reached for her free hand again, and she pulled it away. His mouth was set in a grim line. "I

know it hurts. But you have no control over how other people behave or what they say about you. Don't you get that? You've been back from college for five years, and in all that time I can't say I've ever heard about you with a boyfriend. You make references to flings or whatever, but I've never seen you with a guy. How long has it been since you've had a real relationship?"

"Eight," she whispered miserably.

"Eight what?"

"Eight years since I've had a boyfriend. Or anything else. There

are no flings. No team. No bench.”

His eyes widened before narrowing again. “You think pretending to be happy and wearing sexy clothes is proving something to the jerks who talked about you? That they can’t drag you down, or you don’t care what they think? But every day their opinions affect how you behave is a win for those haters. Don’t let the bastards take even another minute of your life from you. No matter what you do, they’re going to say what they want anyway. The only thing you can control is how it affects you.”

His words penetrated the shame, and she raised her gaze to meet his. "I don't think I know how to do that."

Chapter Four

The vulnerability in her face, the raw hurt in her voice, cut deep.

“Have you even told anyone your side of the story? Ever talk about how the rumors all started?”

She shook her head miserably.

He wanted to go back in time and strangle Nick fucking Melita with his bare hands. Mac gazed at Frankie's pained expression and had to force himself to calm down. Getting all riled up wasn't going to help. Maybe it was time to exorcise some really old demons.

“Sometimes getting things out in the open can make you feel better.”

She seemed to mull it over and, to his surprise, she nodded slowly.

“Maybe it will. Probably it would be easier if I had another glass of wine, though.”

He chuckled and motioned to the waitress. Frankie hunkered down into her seat before expelling a long, pent-up breath. “Okay, here it is. Did you know a guy named Nicky Melita?”

“I did,” he confirmed with a nod. “We used to play pick-up games at the rec center on weekends.” Mac had gone to a private school outside

of town but had hung out with a lot of kids from Brewster High. Nick wasn't his favorite in the bunch, but he'd seemed like an okay guy at the time.

“Well, he and I dated for about eight months, which was a pretty long time, at least by teenage standards. We spent a lot of time together, and about six months in, he started pressing the issue of sex.” She squirmed in her chair and shot him a nervous look from beneath her lashes.

The waitress chose that moment to stop by and drop off the glass of Merlot, and Frankie brightened.

Mac grinned at her as she took a giant gulp, the tension gripping his gut lessening a little when she returned his smile with one of her own.

“This is where it gets embarrassing.” She leaned on her elbows, continuing. “After some hardcore petting sessions, it was getting to the point that I wanted to see what the endgame was too. I was nervous, though. I’m the type of person where, if I’m going to do something, I want to do it right. It’s my nature to research and learn and ask questions. But the one close friend I had was a virgin like me.

She'd never even had a real boyfriend, and I didn't have a mom around to talk to."

An edge came into her voice, and he filed that away for later consideration. Clearly she still had unresolved feelings about her mother as well. He could only imagine what it had been like growing up with the knowledge that her mother hadn't wanted to be part of her life. It was enough to shake anyone's self-esteem, and stupid Nick Melita had only compounded the problem.

Frankie worried the cloth napkin between her fingers as she

continued. "I was confused, in this holding pattern, wanting to move forward but too afraid to do it. So one day I stumbled across my dad's...video collection. It felt like fate or something. The universe answering my plea. Anyway, my dad went out that night, and I popped a tape into the VCR." She rushed through the last part, pink-cheeked, and he bit back a grin before holding up a hand.

"To interject for a quick second, so far none of this sounds the least bit kinky or skanky. In fact, it all sounds pretty normal to me."

She gave him an appreciative

half-smile and took a steady breath before pressing forward. “I watched the first one. It was pretty awful. Like from the seventies. Too much hair. Just hair, exploding from everywhere.”

He laughed out loud, and some of the anxiousness seemed to disappear from her face. “I was pretty determined, though, so I grabbed another. After a few real clunkers, I found a movie I liked. The lady was pretty, like a real person. And the guy was really sweet with her. So I watched the whole thing.”

She glanced at him, gauging his

reaction. He must have looked as enthralled as he felt, because her cheeks got rosy. He barely refrained from kissing her, instead motioning for her to continue.

“I was pretty much obsessed. It was all I could think about. So the next time me and Nicky were alone, I told him I wanted to do it. He was all about the idea. We fooled around for a while, and we finally got down to the nitty-gritty.” She shook her head and blew out a sigh. “Let’s say that it wasn’t exactly what I’d been preparing for, and thirty seconds later I was left confused and feeling

like a failure.”

In spite of his disdain for Nicky, Mac winced on the other man’s behalf. He’d been there before. Tough on a guy his first time.

“I wasn’t sure what to do at that point, because I didn’t feel...done. Sooo, I...” she looked around, then bent close to whisper, “...stuck my finger in his butt.”

For a long moment the only noise in the room was the clatter of silverware and the faraway chatter of other diners. Then her words registered, and Mac fell apart, erupting into howls of laughter. The harder he tried to stop, the

more he laughed. He clutched his aching ribs as tears streamed down his face. People from other tables began to stare. Frankie gazed at him, bemused.

“He m – H-he must ha –” Mac tried to spit it out, to explain why that was probably the most hilarious thing he’d ever heard, but every syllable sent him into another fit.

“I’m not laughing at you,” he said when he could finally speak. “It’s the whole thing. It’s so funny. His eyes must have bugged right out of his head.” The image got him rolling again, but this time Frankie

had caught on to the absurdity of the story as the corners of her mouth lifted.

“Remember that porno I was telling you about?” she continued, clearly warming to the tale. “Well, the guy in that had already... yanno...” she wagged her brows, “...once, and that was how the girl got him interested again. It worked like a charm for her, so I figured what the hey?” She shrugged. “What did I know?”

Mac wiped the tears from his eyes. “Oh my God, that is the funniest thing I’ve ever heard in my life. Just jammed it in there,

huh? No warning? I can picture it. Well, not *it*, but you know, Nick's face. You can believe that is *not* what he told us on the basketball court the next day."

"Ugh, so you did hear something then?" She groaned and covered her face. "The story got so twisted I don't even know what he actually said. By the time it got back to me, I was the sluttiest girl in school and had begged him for everything from a threesome to a golden shower."

He pulled her hands away from her face. "Don't shrink away from me, Frankie. He didn't say any of

those things, not to me at least. All he said was that you were into some kinky stuff, and he wasn't into it."

She seemed relieved. "It was the girls in our class that took it to the next level. He was a prize catch, and they weren't happy he was off the market. They couldn't wait to bring me down. I think Nick felt bad in the end." She let out a snort of laughter. "Poor choice of words, but you get the drift. Actually, he called me a few years ago and asked me out on a date."

That got Mac laughing again, and this time Frankie joined in.

“So what did you tell him?”

“I wasn’t mean or anything. I said no thanks. He isn’t a bad guy. We were kids. It’s not his fault some people don’t want to let it go.”

His jaw tightened, and he shook his head. “That doesn’t give him a pass. He should’ve spoken up. What he did was spineless. He was man enough to have sex with you, and a real man doesn’t kiss and tell. If he couldn’t manage that, he could’ve at least set the record straight after the fact.”

“Can you picture that?”

He thought about it and inclined

his head. "All right, you got me there. But he didn't have to tell the whole story. He could've stood by you and said the other stuff wasn't true. You ended up being branded a slut when all you were was a quirky, curious teenager."

Mac's words wrapped around her like a warm hug, and the weight that had been sitting on her chest for all those years got a little lighter. His genuine delight had made her look at the situation through new eyes. The eyes of an adult. It *was* a funny story, and the heartfelt laughter they'd shared

over it had all but eradicated the snide, mean-spirited snickers she'd put up with afterward.

"In hindsight, I know I added fuel to the fire," she admitted.

"Yeah?"

"I started cutting school, acting out, dressing provocatively. I got caught spiking the punch at the prom. I think part of me felt like if I was going to have to wear the brand, I might as well get some mileage out of it. Then I grew up, went away to college, thinking people would forget by the time I came back. Imagine my surprise when some of them hadn't. I had

guys calling me up to ask for dates when all they wanted to do was see exactly how kinky I was. I had a woman stop by the garage telling me to stay away from her man. He was a customer. Balding fat guy with a handlebar mustache. She assumed he only brought his car in to try to get to me." She shrugged. "Maybe she was right, but how was that my fault? Anyway, I went back to the old standby and put up the front."

"You don't have to put up a front with me. I think you're amazing," Mac said softly. "I think the rest of the world would agree if you give

them the chance. And the one's that don't?"

"Fuck 'em," she finished with a sad smile.

Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time to let it go. The town wasn't nearly as small as it had been, and more than three-quarters of her high school class had moved away a long time ago. For the first time she wondered if the whole thing had been bigger in her own mind than it actually was. Granted, there were a few people she knew would never let it go. And the garage had been struggling, but that was probably as much about

her dad passing and the economy than anything else.

“What are you thinking about?” Mac asked.

“Letting go. Moving on.”

“I like the sound of that. Does that mean this can be a date now?”

“I don’t know what this is. We still don’t live in the same world, me and you. But you had to have known it meant more to me than a meal between friends when you spotted the thirty rejected outfits strewn all over my bed.”

The relief in his eyes at that admission sent a thrill through her.

“Along those same lines, I have a

confession to make,” he said.

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“It only took me five minutes to pick out this outfit.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better, how?”

“You didn’t let me finish.” He leaned into her, brushing a lock of hair from her forehead. “Ask me how long I stood in the garage deciding which car to pick you up in?”

Her pulse skittered at the gentle caress. “How long?” she croaked.

“About an hour. I wanted to impress you so badly,” he admitted with a self-deprecating smile.

“It worked.”

His gaze grew even more intense. “Well, in that case, should you find yourself needing a volunteer to practice some new porn moves on, I’m tossing my hat in the ring.”

She chuckled, giving him a playful punch to the shoulder, but his eyes stayed locked on hers.

“I’m only half-kidding. We’re both adults, so I’m going to lay it out for you straight here. I want you. Not only that, I like you. A lot. I’ve felt that way for a very long time. This is our first date, and I hope it’s the first of many. I don’t

want to pressure you, but I want to make sure you know that I'm dead serious about this and you."

Elation coursed through her, but it was tempered by a very familiar fear. She couldn't remember enjoying someone's company more than Mac's. But he was a Galbraith. And she was Skanky Frankie, the grease monkey. Even if they wanted it to work, his family would never accept her. On the off chance that they did end up really falling for one another, Mac would be forced into the terrible position of having to choose between her and his family. Why put either one of

them through that? Hoping and wishing for something that could only end in heartache?

She couldn't tell him that, though. He'd argue, tell her she was wrong or he didn't care. And because she was already half crazy about him, she'd allow herself to be convinced. But down the line, it would matter, and everything would turn to shit.

She swallowed hard and cleared her throat before responding. "I hear you loud and clear. I'm not sure what to say, exactly. Mac, I like you. More than I've liked anyone in...well, forever. But if I want to

make the garage a go without my dad, that has to be where my focus is. I can't let myself get distracted."

Not a lie, she rationalized. Just not the whole truth.

The light in his eyes dimmed a little and the ensuing stab of regret hurt more than it should have after only one not-date. Definitely best to get out now before it was too late.

By the time they reached her driveway an hour later, the effervescent tingle that had buoyed her most of the night faded as reality set in. The joking around,

the companionship, the sexual tension bubbling right beneath the surface of it all...it was over. Done. Back to her boring life. Maybe she needed to get a dog, because the thought of going into her silent, empty house made her stomach ache.

“This is your stop,” Mac said, then let himself out of the car.

A moment later he swung her door open and held out a hand. She took it, ignoring the blast of awareness that snaked up her arm at the firm heat of his grasp.

“You don’t have to—”

“I’m walking you to the door.”

It wasn't a question, and the quiet, authoritative tone sent a second sizzle through her, this one ending in a low pressure between her thighs.

As he led her to the porch the silence between them felt heavy, and she tried to lighten it.

"I really had a nice time. Thanks so much for inviting me. The crème brulee was delicious. I wish I could eat like that every day. Although I wouldn't be able to fit under the cars soon, and –"

Mac clamped his hands over her hips and dragged her close, until they were touching chest to breast.

“You’re babbling.” His husky voice held a trace of a smile, and she blushed.

“I know. Sorry.”

“Do you know why you’re babbling?”

“I’m not s-sure.”

“You’re nervous. You know what else?”

She shook her head mutely.

“I like that I make you nervous. But let’s see if I can distract you a little.” He bent low and took her mouth in a searing kiss that sent a bolt of heat straight to her pussy. There was no buildup. Just a mesh of lips and teeth and tongues. After

nearly two years of anticipation, that was exactly how she wanted it.

She craned her neck, pressing closer, gasping when he crushed the sensitive tips of her breasts to his unyielding chest. Bouncing on her tiptoes, she slid her arms around his neck, holding on for all she was worth. He murmured his approval, tightening his grip, angling his hips to grind against hers. The thick length of him nudged her stomach, and she groaned, straining closer still.

Mac broke away with a curse, nipping her bottom lip once before retreating. The blood pounded in

her ears as she tried to get her bearings. Apparently, he was no better off because he squeezed his eyes closed, sucking in a ragged breath.

“Damn,” he muttered. He ran a possessive hand over her bottom, leaving a trail of heat in its wake, before stepping back. “That was—” His throat worked as he swallowed hard, pinning her with his intense gaze. He shook his head bemusedly. “Sweet dreams, Frankie,” he whispered. A second later he jogged lightly down the steps and got into his car.

She stared after him, unable to

speaking, shaking with want. What the hell was that? One kiss and she was ready to throw herself at his feet. But it was more than that. He'd seen her, warts and all, and he still wanted her. Even better? He still *liked* her.

His taillights were long gone before she had the strength to push away from the door and stand on her own two feet.

Chapter Five

Two hours later Frankie lay sprawled on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She was no closer to sleep than she'd been when she first slid between the sheets. Every time she tried to relax, her thoughts would flip straight back to Mac's kiss and the adrenaline would start pumping again, making the prospect of relaxation laughable.

She reached out blindly toward the nightstand and found her cellphone. As she held it in her hand, she reminisced about the old

days. Back when a girl could call a guy, listen to the sound of his voice for a few seconds then hang up fast and burst into giggles. No caller ID, no star sixty-nine. Just good, old-fashioned, crush-crank calls. She sighed and stared at the lit screen of the phone, willing it to vibrate.

She thought back to the rest of the night and marveled again at Mac. One minute he was seducing her with his panty-drenching grin, the next he was her champion, slaying the dragons from her past, making her feel normal and special all at the same time.

She was so lost in contemplation,

when the cellphone buzzed in her hand, she tossed it like it was a rattlesnake.

Mac.

She scrabbled through the blankets in a panic, finally locating it near her feet. Scooping it up in trembling fingers, she cleared her throat. "H-Hello?"

"Hey."

She sat back against the pillows and grinned like a fool, not bothering to hide her pleasure at the sound of his voice. "Hey, there."

"Did I wake you?"

"No. Not at all. I was...watching

some TV," she said, grabbing the remote off the table and flicking on the television. She hated lying, but the alternative was to have said, *Lying in bed, fantasizing about you,* and she wasn't that brave.

"I wanted to call and tell you what a great time I had tonight."

She could hear the smile in his warm baritone, and it sent a thrill through her. "Me too."

"I got that impression, but I'm glad to have it confirmed. Which leads me to the real reason for my call." He paused, an edge of exasperation working into his tone. "Tell me one more time why we

can't keep doing that?"

She let out a long sigh. "When you say it like that, it sounds so simple," she admitted. "But just because something feels good doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. Eating ice cream is fun too. If I did that every day, I'd be fat in three months and I wouldn't feel healthy."

"So you think I'm bad for you?"

She hated the hurt in his voice.

"No. Not at all. I meant that our choices have consequences. Sometimes good and bad. Being with you made me feel really good tonight. But if we keep doing it, it's

going to feel bad when we have to stop. I don't want to be the topic of conversation in this town again.

And say what you will, but Galbraiths aren't meant to be with mechanics, Mac. Especially ones like me. This will definitely cause tension between you and your parents, and I don't want that."

"I thought we got somewhere with this conversation at dinner."

"We did. And in my head, I know you're right, but I've lived for the past ten years thinking one way. I'm going to work on it, but it's not going to happen overnight."

"Okay. I get that. For what it's

worth, I did have a great time, and if you ever do get past that stuff, give me a call. I won't bother you again, aside from car-related business."

"Mac, I—"

"I'm not trying to be a jerk or make you feel bad, but I certainly don't want to push you into doing something that doesn't make you happy. It's a shame, though. We could actually have something here. Night, Frankie."

The phone went dead, and her heart sank. That was it. They'd been on one stupid date. So why did she feel so bereft? She wasn't ready to

make a public appearance or to commit, but did that mean they couldn't spend some time together in secret to see how compatible they were? Tonight could've been a fluke. No point in getting everyone worked up over what might amount to nothing.

She flipped on the bedside lamp and snatched up the phone to punch in Mac's number before she could change her mind.

"Hello?"

"What about the other thing?" she blurted.

"What other thing?" Mac said, the genuine confusion evident in

his voice.

Don't make me say it. "Um, the one where you said..." she sucked in a breath and released it in a rush, "...you would be my guinea pig if... you know. While I'm figuring things out. Then we can see what happens from there."

The line grew so quiet she was afraid he'd hung up on her. "Mac?" Her voice was equal parts panic and mortification.

"Yep."

"Did you hear me?"

"I did indeed."

"And?"

"I didn't think of those as two

separate offers. But if that's what you want, I'm in."

She'd been hoping for a little more enthusiasm rather than the clipped response. Maybe he'd changed his mind?

"Do you want time to think it over or something?"

"I don't need time, I said I'm in."

"Are you sure? You took so long to say anything, I thought —"

"You need to stop thinking so much," he said with a heavy sigh.

"It's just not what I was expecting, so it threw me off. Then it took me a couple extra seconds to respond because I had to wait for enough

blood to travel back to my brain for me to form a sentence. It's not every day a beautiful woman asks if she can use you in a series of sexperiments."

She laughed, relief overcoming embarrassment. The weight that had been pressing down on her chest since they'd hung up the first time dissipated. "I guess not."

"When do we start?" The grimness had left his tone completely now, and his voice was like liquid sex, flowing over her, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

Part of her wanted to scream, *Now!* but she held back. Mrs.

Nussbaum was an insomniac, and the last thing Frankie needed was for her to see Mac pulling in at two a.m. "Maybe tomorrow night?"

"Sounds good. Why don't you come over around seven?"

Were they seriously discussing their sex date like it was an upcoming dentist appointment? The time to back out was now. She opened her mouth but couldn't get the words out. Today with Mac had been more fun, more exciting, than all of her dates combined. She had a chance here to live out her fantasy. Who knew if that opportunity would ever come again?

“I’ll be there.” She steeled herself, then blurted, “Should I... bring anything? Uhh...for...”

“You mean like a swing? Or some fur-lined handcuffs?”

She could hear the smile in his voice and found herself grinning back. “Not quite what I meant. Should I bring protection? I mean, I haven’t been with anyone since college, but I’m on the pill for medical reasons and wasn’t sure...”

“This is such a great conversation to have ahead of time. I’m glad you brought it up. It’s entirely up to you. I’m vigilant about my health and give blood twice a year so I’m

on top of things there. At the same time, I definitely want to make sure you feel safe and protected.”

She'd thought about being with him for so long, she didn't want anything between them. “I don't want to use a condom. If that's okay.”

“Oh, babe, I am so down with that. And don't worry, if you change your mind, I'll make sure I have some on hand.”

“Okay.”

The line went quiet again, save for their echoing breaths. She should probably hang up.

“I don't want to hang up yet,”

Mac said, the reluctant honesty in his tone encouraging her to be honest in return.

“Me either.”

“What do you want, Frankie?”

What did she want?

She shoved aside all the doubts and self-recriminations and spoke the truth. “To listen to you talk.

Your voice is so...”

“So...?” he urged.

Her heart pounded, and she closed her eyes. “Sexy. Your voice is so goddamn sexy.”

“I’m glad that you think so. And what would you like me to talk about?”

She squirmed, a familiar pressure spreading low in her belly. How to answer that loaded question? Mac had offered her the chance to explore a world she'd denied herself for so long. If she was going to do it, she was going to do it right.

"The things we're going to do tomorrow, maybe," she whispered.

His breath came out in a hiss.

"That's up to you, babe. I'm at your disposal. Whatever you want, however you want it."

His answer both excited and frustrated her. She'd been hoping he'd —

"But I can tell you what I'd like

us to do," he said softly. "What I've imagined doing a thousand times. Would you like that?"

"Yes." She gripped the phone tighter and pressed her thighs together.

"First, tell me, are you in bed?"

"Uh-huh. Are you?"

"Yes. I hate to be cliché and ask what you're wearing, so I'm going to pretend it's a black, short, lace nightgown."

She glanced down at her flowered boxer shorts and Bob Marley T-shirt and bit her lip.

"Yeah, we'll go with that."

His warm chuckle sent a thrill

through her, and she smiled.

“Are the lights on?” Mac asked.

“Yes.”

“Turn them off.”

She didn't hesitate, reaching over to turn off the bedside lamp.

“Okay, they're off.”

“Mine too.”

He must have moved to settle in because she could hear the creak of the bed. The darkness of the room only intensified the intimacy of the situation.

“Do you remember the first car I brought you?”

She burst out laughing. “Um, let's see. I think it was the Camaro,

right? Is that your idea of mechanic dirty talk?" she teased.

"Nope. I only brought it up to give you a point of reference. That day your dad was out, and you came out of the garage into the office wiping your hands on a rag. Your hair was in a ponytail like usual, and you had on black overalls. They were made of some stretchy material, and they fit you like a glove. It was like some high school wet dream come to life."

His admission made her nipples hard, and she shifted beneath the covers.

"You asked me what the problem

was. I told you, and you launched into this amazing analysis of what you thought was wrong. That made me even hotter for you.” His breath grew harsh, and his voice dipped lower. “I went home and jerked off thinking about you. Pulling the zipper down with my teeth. Pushing those overalls past your breasts...your hips. Making you step out of them so I could bend you over the hood and use my knee to spread your legs apart. You’d be open, Frankie. Accessible and wet as I slid my cock into you one inch at a time. Slow. I’d go so slow, baby, even now, because I’d want

to feel all of you as I went in. I'd relish the heat and the burn. I'd push and stretch you until your pussy squeezed me tight, over and over while you screamed my name."

Frankie pressed her thighs together as his words pulsed straight to her clit. Her strained breath joined his. "W-were you in your bed when you...jerked off?" she whispered, slipping a hand down her stomach. She imagined him stroking his cock as he caressed her, feeling the silken skin of her belly and lower. Her knees parted as a hand — she groaned —

connected with the hot, moist flesh exposed. Her head fell back, and she closed her eyes.

“I was in the shower. I came so fucking hard I thought I was going to pass out,” he admitted gruffly. “Can you wear those tomorrow? The overalls?”

She nodded then cleared her throat when she realized he couldn't see her. “Yes. If you want me to.”

“Hell yeah. I want to unwrap you like a present. No bra. Pinch your nipples for me now, Frankie,” he murmured.

She covered one breast with her

hand and tweaked her nipple. Her body was already in overdrive from the night of almost unbearable tension, and excitement and wetness flooded her center. She pinched again, more sharply this time, and gasped.

“I love that sound.” Mac groaned. “Do it again. Play with your nipple and imagine it’s my mouth, my tongue, my teeth. I can’t wait to cup those full, gorgeous breasts in my hands. Do you remember the second car I brought you, Frankie?”

She writhed against her hand as she plucked at the straining tip of

her breast. "No," she breathed.

"The Z-28. You were leaving midday to go to the dentist. It was summertime, and you had on a halter top with tiny little roses on it. All I could think about was sliding it down and covering one of those luscious breasts with my mouth. Kneading the other with my hand. Want to know something really dirty?"

She did. So much. "Yes," she whispered, grinding the heel of her palm against her pubic bone.

"Every day for a week I had the same dream. You were naked on your knees in front of me." His

voice went rough, guttural, and she strained to understand him, desperate for the words and the sensations they caused. "I didn't even ask. You just opened your beautiful mouth and welcomed me inside. Deep, deep inside. Working your tongue, pulling and sucking me off until I was ready to come."

"Un-huh." Her legs had begun to quake as she arched against her hand now, the tension in her thighs building.

"Then you'd stop and raise up to kiss my stomach. I could feel your tits on my cock, your hard nipples brushing my thighs. You'd press

my dick between your breasts and squeeze. It felt like dying. You'd start to move, bouncing high on your knees, then down again, faster and faster, squeezing tighter and tighter. Right when I thought I'd die, you would stare up at me, those gorgeous lips swollen from sucking my cock. Right as I was about to come, I'd wake up. I'd be so fucking hard, so ready, I'd grip it and give it one stroke and explode."

"I want you to do that now. Let me hear you," she begged.

"Oh yeah. You too. Are you touching yourself?"

"Yes. Outside my underwear."

“Take them off,” he growled.

Her whole body shook as she put the phone down and stripped off her clothes. She'd never felt so desperate for an orgasm, so wild and out of control in her life.

Scooping up the phone, she lay back down and slipped a hand between her legs. The wet heat engulfed her fingers, soaking them. She let out a hiss.

“That's it,” he crooned. “Is your pussy wet for me, Frankie? Because my cock has never been so hard.”

“Yes, I'm wet. So wet, and I want you inside me so bad,” she whimpered.

She could hear the creaking of his bed through the phone now, and the slow, steady beat set her aflame. There was no question what he was doing. She pinched her eyes closed, imagining him there. On his back, stroking his thick cock up and down.

“Slide two fingers into your slit, babe. Nice and deep.”

She did as he asked and moaned as her tight channel clenched around her fingers.

“Those sounds are killing me. Now thrust them in and out, rubbing your clit between thrusts,” he demanded. The creaking picked

up tempo, and that sent a spear of need knifing through her.

She massaged the swollen knot of desire before plunging deep again, and shuddered. "I'm going to come."

"Yes. I want that so bad, Frankie. I want to hear you come."

"Shit, Mac, I—"

Her shout echoed in Mac's head as his cock bucked hard, demanding release. He growled as the liquid snaked up from his balls. Gripping his shaft tighter, he stroked harder, faster. "That's it, babe. Let it happen. God, I can

almost feel that tight pussy squeezing my cock over and over.”

“Mac! Oh God.”

Frankie’s broken cries sent him headlong into the storm, and he exploded in a hot rush, come pumping out in spurts as he fisted his throbbing cock.

The moans on the other end quieted as he lay gasping for breath. Jesus, if that was phone sex, they were going to set the bed on fire when they were in the same room. The blood pounding in his ears receded, and Frankie let out a satisfied hum.

“That was the nicest phone call

I've ever had." Her voice was warm and sleepy.

"Oh, babe, me too."

"So, we're on for tomorrow?"

"Nothing short of an alien attack could stop me," he assured her.

"Okay. And, Mac? Thanks for... everything tonight. It was one of the happiest days of my life."

"Me too." He hesitated, scrambling for a reason to stay on the line a little longer, but came up empty. His brain had shorted out the second she agreed to see him again. "Good night, Frankie," he said simply then disconnected and slumped back against the

headboard with a groan. His heart was still pounding. Despite the release, their little talk had only made him want her more. He had no intention of going along with her plans for them to be fuck buddies. Not that it would be a hardship. If she was as open and sensual tomorrow as she had been on the phone, it was going to be spectacular. But he wanted more. He wanted it all. Now to convince her they were a perfect couple, no matter what anyone else in Brewster thought.

Because he was crazy in love with Frankie Sepkaski.

Chapter Six

Doo-wop music blared from the radio, and Frankie shimmied across the floor of the garage, shaking her tail feathers as she sang along with The Crystals. Something about fifties music always put a bounce in her step, especially when she was working on a car from that era. Now if someone would bring her a root beer float on roller skates, all would be right with the world.

She belted out the last line of the song like her life depended on it, and executed a spin into a bow. She

missed having Danny around, but it was kind of nice having the shop all to herself so she could act a fool.

“Do you take requests?”

She leapt a good two feet off the ground, and her heart stuttered. Whipping her head toward the door, she eyeballed Mac leaning against the jam. “Jesus, I didn’t hear you come in.” *Obviously, or I wouldn’t have been caterwauling that stupid song.* She resisted the urge to cover her molten cheeks with her hands.

“Sorry to interrupt. The door was open, and I didn’t want to startle you by shouting over the music.

Clearly I misjudged that situation," he said with a warm chuckle.

"It's okay. I didn't have anything scheduled until noon and wasn't expecting anyone. Not that I mind. I mean, you're always welcome to stop by." She needed to shut up, but as she watched his amazing mouth kick up at the corner and his eyes go all twinkly, it wasn't easy. He made her as nervous as a virgin on prom night.

"I'll keep that in mind. I thought I'd swing by to see if you wanted to eat dinner with me tonight."

"Like, before..." She tore her gaze from his and swept a hand

through her hair. This was getting ridiculous. She was acting like a child. They were consenting adults, no reason to dance around it like a freaking maypole. She cleared her throat. "Before we...have sexual relations?"

"Sexual relations? That sounds awful. Like I should bring an attorney or something."

"Stop teasing me, Mac! I don't know what to do, or say, or anything. This is all new for me." She gnawed on her lower lip.

"Hey, it's okay. This is new for me too. Believe it or not, I can count the times a woman asked me to be

her sex tutor on one finger.” He held up his pointer then aimed it her way. His eyes got all dark as he crooked his finger. “C’mere.”

Her feet felt like they were nailed to the cement floor as she willed herself forward. If she didn’t stop being such a chicken, this was never going to work. And man, did she want it to work. A half dozen hesitant steps and finally she stood before him. She craned her neck to meet his gaze. “I’m here.”

“Do you want to know why I’m really here? It’s because I couldn’t wait another second to see you. I can’t get you out of my head. I

dreamt about you...us. And every time I tried to get something done in my office this morning, I'd lose my train of thought. All I could think about was you, last night, calling my name as you came. I'm not here about dinner. I'm here because I want you so bad I can hardly see straight."

He didn't touch her, but the words sent a spear of white-hot lust through her. She wanted to respond, to tell him she felt the same way, but her tongue was frozen to the roof of her mouth.

"It's okay. You don't have to say anything, this time. I meant

everything I said, and seeing you now is exactly what I needed to get me through the rest of the day.

That said, I'm happy to feed you as well," he finished with a wink. He didn't take his eyes off her as he walked backward toward the door. "Seven's still good. Come hungry, I bought two gigantic porterhouse steaks."

By the time he left, she was trembling. With a moan, she plopped down on a stool in the corner. Surely this level of anticipation wasn't good for a person. She was setting herself — and worse, Mac — up for a big

letdown. What if it was awful? Or she did something stupid and embarrassing like she had with Nick? She cringed at the thought.

But Mac wasn't Nick, and she wasn't seventeen anymore. She was a healthy, red-blooded woman. It was time to start acting like it.

"Is it cooked enough for you? I can put it back on the grill for another few minutes if you'd rather," Mac said.

Frankie sent an apologetic smile his way. The steak was medium rare, exactly how she liked it, but

she couldn't seem to choke more than a few bites down. Her leg bounced under the table as she pushed the mushrooms around on her plate. "It's delicious, but...I think I'm too nervous to eat." In fact, she hadn't eaten much at all today. Once Mac left the garage, the day had gone by in a blur, most of which she spent imagining what their night would be like. Now that it was finally here, part of her wished she was back at the garage daydreaming about it. The reality was almost too much to bear.

Mac set his fork down and took her hand. "Let's go sit and talk for a

while. See if we can't make you feel a little more at ease."

He urged her to leave the plates on the table and led her to the living room. Like the rest of the house, it was elegant but not opulent and gave off a sense of warmth. A huge, L-shaped leather couch sat in the center of the room, facing a gorgeous marble fireplace with a giant flat-screen TV mounted above it.

"Did you do the decorating?" she asked, taking in the strategic pops of bamboo-greens and burnt-oranges that kept the rich, chocolate-brown of the room from

feeling too masculine.

“Actually, I did. It’s not so different from architecture in the sense that you want a building or room to evoke a certain feeling when you’re in it. Color, texture and shape all come together to create that illusion.”

She shook her head in amazement. “I don’t want to pump up your ego too much, but you seriously have such a good eye for this kind of thing.”

“Thanks. And don’t worry, my mother tells me daily what a waste of time my job is. No chance of me getting a swollen head over it when

she's right there to let the air out." His tone was a lot less bitter than it could have been.

"Doesn't that make you feel like crap?"

"It used to," he said with a shrug. "But I realized a long time ago that she's not going to change. If I let it get to me, it's only going to make me unhappy. I can only please one of us, so I've decided it's going to be me. Life's too short. We do okay. She loves me the only way she knows how, and I throw her a bone every so often and do what she asks because it makes things run more smoothly. The big stuff like my job,

or..." he sent a pointed glance her way, "...my love life? Off limits."

"Probably doesn't stop her from trying though, huh?"

"Sure doesn't," he admitted with a rueful smile. "Come and have a seat."

She followed his lead, taking one side of the couch.

"What do you say we turn the lights off and watch a movie for a while?"

She stiffened. "Uh, you mean a..." she glanced around the room and dropped her voice to a whisper, "...porno?"

He threw his head back and

laughed, the sound sending a warm tingle through her.

“Nope. I’m not going to lie, though, it did occur to me. But then I would’ve had to find one I thought you’d like. The pressure was too much for me. No, the plan is to watch a regular old movie to help us unwind from the day, relax a little.”

She bobbed her head, mostly relieved but a tiny bit disappointed at the same time. He fussed with the remote and then dimmed the lights. When he returned, he sat in the middle of the couch and patted the space next to him. Her heart

pounded as she shimmied closer. He slipped an arm around her shoulders and tugged her until she was nestled against his chest. The scent of warm man and some sort of almond soap enveloped her.

“You smell good,” she murmured.

“Thanks. You too.”

So far, his plan was totally backfiring. Being this close to him felt like walking a tightrope. Exhilarating, terrifying, but definitely not relaxing. His body was tense beside hers, muscles taut, and she resisted the urge to touch. Their breathing seemed to fill the

silent room until, thankfully, the opening credits and soundtrack began.

The movie was an edge-of-your-seat action flick, her favorite, and despite her proximity to Mac, soon enough she was sucked in. In the midst of a suspenseful car chase scene she found herself squeezing his thigh. The second she realized it, she snatched her hand away, only to have him take it and return it to his leg. She let it remain and soon was tracing patterns on the fabric of his worn jeans, exploring the play of muscles beneath her fingertips. Despite the gripping

plot, the movie became background noise as she slid her palm up and down his thigh, moving closer to the juncture between with each pass.

Wouldn't he be shocked if she cupped his cock right now? That would be weird, and totally inappropriate. Sitting, chilling, watching a movie and she, being the freak that she was, all of a sudden would reach out and grab his dick out of the blue. That was probably a story a guy would share with friends on the basketball court.

She started to take her hand

away from his leg, but Mac covered it with his own.

“No, leave it there.” His gaze never left the screen as he spread his legs and drew her hand higher until it was wrapped around a thick ridge of jeans-clad cock. She wet her lips then gave a tentative squeeze. His hum of satisfaction vibrated against her ear and sent a blast of need roaring through her.

He was big, hard, and she was desperate to see him. To touch his bare skin. He released her hand, and for a moment she considered moving hers too. But damn it, that's not what she wanted. This night

was about exploring her fantasies. She wasn't about to waste the opportunity. With her pulse pounding, she massaged him, working her palm over the outline of his cock. Up and down, over and over, until his breath grew harsh.

He nudged her head from his chest and slipped his arm from her shoulders to drop it between them. She risked a glance at him in the dim light, but he kept his eyes on the screen, which made her feel free to continue. Right when she resumed her caress, he covered her thigh with his hand. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth as

she realized what he was about. Quid pro quo. He was going to touch her the way she was touching him. The thought made her squirm in her seat. She was soaked already. Would he feel the steamy heat between her thighs through her overalls? He stroked her knee absently, nothing in his face giving away the extent of his arousal.

She kept her gaze on him, giving his length a firm squeeze. This time he couldn't hide his reaction as he sucked in his breath and his nostrils flared. Emboldened, she repeated the movement, working up the shaft to the tip, lightly pinching the

head. His eyes snapped shut and his jaw tensed.

He was as affected by their play as she was. A wave of need pulsed low in her belly. She wanted to climb onto his lap and slide that huge cock into her. Ride him until they were both out of their minds with desire. His thoughts must have been on the same dirty track as hers because the hand on her thigh clenched then released. Her own mission was forgotten as tantalizing fingers inched their way upward, teasing, taunting, until he paused a hairsbreadth from her pussy. A strangled moan came from

deep in her throat as he shifted to palm her overheated core. "Oh my God."

He still didn't look her way, which sent an illicit thrill through her. Could she break him, or would he maintain the façade? If she unzipped his pants, would he let her stroke him to completion? The anticipation was almost too keen, the want too sharp. The hand on her pussy pressed harder, and moisture flooded her entrance.

The slam of a door onscreen echoed through the room, and Mac twisted toward her. Without a word he took hold of her jaw,

guiding her to face the images on the TV. She didn't know when he let go of her chin because the scene unfolding before her eyes caught and held her attention. The man onscreen strode up to his wife and yanked her into his arms for a soul-stirring kiss. It was frantic. One second a kiss, the next clothes tearing, gnashing teeth and tongues. The woman gasped as her husband flipped her around, arousing her breasts in a brutal caress. He ground against her ass, and she seemed to come undone, crying out, begging for more.

Mac increased the pressure

between her legs, smashing the heel of his hand against her clit while his clever fingers rode her slit. She moaned and helplessly followed his lead, working his cock through his pants to match the rhythm he'd set. Her mouth parted, breath coming in short pants as she tried to gain some control, stop the avalanche of need threatening to suck her under. A sharp rip rent the air as the leading man tore away his wife's skirt, leaving her bare but for her high-heeled shoes. He pressed her forward by the neck, and she braced herself against the wall with her hands. Mac's seductive massage

was relentless now as they watched the man on the screen enter her.

“Do you want to come like this?” Mac rasped.

“D-Do you?” She pulsed her hips, increasing the pressure.

“This is about you. Talk to me, honey. Tell me what you need.”

His need was so evident, so raw, that paired with his deft touch it drove every rational thought from her brain. The onscreen cries grew louder, the slapping of bodies faster as the couple’s movements became frantic.

“Yes. I want to come so bad,” she managed, the admission freeing

her.

“Take it then. That’s it, rock against my hand,” Mac growled, and she bucked against him, out of control. Her body tensed as his fingers rubbed deeper still, working her pussy hard. It was happening, coming on like a freight train. She bowed her back as it crashed into her. Tiny pinpricks of light exploded behind her eyelids. She turned, pressing her face into his shoulder to muffle her hoarse cry as she came apart.

As the waves receded, she became dimly aware of Mac’s labored breathing and his cock

bucking beneath his jeans. She pulled away to see his face, which was stark with tension. He met her gaze, and his eyes were so intense she shivered.

Embarrassment began to creep in. "I'm sorry, you didn't —"

"Shh. Stop. That was the hottest thing I've ever witnessed. Please don't ruin it."

She smiled self-consciously. "So it wasn't weird?"

"Honey, if that's weird, you're going to think I'm an out-and-out freak when I get you into the bedroom. That said, if you want to make it there, you'd best unhand

my johnson.”

She gasped and pulled away.

“Sorry.”

“No more apologies,” he demanded as he rose to his feet.

“Now, if you’re nice and relaxed, what do you say we go upstairs? As sexy as you look in those overalls, I can’t wait to get you out of them.”

He took her by the wrist and pulled her into his arms. She tipped her head back, stretching up to press a kiss to his jaw.

“Thank you,” she whispered, blinking back the tears that suddenly pricked her eyelids. They hadn’t taken off a stitch of clothing,

and already Mac had obliterated most of the sexual fears that had held her captive all these years.

He didn't respond with words. Instead he scooped her up as if she were his bride and strode down the hallway.

Mac set Frankie on her feet and stepped back to look his fill. She'd been so nervous earlier, he'd wanted nothing more than to put her at ease. Drooling over her wouldn't have helped matters. Now that they'd broken the ice, he devoured her with his eyes.

Her full breasts strained the

stretchy fabric, hard nipples spiking the black material. "No bra," he murmured, tracing one peak with his fingertip. She moaned as she swayed toward him. The silver of her zipper glinted in the moonlight, and he fingered it lightly before tugging it down an inch...then two. He'd pictured this more times than he could count, but it hadn't prepared him for the reality of Frankie in the flesh. She was everywhere, surrounding him, filling his senses to overload. Her scent, her taste, the sound of her pleasure still ringing in his ears.

He dragged the zipper lower,

exposing more and more of her silky skin. The shadowed crevice between her breasts called to him. He bent to her, feathering soft kisses over her collarbone and lower, until he nuzzled her cleavage. Her whispered moans lured him downward as he chased the ever-expanding V of flesh. He hooked his thumbs beneath the fabric at her collarbones and gingerly peeled it away, over her shoulders, down the lean curve of her upper arms. It was like Christmas only better as her tits spilled forward, freed of their confines. His cock pulsed and

twitched as he took in the glorious sight. Dusky, tight nipples stood out in stark relief against the pale gold of her full breasts. He closed his eyes, grappling for some semblance of control.

“Touch me, Mac,” she said, taking his hand in hers and laying it on her heart. He opened his eyes as she guided him lower until he cupped one perfect mound. Her nipple tightened even further against his palm. Sweat broke out on his forehead as the effort of holding back took its toll, his balls pulling tight against his ass as precome leaked from the head of

his aching cock. He released her and bent low to take her swollen nipple into his mouth. He sucked hard, without preamble, and she cried out, spearing her hands into his hair, holding him close. He clutched her overalls and yanked them down over her hips, past her thighs, until they lay pooled at her feet.

He released her nipple with a pop and dropped to his knees in front of her, taking in the view on the way down. Her flat stomach, the indent of her navel. Then the breath left his lungs in a whoosh. Her pussy was shaved bare, the

smooth, pouty lips glossy with moisture a few scant inches from his face. He resisted the urge to dive in, plunder her until she broke apart for him. Instead he took his time, dipping a gentle finger into her entrance. She stiffened and let out a squeak.

“Oh my God,” she muttered as he tucked his finger into her tight channel.

He leaned forward, covering her pussy with his mouth, lapping at her with slow, even strokes. She gasped, arching into the caress. Listening to her body's cues, he quickened the pace, flicking her clit

faster. Fast enough to make her thighs quake with need. The bud between his lips swelled, and he rubbed it with the flat of his tongue as he plunged his finger deep.

“Come for me, baby. I want to taste –” Her inner muscles contracting drew his attention. “Fuck yeah, there’s the honey. There’s –” He didn’t finish, but she did as he dove in to feast. Warm, wet and delicious, the sweet taste pushed him nearly beyond endurance.

“Mac? Oh!”

When she began to quiet and the contraction ebbed, he pulled away

and launched forward, sending them crashing onto the bed. His apology was derailed as, instead of complaining, she pushed him back just as forcefully and tore at his jeans. Frantic and desperate like that couple had been on TV.

“I’ve never...” She stared down at him and swallowed hard. “I want to suck your cock.”

Those words slid through him like a hot knife through butter. He lifted his hips and growled as cool air brushed over his boiling flesh when his jeans came down.

“God, I’ve wanted this part of you inside me for so long. Mmm...”

Holy fuck. She was rubbing her cheek on his thigh, turning so her lips pressed against his throbbing cock, opening them to draw another drop of fluid out of him.

His head fell back, and he clenched his jaw hard. He grabbed hold of her hair, ready to pull her up, knowing he'd never be able to withstand the onslaught. But the draw of her mouth was too much. Instead he pushed down, flexing as her mouth opened wide and she swallowed him whole. Searing, living velvet surrounded him in a tight grip that pumped and begged, pushing him to the edge of his

sanity. He wrapped a hand in the curtain of her hair, at first guiding, and then restraining her. She fought him, but he was firm. He wanted more. All of her.

“Stop,” he groaned, his muscles trembling with the Herculean effort of holding back. “I need to be inside you.” He pulled her up to straddle him and looked deep into her eyes. “How do you want me?”

She met his gaze boldly. “Behind me. With your hand wrapped in my hair.” Her quiet declaration sent a lightning strike of adrenaline down his spine and made him want to roar with satisfaction.

“Get on your knees,” he commanded, rolling her away from him, all semblance of control evaporating under the weight of his need.

She climbed onto all fours before dropping to her elbows, arching her back. “Like this?” She shot him a look over her shoulder. The picture she made with her wide, curious eyes, the mass of silky hair hanging over one shoulder and her incredible body displayed for him was one that would remain forever in his mind. How would he ever go back to life before this?

The silence stretched between them like warm taffy, and she resisted the urge to fill it with nervous chatter. She could see the heat in his gaze, could hear his quickening breath, and resolved to stay still. Her patience was rewarded.

“Fucking perfect. You are so beautiful.” The normally husky voice had gone guttural, and a thrill sizzled through her.

The bed dipped as he knelt behind her. Big, warm hands closed over her ass cheeks to massage and knead her. Thumbs traced lower to caress her inner thighs as fingers

drifted closer to her center. He bent low, pressing a sucking kiss to her spine, and she moaned. His mouth was pure magic.

“Please, Mac.”

With a muttered curse, he parted her, probing with the broad head of his cock, testing her readiness. The time for teasing was over. She slammed back against him, trying to take the entire length of him at once. There was no pain, despite his size. Just an almost unbearable fullness that had her immediately tipping her hips forward. The slow drag of her slick inner walls over his steely hardness was sheer

ecstasy and had her sliding back to engulf him again.

“Slow down,” he growled.

Mindless now, she barely heard him as she rocked backward, taking him as deep as he would allow.

“You want it all? I’m not going to fight you.” His fingers caged her hips in a punishing grip as he ground against her, burying his cock until he could go no farther. He was right. It was too much, too hot, too fast. The intensity of it terrified her, but there was no going back. He began to thrust, pulling back in a controlled slide then pounding forward until his

hips smacked her ass. His pelvis flexed in a mind-melting rhythm, the tip of his cock nudging something hidden inside her with every pass, sending dizzying waves of desire coursing through her.

Again. Again. Faster. The restrained power becoming less restrained as he jack-hammered into her. A strangled wail built in her throat, and he moved quicker still.

“That’s it, honey. Don’t fucking stop. Let it happen, let me feel it.”

His words sent her flying. The orgasm crept up, rolling over her in ever-increasing waves until she

shattered, convulsing around him. Her whole body quaked as she worked her clenching pussy over his cock. Mac's grunt turned into a shout and he pounded deep, her name on his lips as his body exploded into hers.

Chapter Seven

“If you get your lazy butt out of bed, we can hit the Whole Foods and get some stuff for breakfast. I’ll cook.”

Frankie opened her eyes, squinting as they adjusted to the light. Mac stood beside the bed with his hands on his hips, peering down at her expectantly. She allowed herself the pleasure of gaping at his ripped abs and bare chest for a long moment before responding. “What are you going to make?”

“Belgian waffles. They’re my specialty. Unless you keep looking at me like that, in which case I can show you another of my specialties. We barely scratched the surface last night, you know.” He stepped closer to the bed, his pupils dilating.

“Not on the menu, buddy.” She held up a staying hand. “I’m starving, so let’s get back to the food. By specialty, you mean only thing you can cook besides steak?”

His eyes glinted, and he set his thousand-kilowatt smile on her. “As a matter of fact, I can cook other stuff.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“Hamburgers. Chili. And I make a mean soufflé.”

“Serious?”

“One hundred percent. It was one of the things we learned in high school home ec. I don't know why, but it stuck with me.”

“All right. But this is just a friendly little breakfast, right? This is—”

“Isn't a date,” he grumbled. “I know, I know. We both have to eat, though, right?”

She didn't know why she was fighting it. Somehow, the idea of sitting in his kitchen watching him

make waffles sounded like a perfect way to start the day. They'd had an amazing night, and she wasn't quite ready to let him go. If someone saw them out together, too bad. Mac was right. Life was too short to worry about what strangers thought of her. It wasn't like she had to make any major decisions right now. All she had to do was be honest with herself. And honestly? She wanted to have breakfast with Mac. Simple enough.

"Okay, but I need a shower. And I didn't plan on staying the night, so I don't have any clothes. I can't wear my overalls," she reminded

him with a grin.

“Oh, believe me, I remember. But don’t think you’re getting out of it that easily.” He crossed the room to a long dresser and began pawing through the drawers. “Here,” he said, tossing her a pair of gym pants and a hoodie. “They’ll be big, but I think you’re going to look adorable. Want some help?” He gave her a lascivious smile and moved toward her.

She screeched and dove off the bed, running for the bathroom. Laughing, she slammed the door behind her. “You said you were going to feed me and I’m not

putting out again 'til you do," she called.

"That sounds like a promise to me."

More time with Mac. What a hardship.

She was still smiling when she stepped out of the shower ten minutes later. That was what being with Mac did. Made her into a silly, giddy fool. A soft knock sounded on the bathroom door, and she hiked the towel up higher over her breasts. "Who is it?" she said in a singsong tone.

"Open the door for a sec."

She bit her lip and took a quick

peek in the mirror. Her hair was scooped back into its usual ponytail because she didn't want to wash it, but she had not an ounce of makeup on and had hoped to at least slap a little lip gloss and mascara on before he got another look at her.

“Why?” she asked, hand on the doorknob in case it was important.

“I want to give you something.”

She opened the door and stuck her head out. “What?”

Mac stood there, buck naked, with a handful of grapes in his big hand. “These.” He held one to her lips, and she instinctively opened

her mouth and took it between her teeth.

“Mmm, good one. Nice and tart.”

His gaze zeroed in on her mouth, sending a zing of heat straight to her pussy. Maybe breakfast could wait...

Mac stared, enthralled by a drop of juice clinging to Frankie's bottom lip. Leaning forward, he swept his tongue out to collect it but found he couldn't get enough. He cupped her neck, dragging her closer. Her breath caught as he took her mouth.

Shit, he didn't want to let this

woman go. He pulled back and worked up a teasing smile.

“Technically, I just fed you. And you *did* say...”

Her brows flew up. “I can’t believe you would stoop to that.”

“Honey, you’d be surprised to know what I would stoop to if I thought I could have you again.”

She closed the door in his face with a soft click, but a few seconds later, right as he was about to walk away, it swung open again. There she stood, hair down, come-hither smile firmly in place, the towel on the floor at her feet.

He tossed the grapes over his

shoulder and stalked toward her, intent on something far sweeter. Her eyes went wide as he wrapped his arms around her hips, pressing her backward until her thighs met the granite countertop. Spanning her slim waist, he lifted her onto the surface, which was slick with steam. Her breath caught, and she braced herself with a hand on the wall behind her. They'd barely touched, but already his cock was pulsing, thickening for her. He stood back, trying to commit the view to memory. Her gaze was heated, her lips swollen from their marathon night of lovemaking.

Hard nipples stood proudly at attention, beckoning him in for a taste.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful,” he muttered, reaching out to trace her collarbone with the tip of his finger.

Her cheeks flushed, and she turned her face away.

“You look, Frankie. Look at yourself.”

She tipped her chin toward the mirror to her right and gasped. “Geez, can we turn the lights down? You can see...everything.” She moved to cover her breasts, but he grasped her wrists, tugging her

hands away.

“Not going to happen. You are the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, and I’m not going to miss an inch of this.”

He stepped between her thighs and laid her hands on his chest. She met his gaze and nodded. “Okay, we’ll do it your way.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” he growled, closing his hands over her thighs, spreading them, sliding her closer to the edge of the countertop. He peered down at her glossy pink pussy and groaned. He’d gambled with the grapes and won. Now he wanted to worship her, take it slow,

show her exactly what she meant to him. Only, things were growing more dire by the second. He was painfully hard. The urge to plunge into her until they both blew apart was getting stronger with every glance, every touch.

He looked up and caught her watching him stare. "You're so pretty here," he whispered, brushing his knuckles over her heated center. Her thighs flexed against his hips. "So tight and wet." He pressed forward, nudging her slick clit with his thumb.

Her tongue darted out and moistened her lips as her head fell

back.

“Tell me you want it. Tell me you want my mouth, right here. Sucking you, licking you,” he urged. Her hips fluttered as she tried to lure him deeper. He shifted back so he could get a better view of her pussy open and dripping for him. He poised two fingers at her entrance and dipped them into her in a shallow thrust.

“I could lick your clit while I do this, Frankie. It would feel so fucking good. Tell me you want it and it’s yours.” He thrust again, groaning as her silky walls squeezed.

She gasped. "Please, Mac."

Her voice was all breath, and he leaned in close. "Please what, baby? Tell me what you want."

"Please, put your mouth on me."

The words made his cock jerk, and he dropped to his knees. He spread her lips, elated to see the creamy moisture that gathered there from his touch. Bending toward her, he flicked his tongue against her swollen clit, and she cried out.

She sank a hand in his hair and yanked. "So good," she whispered.

Her praise sent his body into overdrive, and he drew the little

nub into his mouth, working it with lips and tongue. She twisted and bucked against him, then froze as he slid two fingers over her.

“Oh God,” she groaned.

He pushed deep, thrusting into her tight, claspng sheath. Her whole body was taut, primed, ready to blow, and if he moved, she would orgasm. He stilled as she moaned, hanging on the precipice. Her muscles strained and trembled.

“Mac,” she sobbed, arching her hips to take him further, to send her over.

He blew a soft puff of air on her overheated skin, and she jerked. He

wanted to capture this moment in his mind forever. The sight of her gorgeous pussy, creamy liquid trickling down her thigh. The sound of her breathy gasps. The scent of her body, sweet and mysterious. His cock screamed for attention, precome streaming out as he tried to hold on.

She tangled her fingers into his hair and forced him to look up at her. "Fuck me." Her eyes were wild, her nostrils flaring delicately.

His heart tripped as he stood and withdrew his fingers from her body. Clutching her hips, he centered himself, sliding into her in

one smooth motion. He caught her gaze and held it, savoring the sensations bombarding him. She was finally here. After all the nights he'd spent dreaming of her, of them, together like this, it was actually happening. Her dark eyes burned like coals, reflecting back the emotions threatening to drown him. She loved him too. The certainty of it settled into his bones, giving him a sense of peace he'd never known. Now he just needed to get her to see it. He traced the elegant line of her jaw with his thumb before she turned her head, breaking the connection.

She reached around him and clutched his ass, anchoring him to her, fanning the physical flames in an obvious effort to withdraw from the emotional. He tamped down the flash of disappointment. It wasn't important. All that mattered was that she loved him, and he had all the time in the world for her to figure that out.

Following her cue, he leaned forward to nip at her juicy bottom lip as he drew his hips back and then slid them home again. She arched her back in response, drawing him deeper. Sucking his tongue into her mouth, she locked

her legs around him. The intensity of it rocked him to his soul, and the inferno roared out of control.

Suddenly, the need to come barreled down on him, his balls growing tight. Desperate to take her with him, he gripped her hips, sliding her over his distended cock until she threw her head back with a scream. Every beautiful inch of her went taut as she stilled, her inner walls pulling at him, urging his own release. He thrust hard one last time as her body pulsed over him, milking his cock. The orgasm ripped through him, and he clutched her head in his hands as

he exploded into her waiting heat.

Their labored breaths re-steamed the mirrors, and he bowed forward to rest his forehead against hers.

“Fuck, you’re amazing,” he managed as his heartbeat finally started to slow.

She gave his bottom a weak pat. He leaned back to see her trembling smile. “If you think that was good, wait until you see what a full meal will get you.”

An hour later Frankie held up a can of whipped topping as Mac took a pint of heavy cream from the

cooler. “You’re going to make it? From scratch?” Her wide-eyed wonder made him want to tweak her nose, but he refrained.

“Yep. That’s the best part. You can help me whisk it up. It’s a good workout.” As he put the carton into their cart, she set the can back in the refrigerator. “Blueberries or strawberries?”

She chewed her lower lip and mulled it over. “Both?”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” He pushed the cart over to the produce section. Frankie fell into step beside him, and they chatted amiably. They reached the fruit

section, and he bumped her with his hip. "Go on, pick what looks good." He watched her, mesmerized by her careful selection technique as she held the containers to the light and gave the tops a gentle squeeze.

He loved the graceful way she moved. Loved the way she committed to everything she did wholeheartedly. Loved seeing her in his clothes. Loved...her. It was no revelation, but for the first time he felt like he might have a shot at convincing her they were meant to be together.

He was deep in thought, trying

to figure out how to make this—*her*—a fixture in his life, when a shrill voice interrupted his reflections.

“Mackenzie?”

Frankie’s whole body stiffened, as if she’d been whapped by a taser. He bit back a sigh and pasted a welcoming smile on his face.

“Hello, Ma.”

Frankie pinched her eyes closed as heat suffused her face. What were the odds of Mac’s mother shopping at eight o’clock in the morning? Or grocery shopping at all, for that matter.

“You know I abhor that

nickname. Mother will do. Who is this?"

Frankie could feel the weight of the older woman's stare and turned to face her. "Hello, Mrs. Galbraith."

"Francesca Sepkaski? I nearly didn't recognize you with all those clothes on." Her dour expression turned even more severe as her gaze flicked Frankie from head to toe, taking in her disheveled hair and the New York Giants sweatshirt that clearly belonged to Mac. She aimed an I-demand-answers glare toward her son.

"Yes, but she goes by Frankie. Still." He added the last with a

pointed look.

“It’s okay, Mac. Francesca is fine.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Well, the two of you can debate about it if you’d like, but I’m not calling her Frankie either way. It makes her sound like an unruly Italian boy from the Bronx,” Mimi sniffed. She pronounced it like “eye-talian”, and Mac didn’t bother to hide his eye roll.

“What are you doing here, anyway? You realize this is a grocery store, right?”

“Don’t take that tone with me. I was on my way to meet CeeCee at

the tennis court, and I saw your car. Since you haven't been returning my calls, I thought it would be a good idea to stop in, say hello and remind you about your date with Melissa tonight."

A wave of nausea gripped Frankie, and she set the berries back in the display case.

"I haven't forgotten," Mac said grimly. He tried to catch her eye, but she stared at the fruit instead as hot tears pricked her lids.

"So long as you remember your obligations," Mimi said.

"And so long as you remember that's exactly what this evening is

to me. An obligation.”

“I merely asked if you would accompany her. You agreed readily enough, and it would be unbearably rude to cancel on such short notice.”

“I had no intention of canceling. Nor did I have any intention of repeating the exercise. I accepted because you asked me to. If you somehow took it to mean that Melissa Figbert and I would fall madly in love and provide you with impeccably pedigreed grandbabies, then you misunderstood.”

Mac’s mother tipped her face up and gave a derisive sniff. “You’re

being boorish, and I don't appreciate it. When you're done with your...little get-together with Francesca, give me a call. This matter is not closed, Mackenzie."

"Break a leg on the court today, Mother. And give CeeCee my love."

Mac grabbed Frankie's hand and rolled the cart away without a backward glance, but Frankie could feel the heat of Mimi's gaze drilling into her long after they'd rounded the corner.

"That was fun stuff," Frankie muttered once they'd managed to

get out of earshot. Her tone was ripe with sarcasm, but her body language said something else entirely. She was hunched over, arms crossed over her stomach, like she was hurting deep inside. And damn if that didn't make him want to drag his mother back by her flawlessly executed French twist and force her to apologize.

Mac pulled the cart to a stop. "Fuck her," he said firmly. "I would no sooner let her pick a woman for me than I would a career path. Don't let this ruin what we have before it even gets off the ground." Frankie kept her face averted until

he lifted a finger to her chin. "Look at me."

When she finally did, the unaffected joy on her face that had been there all night and most of the morning was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a practiced grin that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"I'm looking, and the view is pretty fine," she said with a wink, letting her gaze drift down over his chest.

The look that would have set most men aflame sent a bolt of fury through him. He would have rather seen tears. At least they would be honest. "Stop with the show,

Frankie. I thought we were past that. I know you're hurting right now."

The smile died a sudden death, replaced by outrage. "We had a deal. There isn't supposed to be anyone hurting. You agreed to a purely physical relationship and some good times. Now you're poking around spots I don't want you poke —"

"Don't pull that shit on me," he snapped. "From the second we kissed, we both knew it was more than that. Hell, I don't even think you realize you couldn't have been with me if it wasn't more than that."

This is not who you are.”

She pursed her lips, a wistful expression clouding her features before drifting away. “That’s where you’re wrong. Maybe it’s not who you want me to be, but I realized last night I like the wild feelings. I love the adrenaline rush, exploring new things, dressing sexy. Maybe it started out as a defense mechanism, but now it really is a part of me. And that doesn’t make me a bad person.”

“You’re so right. It, along with so many other things, makes you an awesome person. I love that you’re comfortable with your sexuality.

But don't confuse that with being promiscuous. We did these things together because we care about each other and we trust each other. Why else would you have waited this long?" He was pushing her too hard, too soon, and he knew it, but he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"I was busy." She jutted her chin out stubbornly, her annoyance apparent.

"Now you're not? What's changed?" He shook his head, refusing to back down. "Nothing. If anything, it's more hectic with your dad gone. The difference is you finally found someone you wanted

to be with enough to risk getting hurt again. Don't chicken out on me now."

"What are we, five? Are you going to double dog dare me?" Her voice was steadily on the rise now, and twin spots of color rode her cheekbones. "I got news for you, pal. You can't always get what you want. I'm sure that's an entirely new concept to you, but it's the truth. We had a deal. If you imagined this was going to unfold some other way, that's on you. I never lied to you." She thrust the last out like a shield, and he wondered who she was trying to

convince.

“You’re lying to *yourself*. I’m just collateral damage. You need to face the fact that last night was special and could never have happened if you didn’t care about me.”

She held up a staying hand. “I’m done with this conversation. Enjoy your waffles, Mac. I’m going home.”

“Don’t go.” Anger warred with fear as he watched her retreating back. “At least let me drop you off. It will take you forever to walk.”

She didn’t turn around. He fought the desperate need to follow her, knowing he’d already pushed

too hard. If he stood any chance at all of her coming around, it had to be on her terms. She rounded the corner, disappearing from view, and he let out a string of curses. Despite his best intentions, he'd still managed to drive her away, and in record time.

Now to figure out how to drive her back.

Chapter Eight

Frankie stared blindly at the carburetor on the greasy towel in front of her. After leaving Mac in the dairy aisle of the grocery store then spending the rest of her Saturday watching old movies, she'd gone to the garage in hopes of finding something to keep her mind busy. She'd scooped up a couple smaller parts to take home and work on. Now Sunday was more than half over, and she'd done little more than stare into space trying not to imagine Mac

slow dancing with Melissa Figbert. The girl with a last name that sounded like something plucked from a tray at the Russian Tea Room. She was probably a classic beauty, the picture of grace, and had perfect fingernails without a hint of grease under them. Surely, she knew how to waltz, put together a soirée at a moment's notice and maybe even do embroidery.

Frankie let out a heavy sigh and risked another glance at her cellphone. Nothing from Mac at all. Maybe he'd finally come to his senses. She swallowed past the

tightness in her throat and picked up a screwdriver. It was bound to happen. She should be grateful it was now, before she was balls to the wall, head over heels in love with him.

She was so tangled in thought that she jerked in response to the sharp rap on the door. *Mac?* Her stomach did a flip as she rushed to the window. She pushed aside the curtain to see a cream Mercedes in the driveway. Not Mac. Then who?

She crossed the room to the door, sparing a glance at the face staring back at her from the glass doors of the hutch. Wincing, she said a silent

thanks that it wasn't Mac at the door. She looked like shit. Yanking the elastic band from her hair, she gave the long locks a quick finger brushing before sweeping it back into a ponytail.

The knock came again, this time more insistently.

“Coming!”

She peered through the peephole to see Mimi Galbraith glaring back at her. Blood rushed to Frankie's ears, and her hand stilled on the doorknob. This couldn't possibly be good, but what could she do, leave the woman on the stoop?

“Oh for heaven's sake, Francesca,

open the door. It's chilly and I've forgotten my scarf." The crisply issued command brooked no argument, and Frankie responded like a scolded schoolgirl, swinging the door open.

Mimi swept in on a cloud of Shalimar, making a beeline for the kitchen, leaving Frankie to stare after her. "I'd love a cup of tea," she called.

Frankie shook off the initial shock, closing the door with a snap as she ran through the possibilities for this visit. Only one of them made any sense at all. Mother Galbraith had been thwarted the

day before because there was safety in numbers. Today, she'd come by in hopes of cornering the weakest gazelle alone and tearing her to shreds. Little did she know that their little ménage à awful at the grocery store had been all the convincing Frankie needed to back off. She'd known from the start this thing with Mac was an exercise in futility, but the thrill of being with him had lulled her into some sort of opium-like daze where for a few sublime hours she believed anything was possible. No longer. That didn't mean she was going to let this woman make her feel like a

piece of trash, though.

She squared her shoulders and gathered up her courage as she made her way to the kitchen.

“Listen, Mrs. Galbraith. I can guess why you’re here, and while I appreciate your sticktoitiveness, there’s no need to waste your time or mine. Mac and I aren’t a couple. We never really were and we are even less so now. Our relationship from here on out, if any, will be strictly platonic and centered around business.”

The older woman shrugged off her coat and thrust it at Frankie. “On a hanger, not on a doorknob

please,” she instructed, then sat ramrod straight in the nearest chair, crossing her trim ankles as she waited expectantly.

Frankie stood for a moment, at a loss for words. With a sigh, she loped off to again do Mimi’s bidding, muttering to herself all the while. Why couldn’t she send her packing? Was she that much of a wuss? She comforted herself with the thought that she’d had an emotionally draining couple days and, had she been one hundred percent, she would’ve held up much better against the bulldozer that was Mimi Galbraith.

By the time she returned, Mimi had laid out a small stack of photos – some black and white, some color – on the table. “Sit.”

Frankie sat.

“Would it surprise you, Francesca, to know that I’m fully aware of my flaws as a woman and a mother?”

Frankie shook her head politely but apparently didn’t manage to camouflage her doubts on that score because Mimi’s rose-tinted lips twisted into a wry smile.

“I suppose I deserve that. I don’t comport myself in a way that indicates humility, do I? But on the

inside, believe me, I can be as neurotic and unsure as...others.” She raised a brow at Frankie pointedly.

“Oookay.” Things had taken the oddest turn. Suddenly Frankie’s theory seemed off, and she had no clue where the strange encounter was heading.

“I know that I’m demanding and snobby. I know I care far too much about what others think. I nag my only son as if it’s my purpose in life, and even that pales in comparison to the amount of abuse my husband takes.”

Mimi rifled through the photos,

plucked one from the bunch and held it out to Frankie. A lovely young woman, around fifteen years old, stared up at her. Her golden hair leapt off her head in a riot of curls, and the most beguiling gap-toothed smile wreathed her sun-kissed face. Freckles sprinkled her nose and the apples of her round cheeks. Her eyes snapped with a devilish delight that had Frankie's lips splitting into an answering grin. The child's zeal was infectious.

“That's Mary-Alice Starkey. She's a pip, isn't she?” Mimi said, her tone bittersweet.

Fear lanced Frankie's gut. "Is she...dead now?"

A crack of laughter exploded from Mimi's mouth, and she nodded. "Oh yes. Long dead."

As Frankie stared into the eyes of the woman before her then back at the picture, one piece of the puzzle fell into place. "Holy crap, that's you."

"Sure as shootin' is, darlin'."

Gone was the cultured, upper-crust New England accent that had separated Mimi Galbraith from the unwashed masses. This was Deep South. And not the pecan-ranching, debutante kind of Deep South,

either. Mimi could have easily been a Clampett.

“My mama was from tough stock, and she made no bones about us making a bettah life than she had. My two older sisters and me, we were wild when we was young,” she said with a whisper of a smile before steeling her spine again. “But she made sure we straightened out. Landed ourselves some good men with fine families. It wasn’t easy. Charm school was paid for by her second job as the mistress of a sugar plantation owner.” Her shoulders shuddered delicately. “Mr. Samuel

Beaudegraven. What a bag of wind. I don't know how she stood it, but I know why she did. For us."

She smoothed the yellowing picture with one hand and cleared her throat before continuing. "And now here we are, you and I. I have spent my whole adult life trying to escape my beginnings. It's a part of me, the need to make sure my children don't go and undo all the hard work me and my mama did to get them out. To give them some legitimacy. But it's times like these I feel a bit like a general without a war. You know what I mean by that, darlin'?"

“I think I do, yes, ma’am.”

“Because nowadays, nobody cares much about legitimacy or about what’s proper. Sure, the Montclaires do, and the Samuels, but aside from this little vacuum of a world I live in, does anyone really know or care?” She shrugged helplessly, suddenly looking every one of her sixty years. “Not one lick.”

A surge of sympathy rolled through Frankie, and she reached out to give the other woman’s hand a squeeze. Things were never as black and white as they seemed.

“Mackenzie has always suffered

my silliness with a sort of good-natured acceptance. He'd get irritated, but he let me have my way if it didn't tax him overmuch. But yesterday?" She shook her head grimly. "Yesterday I pushed him too far. Lord, I never saw him so furious. Gave me a piece of his mind, he did. Told me I had better take my snobby ass—he sure did cuss at me—over to your house and apologize for my behavior." She lifted a hand to her elegant, champagne-blonde coiffure and sighed. "I didn't much care for any of that and told him so. But he was right, and I told him that too. Then

he told me he loves you.”

Frankie slammed her eyes closed as white lights exploded behind her lids. She sucked in a breath, then another, but she couldn't seem to get enough air.

“Put your head between your knees, darlin', and breathe through your nose.” Mimi's voice sounded very far away, as if they were playing telephone with two cans and a length of string. “Get yourself together, young lady. Last thing I need is to tell my son I went and killed you. He's likely to think I did it on purpose for spite. Come on now, slow breaths.”

A cool hand rubbed circles on her back as she did Mimi's bidding. After a minute, her heartbeat started to slow and her lungs began to cooperate.

"W-we only went on one date," she wheezed.

"Must have been a doozy. Or maybe he loved you before that. When I look at you, I surely do see a bit of this girl in there." She tipped her head toward the photo of herself as a child. "I have neither the backbone nor the inclination to resurrect her, but I think I could get used to having someone with a little fire around in small doses. Not

that I'd ever admit it outside these walls. Think on it long and hard because this whole hippy-dippy nonsense won't happen again. I love my life and I have no intention of changing it for anyone. When I walk out this door, good old Mary-Alice is dead and gone again. If you become part of the family, I'll butt in where I'm not welcome, browbeat you into fundraising events and even try to dictate your wardrobe. I'll ride you about using the proper fork at a restaurant and I'll not let my grandchildren run around like heathens. In public, at least," she added with a wink. "As

long as you understand that, and you're good to my son, you and I will do fine." She pushed the chair back and stood. "Now be a dear and fetch my coat."

Frankie's thoughts were racing as fast as her heart. It took a raised brow and pointed stare to kick her into gear. She made her way down the hall to the closet and retrieved the coat. Mimi had followed her and stood, arms outstretched, as Frankie held it open for her to step into.

"I appreciate your hospitality. Although I never did get that cup of tea," she said with a *tsk* as she let

herself out, pausing on the doorstep. She didn't turn around and her voice was hushed, but Frankie heard her loud and clear. "I do apologize for my behavior the other day. It was...unbecoming." The words were barely out before she faced Frankie and continued briskly, "Now, maybe you want to consider running a brush through that hair and applying some rouge. Mackenzie is at the coffee shop down the street, and I'm sure he would love to see you."

With that, she turned on her heel and marched down the stairs as Frankie stared after her, speechless.

Mac sent the watch on his wrist a baleful glare. His mother had been with Frankie for over an hour. That couldn't be good, could it? An apology should've taken a few minutes, tops. Then again, this was his mother. The first hour was likely her working up to it. Apologies didn't exactly come naturally, that was for sure.

The bell jingled over the door as another person who wasn't Frankie or his mother stepped in, bringing a blast of chilly air with them. He tore his gaze away and took a slug

of cold coffee. What would he do if she wouldn't hear him out? More to the point, what *could* he do? And the answer was not a fricking thing. If she didn't want to take a chance on them, then they'd go back to the way things were. Friends. Fellow car enthusiasts. Customer and proprietor. He'd have to console himself with the memory of their brief time together as more. At least they'd had that.

What a crock.

He swallowed a bitter laugh. Whoever said that nonsense about having loved and lost clearly didn't know shit. It felt awful. Way worse

than when he'd only been with Frankie in his imagination. The reality of it had been so much better than anything he'd expected. Going back to less would be sheer torture.

He pushed away his cup, scrubbing a hand over his face. He'd always considered himself a patient man. Hell, he'd waited two years for a change with Frankie, but he was at his wit's end. If he didn't hear something from his mother soon, he was going to lose his mind.

His cellphone chimed, jarring him from his thoughts, and he yanked it from his pocket. Marjorie,

his assistant. He diverted it directly to voicemail.

The door jingled again, but this time when he looked up it was to see Frankie Sepkaski striding toward him. His body tensed, on high alert, as his stomach took a dive. Even now, with their possible future hanging in the balance and her blank expression, he couldn't stop from admiring her. The elegant way she moved, the long line of her neck. He was well and truly snared.

She pulled out the chair across from him and dropped into it. "You sicced your *mom* on me?" she

whispered furiously.

Upon closer inspection, the look he'd initially interpreted as enigmatic seemed more like shell shock. Her eyes had a glassy sheen, and the confusion on her face was plain to see.

"It sounds pretty lame when you say it like that," he admitted. "But to be fair, I didn't exactly *sic* her. I just told her she needed to apologize. She agreed, and we decided to meet here afterward so I could make sure she went through with it."

Frankie gave him a dubious eye squint. "That's all you told her to

say?"

"Yep. So here I am. Waiting to see if she went through with it."

She met his gaze then nodded.

"She's a piece of work, you know."

"I do." He was afraid to say more as his imagination ran wild. What the hell had his mother done?

"She told me some...things."

Frankie's face turned a pretty shade of pink as she began fiddling with the sugar packets on the table.

"She, uh, said that she wouldn't necessarily disapprove if we were together. If you wanted to be, I mean." Pink became magenta as she let out a whoosh of air,

blurting, “She said you love me.”

Mac jerked back as the words hit him like a slap. He’d already pressed Frankie too hard once and had ruined everything. Now his mother had to go and tell her that. He could almost hear the final nail being pounded into the coffin. He fumbled to recover, letting his face go blank as he struggled to figure a way to do some damage control without lying outright.

“My mother tends to be both melodramatic and nosy. She was rude to you and hurt your feelings. I would have insisted she apologize to anyone she treated that way in

my presence. You think she's bad now? You can't imagine what she's like unchecked." He shot her an innocuous smile that he hoped didn't betray his roiling emotions.

"So you don't love me?"

He stared at her hard as he tried to untangle his thoughts. Her rich brown eyes regarded him expectantly. Was that hope shining there? Fear? She swallowed audibly, her delicate throat contracting, and suddenly it was clear as glass. It didn't matter what she thought she wanted to hear. She loved him too. The question was whether she was willing to

take a leap with him. It would kill him if she walked away. But after years of watching his mother dance to the tune of the people around her who she so desperately wanted to impress, he'd had his fill of phony. He'd been daring Frankie to be honest with herself, face her fears. How could he turn around and do less than that himself?

“She wasn't lying. I do love you.” He shrugged helplessly. “Every time I see you, I fall a little harder. In fact, I had to build a new garage last year. Do you know why?”

She shook her head dumbly.

“Because I bought six cars. Six.

Don't get me wrong, I love cars. But more than that, every time I saw one I knew you'd like, I'd imagine your eyes lighting up when you saw it. I'd picture us choosing colors for the paint, and me stopping by with coffee, checking up on your progress. Us laughing and flirting. You in your little overalls. I hadn't planned on buying any more cars until I was through with my business expansion plans, but the prospect of spending time with you was too tempting to pass up."

Tears clung to her lashes as she slapped a hand over her trembling

mouth.

He leaned closer and took her by the wrist, uncovering her lips.

“And now this new garage is full too, so it would be really great if you could put me out of my misery and tell me you love me back,” he urged gently, hoping she couldn’t hear his heart knocking against his ribs.

The tears spilled over and she nodded once. “Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“I love you b-back.”

He stood, dizzy with relief, and pulled her to her feet. “I thought you might. The question is, do you

want to be with me? Are you willing to put up with the crap a couple people might throw our way?"

"Let them talk. As long as you love me the way I am, none of the rest matters." She bounced onto her toes and laid her lips on his.

He wrapped his arms around her, reveling in the warmth of her body and the joy he felt at not having to wonder if it would be for the last time. After giving her a hard squeeze, he pulled back to look down at her face. "And my mother? Can you stand it? Because if not, they have cars and plenty of

buildings in California. Then we're talking Christmases and funerals only."

"Wait, are we moving in together now?" she demanded, panic stealing over her features.

"Doesn't have to be right away. We don't have to talk about it until you're ready. As long as you're aware it's part of my master plan. That and, you know, a ring and babies an —"

She thumped him in the chest with one fist. "Babies?" she screeched. "Stop. Please stop. My brain can't take it right now."

"Shh, it's okay, love. We have all

the time in the world. As long as you want that *someday*, I'm not going anywhere."

She nodded and curled into him, the tension seeming to seep from her body. "That, I can handle. I don't want to move away, though. Your mom and I have had a meeting of the minds. Sort of. And I could never leave the garage. It's the one place I can still feel close to my dad. It's my whole world. Well, it was. Until you."

Her words washed over him like a healing rain. "I am so happy to hear you say that." He tugged her arms from around his neck and

stepped back. "So, let's make it unofficial. Frankie," he said, his tone solemn as he dropped to one knee with her hand in his. "I want to be your eight-cylinder man. Will you agree to a long-term lease, with an option to buy?"

She tossed her head back and let out an exceptionally bawdy laugh. "Eight cylinders, huh?" She yanked him to his feet. "If you can keep up with me, I'm yours." She cupped his face in her hands and tilted her lips to his. "I'm all yours."

About the Author

Chloe Cole is one half of the happiest couple in the world. She and her handsome hubby currently reside in Pennsylvania with a four-pack of teenage boys and their two dogs, Gimli and Pug. When she isn't acting as maid, chef, chauffeur or therapist, she can be found reading just about anything she can get her hands on, from young adult novels to books on poker theory. She hates bugs (except ladybugs, on account of their cute outfits), but lurrves chocolate. She loves writing

super-steamy romance stories, but also hopes to one day publish something her dad can read without wanting to dig his eyes out with rusty spoons. If she had to pick another occupation, she'd be a pirate. Ooh, or, like, a ninja maybe.

She also writes adventure romance under the name Christine Bell. She loves to hear from her readers, so please feel free to contact her via the contact page at her website, www.christine-bell.com/ChloeCole, or chat with her on Twitter [@ChristineBell](https://twitter.com/ChristineBell).

Look for these titles by
Chloe Cole

Now Available:

Just One Night

*He's got one shot. Better make it
naughty...*

Just One Night

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Micah's new living arrangement with her best friend is quickly becoming unbearable. Not because Tomas isn't a good roommate. When they're alone, he shows her his sweet, loyal side. It's just that he shows the rest of his parts to half the women in town. If she can't scrape together the money for her own place soon, witnessing the aftermath of his late-night

carousing is going to break her heart.

Then again, if it's going to break anyway, maybe she should just go ahead and make a move on the man she's loved since high school. And risk his rejection a second time.

It hasn't been easy for Tomas to share space with the one damsel he can't bear to see in distress. To have her within easy reach has been torture. His foster mother's words echo in his head: a classy girl like Micah deserves more than the likes of him. But lately Micah's been rattling his cage. If she does it one

more time, she'd better be ready for the animal she awakens.

Unfortunately for him, Micah's hot little hands are already wrapped around the bars...

Warning: Contains a Latin bad boy with twelve years worth of fantasies to get out of his system, and his goody-two-shoes best friend who learns that her inner bad girl likes handcuffs and spankings. Beware. This book could cause a riot since there's only one Tomas to go around.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Just One Night:

He reached out a hand and

brushed the hair from her face. God, she was beautiful. Smooth, creamy skin, plump red lips, clear hazel eyes...that had popped open at some point during his perusal and were regarding him curiously.

“Are we home?” she asked and gave a sleepy stretch. The thin cotton blouse pulled tight across her chest, and it was only through sheer force of will that he managed to look away.

“Yeah. Let’s get you inside. I’ll make us some coffee and you some food.”

She didn’t respond. She just opened the car door, slipped off her

shoes and weaved her way into the house without a backward glance.

By the time he got inside, her shirt was off and she was hopping around the living room on one foot. One leg was bare, the other was still tangled in her jeans. Every time she jumped, her lace-encased breasts gave a jiggle and so did his heart.

He wet his lips. "Uh, what are you doing, babe?"

"I'm stuck."

"I see that."

"I'm gonna take a shower. But I'm stuck. Can you unstuck me?"

He paused for a long moment

and sucked in a breath. Could he? It was a simple request, but over the past few months even the simplest request seemed difficult. He was only a man, made of flesh and blood – every drop of which had drained to his cock. Taking off her jeans rode the line between *out of the question* and *abso-fucking-lutely not*.

Micah was on the floor now, wrestling with her jeans as if she was an alligator in the midst of a death roll. Her face was crinkled in concentration, her tongue perched on her top lip à la Charlie Brown, and his heart gave a lurch.

“Stop rolling around, you’re making it worse.” He walked over to help her up by the elbow. “Put your arms around me, babe.” His voice sounded like he’d been sucking on broken glass, and for that second he was glad she was shit-faced enough to not notice.

She leaned forward, nestling her head into his shoulder as she wrapped her arms around his waist. He pinched his eyes shut and counted silently until the initial shock of her scent and the lush press of her curves wore off. He got to eighty before he regained control.

She seemed perfectly content to stay where she was, but instead of getting better, his situation was getting more and more dire by the second. “Okay,” he said, patting her shoulder. “Lift your leg up.”

She nodded into his chest and slung her leg – the bare one – high over his hip. Blood pounded in his ears as the soft heat of her pussy pressed against his thigh.

“The other leg, Mike,” he ground out.

She nodded again and slipped her hands to his shoulders, launching herself in the air and hooking her jeans-clad leg around

his other hip to straddle him.

Poor word choice. "I meant switch legs, not both."

She started to slip, and he instinctively grabbed her to keep her from falling. Unfortunately, the most natural handhold left him with two palms full of luscious ass.

Staring at him through wide eyes, she mumbled, "Well this is nice," and wiggled against him, her almost-bare sex rubbing against his throbbing cock.

"Jesus, Mike, stop it."

"Why? What do I have to stop? It feels really good. Doesn't it feel good to you?" She did it again to

make her point. He tried to stay still, but his fingertips flexed deeper into the soft flesh of her bottom.

He groaned. And she heard him. Even the room seemed to hold its breath until she broke the deafening silence.

“You want me?” She sounded afraid.

She should be.

He started to shake.

“Tomas?”

“No.” The word felt like it was ripped out of him. There was nothing in the world he'd ever wanted more than he wanted her right now, but she was drunk.

Worse, even if she were sober, she wasn't for the likes of him. They'd both always known that.

Her face crumpled, and she pushed her hands against his chest to escape. "Let me go. Just let me go. I'm tired of making a fool of myself over you, so let me go, dammit."

Defeated, he stared into her tear-filled eyes. "You don't get it, do you, babe? It's not that I don't want you. I want you too much."

Tomas's intense, chocolate gaze held hers captive. "The things I want to do to you... Jesus, Mike,

none of it's nice. Do you get what I'm telling you?" His husky voice was tinged with desperation.

Heat pooled between her thighs as she tried to comprehend what he was saying. Was the tequila addling her to the point that she'd heard him wrong? And if she'd heard him right, *did* she get it?

Her heart thudded, and she weighed her response. In truth, she had no idea what he meant, and the fear of the unknown assailed her. But if she said *no*? The answer made her blood run cold and chased her pleasant buzz into oblivion. He wouldn't sleep with her unless she

was going into it with eyes wide open. If she wasn't, he would walk away from her again. She could bear anything but that.

"I get it," she said in as firm a voice as she could manage. Then she wet her lips and rocked onto her tiptoes, pressing her mouth to his in a soft kiss.

He groaned as her tongue swept along his. His hands slipped down, closing over her hips, urging her closer. Giddy with elation, she moved to wrap her arms around him when suddenly he pulled away, thrusting her from him as if she were on fire.

“I don’t think you do.” His pupils were dilated, his nostrils flaring.

She flicked a glance downward and could make out the thick shape of his erection straining against his zipper. He was a man on the edge. Now she needed to push him over.

“Make love to me, Tomas.”

Desperate, she decided she would take whatever she could get. “Give me one night,” she whispered.

Then maybe she could convince him that one night wasn’t enough.

His jaw tightened, and he ran an impatient hand through his hair.

“And now I know you don’t.”

His wistful tone scared her almost as much as his words. He took a step back and turned away. Panic clawed at her, and she grabbed his wrist. “No. Don’t do this to me again. Please.”

He shook his head but said nothing, refusing to meet her gaze. “You’re drun —”

“I’m better now. I’m buzzed, but I know exactly what I’m doing. I know exactly what I want.”

His face was stony, and she knew that look. His mind was made up. She swallowed the lump wedged in her throat along with the last of her pride. “At least tell me why this

time. I deserve that much.”

“No. You deserve more. Much more than me. Your parents always knew it. Hell, I always knew it too. You’re good and sweet and beautiful—”

“So are you!”

“See, that’s where you got it wrong, babe. I was never good. Not then, not now. I stole money from my foster parents, I smoked weed, I went through girls like potato chips.”

“You had it tough,” she argued. “And look how you turned out.”

He slammed a hand against the wall behind her. “*You* look, Mike.

You look at how I turned out, because sometimes I think you don't even see me. You just see this shiny fucking knight, your buddy Tomas, who will beat up a kid for taking your lunch or pick you up when a date goes bad and let you crash at his place."

He laid a hand on her neck, closing it gently over her throat. His voice was low and urgent. "But what you don't see is the Tomas who jerks off to the memory of you bent over in your boxer shorts. The one who closes his eyes and imagines fucking you from behind then pulling out at the last second

so he can come on your juicy, round ass that's still pink from the palm of his hand. The one who wants to tie your wrists and ankles to the bedpost so he can make you scream and cry out his name."

He rubbed his thumb over her pounding pulse, and her breath caught in her throat. His eyes were wild, his expression pained. He stepped back, and his voice dropped to a whisper.

"And that? That's just the tip of the iceberg. Do you get it now, babe? The big bad wolf is sleeping one door away. Don't come knocking again, or you'll wake him

up for real next time.”

*Desire as reckless as a fighter jet in
freefall...and just as dangerous.*

Double Down

© 2012 *Katie Porter*

Vegas Top Guns, Book 1

As part of the 64th Aggressor Squadron, Major Ryan “Fang” Haverty flies like the enemy to teach Allied pilots how not to die. The glittering excess of the Strip can’t compare to the glowing jet engines of his F-16. But a sexy, redheaded waitress in seamed stockings? Now *she* gets his blood pumping.

Cassandra Whitman's good-girl ways haven't earned any slack from her manager ex-boyfriend, or prevented a bad case of frazzle from holding down two and a half jobs. She sure wouldn't mind letting the handsome Southern charmer shake up her routine.

Their wild weekend lives up to Sin City's reputation. Especially when they discover a matched passion for roleplaying. For Cass, it's an exciting departure from her normal, shy persona. But for Ryan, it triggers memories of a time when his fetish drove away the woman he loved—leaving him reluctant to

risk a repeat performance.

Except Cass refuses to settle for ordinary ever again. She's about to show the man with hair-trigger hands that she's got a few surprise moves of her own.

Warning: This book contains dirty-hot roleplaying, featuring an all-alpha fighter pilot and an ambitious waitress with a fabulous imagination. Also: dressing-room sex, a plaid schoolgirl skirt, and a sprinkling of spankings.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Double Down:

She assessed her appearance in the bathroom's full-length mirror.

For the hundredth time. No change. She still looked like a naughty fantasy.

A French maid. She should've guessed.

Her grin took on a distinctly sexual edge, which she didn't mind at all. The blush too felt right — a little self-conscious, a little anxious. Already the temperature in her blood upped toward scalding.

“You greedy slut,” she whispered to her reflection, the grin broadening. “One great time wasn't enough.”

Her nerves stretched and stretched as she waited. She'd

ordered room service and managed to take a quick shower. Her hair was still wet, but she'd bound it in a sleek bun at the base of her neck. A light application of the cosmetics she'd snagged during a two-minute run through a store in The Paris's lobby had done wonders to hold back the look of fatigue.

Ryan's knock, when it came, sped her heartbeat. If she played the French maid, she wondered what he would be. A bedraggled traveler who'd had the buttons yanked off his shirt? A down-on-his-luck gambler?

And just how far would she push

this? Cass had spent the last hour trying to get inside his head. There was a huge gulf between a bit of dress-up and full roleplaying. She was almost surprised at how much she wanted it to be the latter.

Something that tipped over, deep inside. Something had *unlocked*. She could be anything, say anything, do anything.

The worst he would do is laugh, maybe flash that pulse-pounding smile and tell her to drop the act. He might merely be a guy after something different to look at, but that didn't feel right, not for Ryan. She had a guess as to what he liked,

and she was willing to give it a shot.

His knock was more insistent the second time. Good. She didn't like to think that he'd give up on her.

Cass took a deep breath and opened the door.

Ryan stood at the threshold wearing a fantastic dress uniform. The dark blue did marvelous things for his healthy tan, and the braided silver trim looked impressively realistic. Navy? No, that wasn't right. Air Force, maybe?

More than the color and the authenticity of the costume, she loved how it was exactly tailored to

his body – tall and lean, long and strong. Only a slack, bewildered expression gave away his response to her maid's outfit. Otherwise he embodied everything impressive and sexy about a man in uniform.

“Oh! *Monsieur* Haverty,” she said in her best French accent. A year spent studying art in Paris would finally prove good for something. “I hadn't expected you so soon. *Merci*, come in.”

He hesitated for only a second. Then the reality of what she'd done and said – how she sounded – seemed to click in his brain. “Thank you. I didn't expect to be kept

waiting.”

“My apologies, *monsieur*. I was only just finishing up.”

“I don’t appreciate sloppy service.”

She nibbled her bottom lip, daring to glance up from beneath lowered lashes. He surveyed the hotel room with the air of a man who expected perfection and found it lacking. A curious heat bloomed in her stomach, reveling in his command of the moment.

She’d been right. The man wanted to play.

“Your room-service order is waiting for you in the bedroom,”

she said, pitching her voice toward conciliatory. "As you requested."

"Oh?" He lifted his brows. "I'm curious if you managed to get that right, at least."

She ushered him into the bedroom where a rolling silver-tone cart was topped with a plate of fresh fruit and a bottle of champagne on ice. She'd ordered the items no matter the sticker shock, figuring they'd sort out paying for it later. Tonight was about living a fantasy.

Ryan strolled to the cart. His expression verged on haughty as he surveyed the assortment. "Good

enough.”

“I’m pleased, *Monsieur* Haverty.”

“It’s Major Haverty, actually.”

“Major?”

“Yes. And you are?”

“Cassandra,” she said, briefly shaking hands. That same electric zap they’d shared from the first moment reappeared, only stronger. She almost dropped character. Ryan’s teasing grin made a brief reappearance, as if he too was tempted to laugh.

Then it was gone. He was Major Haverty again.

“Where are you from, Cassandra?”

“Montparnasse, in Paris.”

Dear Lord, he was unbelievably handsome in that uniform. She wondered again where he'd picked it up. Had he returned to the sex shop? Or someplace else? He stood with his shoulders back, his posture firm and solid. The thought turned her on in funny, unpredictable ways. The roleplaying was easy to indulge when he fit the part so perfectly.

“What do you do in the military? Is it the Air Force?”

“That's right,” he said. “I fly fighter jets. F-16s.”

Cass's jaw dropped. He could do

that all day, adding facts to his character that would've seriously jeopardized the absorbency of her panties – had she been wearing any.

No matter how fabulous Ryan looked, her hands were restless for wanting to see him stripped. Something about his expression, however, told her he'd be the one giving orders.

Yes, sir.

“Well, I should finish up my duties.” So breathless now, she heard her accent slipping.

She turned to leave the bedroom, but he called out, “Miss? Could you

help me first?"

"My pleasure, *monsie* – I mean, Major."

He seemed to stifle a private smile. "This coat." He began undoing the buttons. "It's too hot in here for it. I won't be able to get comfortable."

"I should think not." She crossed the floor, her knees shaky. "Here, let me help."

He dropped his arms to his sides as she undid the remaining buttons. Her breath was coming in fitful gulps, but she forced herself to concentrate.

Calm down.

By the looks of how they were playing this hand, they would take their time. She needed to get herself under control or she'd wind up begging for a quickie down on the carpet to cut the tension. What she loved about their game was what would rip her up inside. The waiting. The deliberate buildup.

She pressed her hands flat against his body, right above his ribs. Slowly, slowly, she smoothed them up the inside of his coat, making love to his chest with her palms and her fingertips. His shoulders were tense. Corded ropes of muscles bunched and relaxed

beneath her touch. She eased the dress coat over his shoulders then down his brawny arms.

Through it all he held his tense stance, chin thrust out. She liked to think she had all of him at attention, but she didn't dare go for his crotch. Not yet.

The coat dropped to the floor behind him. "Thank you," he said curtly. "You can hang that up now."

Cass hid her smile. She angled her backside in such a way that he would get the choicest view as she bent at the waist. She took her time, first retrieving the coat, then

strolling to the closet where she found a hanger. Every action felt bathed in molasses, so achingly slow. In that hotel room, time had ceased.

A *pop* sound yanked her heart into her throat. She turned to find Ryan pouring champagne. The pale blue dress shirt did even better things for his tan than the dark coat. Muscles pulled and shifted with every movement. Her mouth watered at the prospect of seeing him fully nude. They'd shared so much so quickly, but damn did they have a long way to go.

“Come,” he said.

“So soon?”

His gaze jumped to hers. His expression told her she was naughty to risk ruining their charade. “Cut the impertinence, miss. Come here.”

She toyed with the lace edge of her skirt as she approached. His eyes jumped and danced, as if trying to take in everything.

He handed her a full champagne flute before downing a big gulp from his. Maybe he wasn't as controlled as he managed to appear. “Now, drink.”

Cass dove in for a healthy sip. The bubbles went straight to her

oxygen-starved brain. Ryan made her half-drunk already. The alcohol didn't stand a chance when compared to his blatant sex appeal.

"I want you to do something for me," he said, his voice tight and low.

"Anything. Anything you need."

"Go sit on that loveseat."

Cass willed her feet to move. She crossed away from the serving cart and sat primly on the edge of the loveseat's stiff cushion.

The window behind her allowed the lights of the Strip to shine in, bathing his face and his crisp, pale blue shirt in color. She just waited,

perched there, loving the way he touched her everywhere with his hot gaze.

“Cassandra,” he said softly.

“*Oui?*”

“I’m going to go down on you.”

Overdrive

Chloe Cole

To win her heart, he'll have to touch off her internal combustion.

Even after ten long years, Frankie Sepkaski's success as the best vintage car mechanic around still

hasn't overcome her teenage rep as a promiscuous troublemaker. No matter how tempting the prospect, the last thing Mac Galbraith needs is for her to take him out for a spin. Especially since his family thinks he should be looking for a prospective wife among the local socialites, not slumming with a grease monkey.

Mac likes vintage rides, but buying a new one every month just to have an excuse to see his ridiculously sexy mechanic in her overalls? That's pathetic. When she finally says yes to his date offer, he's not fooled. It's only because she has every intention of using

him to indulge her fantasies – then walking away. But Mac knows something else: underneath her bad-girl persona is a woman worth her weight in lug nuts.

It might take a crowbar to get her to admit she has feelings for him, but he plans to put the pedal to the metal to convince her to keep him around for more than just a test drive.

Warning: Sweaty, down-and-dirty sex between a mechanic and her best client. Read at your own risk. Dangerous curves lie ahead, and these roads are slippery when

wet.

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Overdrive

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