

Untouchable

rules

and

ROSES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HEATHER LONG

RULES AND ROSES

UNTOUCHABLE BOOK ONE

HEATHER LONG

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About Heather Long

Also by Heather Long

RULES AND ROSES

UNTOUCHABLE BOOK 1

When it comes down to acclaim in the yearbook, my class rank would probably earn me my only entry, but probably very little else. I don't wear cosmetics, do my hair, or give a damn about my appearance in general. Despite this, I've navigated high school among all the different groups from the nerds to the jocks to the theatre kids and the band geeks. I don't *need* to be cool.

Kicking off senior year, my only focus is to make every AP class count and keep my grades up. Shouldn't be hard, particularly with my so-called *untouchable* status. Oh yeah, imagine that—I had a reputation. Hadn't been a blip on my radar until the end of junior year when one of the girls' dropped that little nugget on me. Apparently, the guys at school considered me the best girl to hang out with for fun or homework, but nothing else.

While I'm not looking for a date, it's a little hard to swallow that I ranked as the best bud and tutor, but I would definitely never fall into the Girl Most Likely To Get Asked Out.

Pfft. What do I care? One more year and I'm off to college. So what if the numbers of female friends I used to have drifted off, and I'd scored a permanent seat in the friend zone? I had subjects to study, grades to maintain, and colleges to get into. I've never cared about the rules or status before, and I wouldn't now.

181 class days to go, and I'll graduate. No problem, right?

FOREWARD & DEDICATION

Every once in a while, you get a chance to work on a book that captures you so thoroughly you can't not write it. I've been very fortunate to have been similarly captivated over the years, but *Rules and Roses* truly submerged me in Frankie's world.

Frankie and her friends Archie, Bubba, Coop, and Jake are fantastic characters that came totally to life while I was writing and I found myself as captivated with their tale as I hope you will be.

I have to thank Blake Blessing, in particular, for Frankie's tale. A few months ago, she asked a question during a party on Facebook and I answered her privately. Just a fun recollection from my past. She said that sounds like such a great book! Well, the idea kind of planted itself and I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Ideas, like seeds, grow when they are watered and Blake along with Rebecca Royce were fountains of encouragement. So this book is for them!

Just a couple of housekeeping notes!

For those of you who have never read a reverse harem before, first let me thank you for picking this up and giving it a shot. Second, a reverse harem means the heroine will not make a choice in this book or any other between the guys in her life. It may take her a while to reach that conclusion, but it's the journey that drives it. There are many ways to frame this kind of relationship, currently reverse harem fits it very well.

Also, this is the first book in a series. While there may be no specific happy endings at the end of each of these books, there will be one to the whole series, that I promise you. Some of these books will have cliffhangers, largely due to the size of the story, but the happy ending has to be earned as part of the journey.

Thank you again for reading Frankie's story and I truly hope you enjoy it!

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST DAY

“*F*rankie,” Mom called. “You’re going to be late.”

“I’m not going to be late,” I yelled, not bothering to straighten from where I was digging under the bed for my shoes. I had one, the other was just almost out of—got it. Fingers hooked into the heel of the sneaker, I yanked it out and then pivoted to sit on the floor so I could put on my shoes.

Tiddles eyed me from his perch on my windowsill. He paused mid-groom as though I’d disturbed him with my antics. Shoes on, I stood and gave the black feline a scratch under his chin. He purred his approval then resumed his grooming as I snagged my backpack, made sure my wallet was secured where it went, then checked for my keys before giving the room a once over.

Bed not made. Clothes still in the hamper because I didn’t have time to do laundry over the weekend. My uniform stuck out of the top with its ugly ketchup stain prominent as if giving me the bird. Fine, I’d do laundry after school. I didn’t work again until Wednesday, anyway.

I scanned the floor—I’d vacuum before Mom noticed, had an aneurism, and ripped my head off. Course, that depended heavily on *if* she noticed. Backpack over my shoulder, I pulled the bedroom door wide and left it that way. Tiddles would spend ninety percent of his day in my room, but if I shut him in there, he’d shred the door or the carpet. As Mom always said, we needed the pet deposit back someday.

Speaking of Mom, she stood in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee. As I approached, she pushed a sealed tumbler of coffee toward me along with two twenties.

I eyed the money then her. “Thank you,” I muttered, claiming the coffee. I had a car and the school was less than ten minutes away by car, but I always went in early. First day, new year, and I had six AP classes and a TA period. No time for slacking, senior year or not.

“Take the money, too.” Mom held up a hand before I could open my mouth. “Not a word, Frankie. Put the money in your wallet. I don’t care if you never spend it, but you’re going to have pocket money.”

I made my own money. I worked at the fast food joint two blocks from school—Mason’s, home of the Big and Thick, known for its big burgers and thick shakes. Yes, it sounded dirty, but I’d gotten over blushing about it years ago. I still snickered, though. Course, every penny I earned was currently being poured into a savings account.

One I’d dipped into to fix my car two weeks earlier, but I still had to have air conditioning and a car that didn’t overheat. It was supposed to be over a hundred today and would stay about that for the next week or so. Back to school did not mean fall weather in Texas.

Joy.

Rapture.

“You’ve been working your butt off, missy, and instead of cruising through your senior year—which you *could* be doing—you’re overachieving, *again*.” Madeline Curtis, Maddy to her friends, Mad Maddy to her family, and Mom to me, shook her head.

“Every AP exam I ace equals one less college class I have to take a loan out for.” Since I had my eye on an out of state university, I needed all the help with *that* tuition I could get. I’d done two classes in my sophomore year, five in my junior, and this year was all AP classes. I only needed *three* of those

classes to finish my credits for graduation. “I really don’t mind.”

Actually, I kind of looked forward to the classes. I knew a couple of the guys in at least two of the classes, and I’d probably end up tutoring some of the others, so it wasn’t like I wouldn’t have people to talk to.

After the end of last year, that was a good thing.

“Fine,” Mom said with a sigh. “You’re going to do what you do.”

“Yep.” I grinned and gave her a loose hug. Mom wasn’t that touchy-feely, no matter how much I might have wished otherwise. She tolerated my hugs. PDAs just weren’t her thing, but she let me kiss her cheek and give her the occasional hug. Sometimes, she even ruffled my hair, which I had to duck away from because it was in a ponytail, the frizzy tamed at the moment, and I wanted it to stay that way.

After slipping the twenties into my wallet and securing it back inside the safety pouch of the backpack, I took my keys and my travel mug of coffee. “We, who are about to enter the breach, salute you.”

Mom snorted. “May the odds be in your favor.”

I groaned. I *hated* those movies, but she loved them. “Thanks, Effie.”

Her eyes crinkled with her smile as she followed me to the door. “I’m going to be late tonight, but there’s still leftover lasagna. Get the chicken out for tomorrow before you go to bed?”

“Can do.”

I jogged down the concrete steps from our apartment to the ground. The apartment complex was built into a hill so we were higher than the apartments behind ours.

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“Wednesday,” I called. “Thursday, too. Then the weekend.” Same days I did every week, but I’d pulled extra shifts over the summer. “Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, Frankie!”

It took a couple minutes to reach the parking lot. Mom got to park in the carport, but we only got one slot with our apartment, so I had to park across the lot in any open space I could find. The extra ninety seconds of walking wouldn't kill me. I checked my phone before I shoved it in my back pocket. *Five minutes late.*

I needed to get going or I'd never find a parking spot at the school. I got the sticker that said I could park, but unless I wanted to pay an extra hundred, I didn't get assigned parking spot there, either.

Unsurprisingly, a sandy blond leaned against the side of my car. He had his backpack slung over one shoulder, his eyes half-closed, and five o'clock shadow on his face.

“You look like crap,” I said by way of greeting.

“Look better than you,” Coop retaliated, and I grinned.

“Impossible.”

With a light shove, I pushed him away from the driver's side door. He mock-stumbled before straightening. At six foot, he topped me by six and a half inches.

“Let me guess, you need a ride?”

“Kind of obvious, isn't it?” He smirked and circled around the car. I'd already unlocked the doors, so he all but fell into the passenger seat. “I'll cover half the gas.”

“For the ten-minute drive?” I rolled my eyes as I set my backpack into the backseat before climbing into the driver's seat. The ten-year-old Toyota wasn't flashy or sexy, but she was reliable and got me where I needed to go. She was also paid off, and I made payments to Mom for her, which helped Mom make payments on her new car—not that she'd asked me to do it, but fair was fair.

“Okay, I'll keep my money to myself, if you insist,” Coop smirked. “Drive, Jeeves.”

I flipped him off, and then got the car started. “Ass.”

He just laughed.

The drive to school didn't take long; it never did. Coop spent most of it with his eyes closed behind his sunglasses, and I drank my coffee, draining the last of it before we even pulled into the lot. First day back and it wasn't crowded yet. *Fantastic*. I scored a parking spot next to the only tree and closer to the gym hall's exit doors.

Good karma for the first day.

First day as a senior, too.

So weird.

Coop made an obnoxious snoring noise as I shut the car—and thus the air conditioner—off. I pinched him and he made a grumbling noise then caught my hand and held it to his chest.

Rolling my eyes, I flicked his nose and he made a face. “You are so mean to me.”

“Ha. Out of my car, Coop. I need to go inside, walk my classes, and see if Ms. Fajardo is in her classroom.”

“Why?” He gave my hand a squeeze before he let me go. “God, girl. Just come to the cafeteria and hang out.”

“There's plenty of time for that.” Well, there had been in freshman and sophomore years. We hung out every day before classes, but then Mr. G let me use his classroom in junior year, and I hung out there some—mostly toward the end of the year. I was kind of hoping Ms. Farjardo would do it this year.

“Uh huh.” Cooper “Coop” Brennen, the boy next door with the lazy attitude and the never in a hurry motto, had a GPA just a bare fraction off mine. He was so not the face he showed the world of being too cool for school or study. “You said that last year and disappeared on us.”

“I didn't disappear,” I argued. He unfolded himself from my car and stretched before sliding his arms into his backpack. He shut the door and circled the car, snagging my backpack for me and holding it up. It was already hot and humid outside. Texas in August? What did anyone expect? At least we could wear shorts to school, and I'd taken advantage of it.

Not Coop. He wore jeans and looked like he'd never broken a sweat. Sliding my arms into the straps, I locked the car before shoving the keys into my pocket. My tumbler would stay in the car until I got home. I'd kill for another cup of coffee. There was a Starbucks a short walk away, inside the grocery store up the street. But—meh. I didn't want to be dripping sweat with curls pulling my hair out of the ponytail.

So, I'd suffer.

Looping an arm over my shoulders, Coop turned me toward the building. "You spend most of your time *in* classrooms even when you didn't have to be."

"I was studying. Five AP classes is a lot of homework."

Coop snorted again. "Frankie, Frankie, Frankie... do not hide this year."

"I'm not *hiding*," I said, and gave him a shove. "And get off. It's hot."

He laughed. The great thing about Coop was he never fell into bad moods or got tense. If anything, he was the most laid-back guy at Robertson High. He didn't sweat grades, homework, the temperature, or life. He just drifted along, and the currents were always kind to him.

Well—except for when they weren't. I put a pin in my internal whining. Coop made conscious choices to be zen, and I knew why, so better to just respect than be an ass about it.

"Tell you what," Coop said as he pulled the door open for me. The ancient air conditioning must have been in a good mood because a wall of cool air greeted us. After a couple of thousand students arrived, it wasn't likely to stay that cool. "I'll go with you to Fajardo's room. You can kiss up to teach, dazzle her with your awesomeness, and *then* you come hang out with me in the cafeteria."

I didn't say anything at first. What did it matter if I hung out or not? Being seen wasn't going to get me a date. If anything, the end of last year proved my involvement, or lack thereof, in the social scene wasn't going to get me anywhere.

“Frankie,” Coop dragged out my name like every syllable was a hint of him pleading. “Say yes. C’mon. You know you wanna. Bubba will be there. Jake and Archie, too. You haven’t really seen them this summer.”

I scowled. “You’re going to be a pest until I say yes, aren’t you?”

“Well, duh,” he said, smirking. “If you’d come to one party this summer, I might cut you some slack.”

“I went to one of the parties.” I’d gone to Bubba’s birthday party two weeks ago. His eighteenth. The first of the group to hit it. Coop was next. Archie closer to Halloween and Jake at Christmas. Me? I didn’t get the right to vote until almost Easter.

Sucked to be me.

“One.” Dry. So dry and so sorrowful. “One does not count. You only went because it was Bubba’s birthday. You stayed for exactly thirty-five minutes, gave Bubba a present, and slipped out when you thought no one was looking.”

Halting, I stared at him. We were mostly alone, because I’d only seen a few kids and a couple of teachers. In about twenty minutes, the first school buses would be rolling in. “How do you know? You had your tongue down Laura’s throat.”

His smile grew. “I know things.”

“Like what Laura Zaverman’s tonsils look like?”

“Feel, not look. If I were looking at them, that would be gross. And we all noticed you ditched.”

Crap.

I tilted my head back and stared at the ceiling. The problem with being *that* girl. The one they all hung out with, the terminally friend-zoned buddy, was they did notice crap like that.

Everyone at the party had been pairing off. There were kids in the pool making out, kids on the lawn furniture making out. At least three of the cars had been rocking when I headed

down the hill to my own. “Fine,” I conceded. “But I need to walk my schedule first and talk to Ms. Fajardo.”

“Then the cafeteria?”

Gripping my backpack straps, I made another face. “Yes, then the cafeteria. Can we go now?”

Coop pivoted and started walking, his longer strides outpacing me almost immediately. “C’mon, slowpoke,” he called over his shoulder. “Stop dawdling. We got teachers to see and classes to find.”

Torn between laughing and groaning, I shook my head and hurried to catch up. It was almost impossible to get mad at Coop.

Almost.

I’d done it.

At the end of last year, but I’d taken the summer to get over it.

When he smirked and bumped me, I had to fight the urge to bump him back harder.

I was over it, right?

Most of my classes were on the second floor, which was convenient. I’d spent my sophomore year zigzagging across the school along with Archie. The two of us had the worst schedules. Coop and Bubba had pretty much been on one half of the school or the other while Jake had the opposite of their schedule. The only benefits Archie and I had were we had classes with all of them, but after Freshman year, we’d never had a class including all five of us.

Then again, we were all focused on different tracks. Junior year they’d combined all the lunch periods, so at least we could eat together. Junior year also marked the first year we could eat off campus, though, so the guys ate off more than on for the fall semester. I got used to finding somewhere else to go at lunch. I could afford to eat off campus, I just didn’t want to spend the money.

Coop nudged me when we got to Ms. Fajardo's room. The door was open and the lights were on. The teacher in question was just setting her purse on her desk when I stuck my head in the room.

"Hi, Ms. Fajardo."

With a soft laugh, the teacher waved me inside. "Hi, Frankie. Couldn't even let the first day go by before you checked in?"

Heat kissed my cheeks. "Well, when a routine works, it's better to stick to it."

"True enough." Ms. Fajardo wasn't much older than my mom. She had a pageboy cut to her dark brown hair, really kind brown eyes, and a smile that welcomed questions. She also possessed a terrific sense of humor. This was the first year I'd actually *be* in her class, though I'd met her way back in ninth grade when she talked to our Honors Humanity class that served as my English credit that year. "Come on in."

I straightened and slipped in the door. Instead of following, Coop just leaned in the doorframe.

Ms. Fajardo had already pulled out her sticky notes and wrote down the name of three books. "I'm assuming you finished *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Middlesex*?" Those had been on our summer reading list.

"In June," I admitted ignoring Coop's drawn out "*nerd*" from where he stood at the door. Hands behind my back, I flipped him off.

Ms. Fajardo glanced past me to Coop. "If you haven't finished them, Mr. Brennen, you won't be ready for today's introductory quiz."

"I'm good," he declared, much to my surprise.

Twisting, I stared at him. A, he was in AP Lit? And B, he'd done the reading?

"I finished the last one yesterday." He tapped his chest. "Not a nerd." He pointed at me. "Definitely a nerd."

Rolling my eyes, I returned my attention to Ms. Fajardo. She just shook her head while still chuckling. “Then this list is for you, too,” she informed him. “You’re going to have independent reading each quarter. This is the first quarter choices. Pick whichever one you like. If you have it with you, and there’s free time in class, you can read it then.” Without missing a beat, she focused on me. “You should probably grab all three, because I know you. You’ll finish them by the weekend.”

Face hot, I just grinned. “Like I said, when it works...”

“Yes, yes. It works. Okay. Go on.” She pressed the sticky note to my hand. “I’ll see you both in fourth.”

Oh. Cool. Coop and I had Fajardo together before lunch.

“See you then!”

As Coop fell into step with me, he peered at the list. “How many have you already read?”

I skimmed the list of books then had to bite back a laugh.

“Two,” Coop answered before I could. “My money is on two.”

Dammit. “Yes, I’ve already read two of them.”

He laughed and hooked an arm around my shoulders again. “Gonna be my study buddy, right?”

“Depends,” I countered. “You didn’t tell me you were taking AP classes this year.” In fact, he’d avoided them when at all possible. Dual credit was where he’d focused his efforts. If you were going to school in state, dual credit was better.

“You didn’t ask,” he challenged. Without missing a step, he guided me to the next classroom. AP French. Four years and I’d gotten pretty good at the language, so this year would be fantastic. Madame greeted us both, though Coop hadn’t set foot in French after sophomore year. Since they only required two years, that was all he intended to do.

With Madame’s notes added to my sticky, we went on. AP World History with Mr. G was an independent study class. He

wasn't in his classroom, but there was a note on his door addressed to me. Coop laughed his ass off when I snagged it.

By the time we'd swung by AP Calculus, AP Government and AP Economics—gov was on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays while econ would be Tuesdays and Thursdays for the fall semester. The schedule would flip-flop in the spring—Coop was over the tour and hurrying me along. It helped that those teachers weren't there.

“I'm sorry, Coop,” I said as we jogged down the stairs to hall A so we could make our way to the lunchroom.

He paused on the last step and stared at me. Since I was two steps up from him, we were almost eye-to-eye. “For what?”

“I kind of ignored you this summer.” Coop was right about that. We'd picked our classes last April, two days after the spring formal and fundraiser, and I'd—I'd been a little sore.

“Yes,” he said slowly, eyeing me. “You did. Lucky for you, I forgave you for that already.”

A laugh escaped and I shook my head. “I really am sorry.”

“Fine,” he said all too easily, but that was Coop. “You can make it up to me by driving me to school this year. And maybe giving me rides home.”

“I'm pretty sure you were going to ride with me anyway...” Then again, he'd just shown up at my car this morning. He'd been waiting for me. Maybe it hadn't been a sure thing for him.

Yep. I'd been a jerk.

“Convenient, isn't it?” He winked. “Now, let's go.” With a light tug, he pulled my ponytail, and I smacked his shoulder. The tension popped and we were just Coop and Frankie. I'd known Coop since kindergarten, we'd been best friends from day one. He'd vanished over summer vacation between 7th and 8th right as his parents were getting divorced. He'd gone to stay with his sister to stay at his grandparents. I didn't hear from him at all. Then he was back, waiting for the bus the

morning eighth grade started, and he'd tugged my ponytail then.

It was like nothing had changed.

Yet, at the same time, everything had.

But it had changed even more in ninth...

There were a lot more kids in the cafeteria. Band kids streamed in from practice, theatre kids acting out—pun intended—on the steps, the ROTC kids checking each other's uniforms, and then there were the jocks flowing in from the athletics hall. Band and sports got there even earlier than me.

Speaking of sports, Bubba and Jake dropped their backpacks on the table Archie had already claimed. Sipping from a venti cup from Starbuck's, Archie motioned to the other cups, but Coop's whistle caught their attention. Archie—Archibald Standish the Third, poor guy. His parents were well off, but his grandfather was stinking rich. There'd been some kind of falling out between his grandparents and his parents, so while Archie could probably afford to go to school at some ritzy place in Europe, he was enrolled in public high school and had been since ninth grade.

That first year had been kind of hard on him, and I wasn't the only one who'd gotten protective. Rich and pampered didn't always equal egotistical dick.

No, he'd had to grow into that reputation, but in a lot of ways, Archie was still that same kid who'd looked so hopelessly out of his depth in my freshman homeroom class. I'd taken the seat next to him and spent that first week of school introducing him to everything.

“Oh my god, it must be a holiday. Frankie Curtis is in the *house!*” The announcement sounded a lot louder than it was, but it definitely earned us a few looks from the other tables, including a smirk from Rachel Manning. We shared one of those barely polite smiles at each other before she turned back to her friends and I followed Coop over to the table.

Jacob “Jake” Benton snorted as he checked the coffees on the table, then picked up one and turned it around so I could

read the *Frankie Goes to Senior Year* on the side of it. Laughing, I shook my head as he held it out. Jake had gone to elementary with Coop and me. But Jake's dad was military, so when he got sent overseas, off their whole family went. After his parents divorced while he was in junior high, his mom moved them back here.

Ian "Bubba" Rhys straddled a chair and took a long drink from his coffee while Jake handed me mine. Bubba's eyes were closed, his expression almost blissful. He was a running back on the football team while Jake served as the tight end. That was about the extent of my knowledge of football. They were both big, bruiser-looking guys with wide shoulders, heavily muscled, and every stereotype of fit, buff jock you could think of. While Archie wasn't a slouch, they made Archie and Coop both look lean and underweight. Not that it seemed to faze them.

Out of all of them, Archie had been in most of my classes the last three years. We were the closest in GPAs, too. I edged him by less than a quarter point when they posted our class rankings last spring.

I needed to climb two more spots—that would secure me a top percentage and a guaranteed scholarship.

"You look beat," Coop said with a light slap to Bubba's back.

Bubba grunted, but just kept drinking his coffee.

"Wait until his caffeine kicks in," I advised, setting my bag down. Jake stole my sticky note before I could secure it, though. Thankfully, he offered me coffee to keep me from smacking him.

"Ha. Ten bucks," he said to Archie and held up the note. "I told you she'd go see the teachers first even if she brought Coop with her."

Archie made a face. "You know, Frankie, you could be less predictable. Just once. That would be great."

"Too bad, so sad," I told him then snatched my note back before sitting down and taking a sip of my coffee. "My

methods work.”

With a sigh, Archie stared at me as he pulled out his wallet and forked over a ten-dollar bill to Jake. “Don’t we know it...”

CHAPTER TWO

LUNCH

The first four classes of the day blew past like someone had hit fast-forward. Coop had claimed the desk next to mine in AP Lit. Since our very first assignment required partners, he smirked at me and we ended up spending the class arguing about the summer reading.

My morning had been packed—first period with Archie alternating between AP Government and AP Economics, Bubba turned up in my AP Calculus class, and Coop in my AP Lit. I hadn't seen Jake since the cafeteria earlier, but AP French had been a lot of fun. The great part of having the same French teacher for four years was that I've gotten to know her, and she had a terrific sense of humor. She also had a gorgeous new TA, a French foreign exchange student named Mathieu Domienier.

While I wasn't the only girl who'd taken notice, I thoroughly enjoyed my front row seat and his delicious accent. I hoped he had the TA assignment all year, because while I'd already been looking forward to AP French, but he was like a cherry on top of it.

"Yo," Coop said. He caught my arm when I started to follow the flow of students toward the cafeteria. I really did hate the fact everyone had the same lunch period, and what was up with the freshmen this year? They seemed to outnumber the sophomores and juniors by, like, two to one. "Not that way."

“We’re not eating lunch?” But I let Cooper drag me through the flow of traffic. The benefit to his height and laconic manner was most people did get out of his way.

“We’re eating lunch,” he said.

“Cooper!” Laura Zaverman appeared in front of us. She hooked her arm through Coop’s free one. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Yeah?” He barely glanced at her. “Don’t have time right now, Laur. Maybe later.”

“But it’s lunch...”

“Exactly.” He extracted himself from her grasp even as he kept a firm grip on me. What did he think I was going to do? Vanish into the flow of the crowd? Half-turned, but still moving, Coop pivoted to give Laura a once over. The weight of those piercing gray-green eyes was impossible to deny, and Laura straightened, her chin and chest lifting. Definitely *not* a coincidence. “Looking good, babe,” he said. “Real good.”

Before he even finished the heated compliment, he’d already focused away and we were on the move. Laura’s gaze skipped from Coop to me. A part of me wanted to apologize because Coop was an idiot. The rest of me just shrugged. Coop was also Coop. If Laura wanted to swap spit with him, she should get used to it. He did what he did on his schedule and no one else’s.

She vanished into the sea of students. Coop didn’t slow down. He shoved open the door to way too bright sunshine and wall of heat waiting for us outside.

Eeling out of his grasp, I dug my sunglasses out of my backpack. I slid them on before tugging the straps over my arms. It was an oven outside, the sun beating down mercilessly on us. If the school let me wear hats, I’d have a baseball cap on in a heartbeat.

“Keep up.” Coop produced his own sunglasses and tucked them into place. The hot breeze rifled his hair as he led the way toward the parking lot.

“Let’s go,” Jake yelled as soon as we rounded the corner. He stood on the running board of the driver’s side of his sunshine yellow SUV. The thing was just so bright. He’d gotten it at the end of our junior year when he bootstrapped his class placement to the top ten percent.

“I take it we’re going off campus for lunch,” I stated rather than asked as I followed Coop. Archie already sat in the front passenger seat and Bubba had the backseat. Coop herded me into the middle between him and Bubba.

I hated the middle, and he damn well knew it. The seat cushion there was not comfortable, but I stripped out of my backpack. Bubba snagged it from me to drop it into the rear with theirs before I settled. Coop’s backpack followed. No sooner did Coop close his door than Jake settled in the driver’s seat, seatbelt on, and eased the SUV into motion.

Getting out of the parking lot was a pain in the ass, but if we went out by the football stadium, we could slip out a much more unused entrance.

Bubba stretched his arm along the back of the seat, and the lack of space left me sandwiched between him and Coop. Leaning forward, I said, “Turn up the A/C?” Even in shorts, they were going to roast me back here.

Jake flipped it higher. His phone rang, but he just hit ignore as Maria’s name popped up on it.

Jake and Maria. Archie and Patty, Bubba and Sharon, Coop and Laura. “Are you guys playing hooky from the girlfriends?”

“Broke up,” Archie said over his shoulder.

“Not dating,” Bubba said, his eyes still closed as he tipped his head back. Why the hell was he so tired today?

“Not my girlfriend,” Jake said with a flick of his fingers.

Coop, however, said nothing. When I glanced at him, he made a face.

Five minutes later, we slid into the parking lot at Blaze’s. The pizza place was a longtime favorite of ours. I snagged my

backpack on the way out of the car and Coop said, “You can leave it, it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but I brought my lunch.”

“We’re having pizza.” Jake tugged the backpack out of my grasp and slid it back in the car. “My treat. You skipped the pizza party in June, so now we’re making up for it.”

I hated when they paid for me. But Bubba and Archie had already vanished inside, and Coop gave me his smug, *I-know-something-you-don’t* look. Rather than arguing, I spread my hands. “Thanks, Jake.”

“You’re welcome, Frankie.” He winked then shoulder-checked Coop as we passed him. Inside, the restaurant was darker, so it took a minute for my eyes to adjust. The scents of pizza hit from all sides and my morning snack and coffee seemed a long, long way away. I grabbed two slices from the available trays—one keto crust with grilled chicken, mozzarella, and mushrooms with a light garlic pesto sauce and another keto crust with sausage and applewood bacon with a familiar red sauce.

Right behind me in line, Jake loaded his plate. We grabbed cups when we got to the register. He paid, and I waited a beat for him, then we got our drinks and went in search of the guys. They’d claimed a rear table with Coop following right behind us.

“Congratulations to us for having made it to senior year. Only one-hundred eighty days left until we graduate,” Archie said. He toasted us with his soda and I laughed.

It seemed like forever and no time at all.

We all made like our various sodas and lemonades—and it looked like Bubba was just drinking water—were toast-worthy drinks. Finally, digging in, I sighed happily at my first bite. Okay, I could admit the pizza was a great call. My peanut butter and jelly sandwich would have filled the hole, and I preferred saving every dime I could, but warm cheesy pizza tasted amazing.

Across the table, Jake stared at me as he bit into his slice. I crossed my eyes at him, earning another laughing smile. Wrinkling my nose, I kept eating. As annoying as their presumptuous behavior could be, it was also as familiar as the halls of the high school. It was just the way the guys behaved. Pushy, occasionally kind, and always looking after each other.

I used to think that applied to me. Eating the pizza Jake paid for reminded me of that same feeling. But we all knew better. Twice, I'd considered asking them and twice I'd discarded it, words unspoken. For all that we'd hung out for years, I was and wasn't a part of their group.

My choice.

Not theirs.

I didn't *run* with any one crowd. I'd avoided pigeonholing at all costs. I'd read the books and seen the movies—high school was often depicted as a nightmare gauntlet, but I hadn't let it touch me. I had too many other things I needed to do, and I wouldn't make the mistake of thinking high school was the rest of my life.

A foot collided with mine. "Hey," Bubba said, nudging me. "You're not listening."

Nope. I hadn't been. Frowning, I glanced around the table. "Sorry, thinking about the rest of my schedule. What did I miss?"

"Frankie, I get you have better places to be and better things to do," Archie remarked, his tone walking the line between teasing and sarcastic. "But it's the first day of *senior* year. We had a deal, remember?"

A deal?

"College essays," I murmured slowly. Yes, we had a deal. Of course, how could I forget? After wiping my hands on a napkin, I shifted to pull my phone out of my pocket and set it on the table.

"Where are we applying?" Archie prodded me, his expression sober.

“I don’t know Arch, where do you want to go to school?” Yes, now I played dumb. In 10th grade, Archie proposed the idea we should all go to the same university. Each of us had thrown out the pros of picking the same college—first of all, we’d know our roommates, provided we could get a co-ed dorm and, if not, maybe we could all rent an apartment together. Split five ways, we could save money. Then there was all the fun and the parties we could have... that was their idea, not mine. Out of state had always been primary on my list. At the time, Coop had been focused on in-state, probably UT Austin. Bubba had been eyeing potential football scholarships. Jake was going after STEM scholarships—despite his active sports life, he was into robotics and engineering just like Archie. It was why the two exceptionally different guys got along. Their interests said MIT, and so did Archie’s grades. Jake was fighting for it.

Just like the rest of us.

“Pfft. I asked first,” Archie retorted, pinning me with that wry dark brown stare of his. It was always odd how he could wax and wane between staring through a person like they weren’t there and staring right into a soul like he could read you like a book.

In the early days of our acquaintance, I’d confused him. I wasn’t like everyone else, and he couldn’t predict or read me. In a way, I enjoyed the mystery. I didn’t want to be predictable.

“I haven’t decided,” I admitted because, despite their seeming devotion to eating their way through the stack of slices each of the guys had picked, they weren’t throwing out their answers. No, they were waiting for me. “I spent my summer doing research.”

“Weren’t you going to visit a couple of them?” Coop prodded. While I could and had avoided most of the others, Coop had been harder to shake. He lived in the same courtyard at the apartments; we saw each other all the time even when I tried to blow him off because I’d been angry. I could have yelled, I supposed. But losing my temper gained me exactly

nothing, while it could cost a lot more. It was just better to avoid them and the issue. Right or wrong.

“I was but it didn’t work out.” Not elaborating, I glanced at Bubba. “How has the scouting been going?” Junior year had been an exceptional one for the football team. They’d made it all the way to the state finals before being knocked out of contention. The rise there had netted them quite a bit of interest.

“Maybe.” Bubba said by way of an answer then smothered a yawn. “All maybes. Why didn’t you get to go look at your schools? Weren’t you really looking forward to New England?”

Yeah, New England where they actually had seasons. I’d been looking at Harvard—definitely beyond my price range, but there were scholarships and dreams—and fantasies. I just liked the idea of crisp fall colors, snowy winters, and actual spring.

Texas had two seasons—summer and winter—and they often alternated days in the same week. Summer, my least favorite season, could smother me in the heat. I liked to do things outside, but I didn’t like heatstroke and, sadly, I never mastered getting a real tan. I tanned, but usually it was burnt to a crisp fading to a weak tan before I got burnt to a crisp again.

Yes, even with sunscreen.

“Car needed repairs,” I said by way of explanation. “Mom couldn’t take the time off work.” Not that I couldn’t have gone without Mom. My original plan had been to drive up, stay in an Airbnb I found for pretty reasonable, tour the school, and then drive back. If I slept in the car on the way there and back, with gas and the Airbnb, supplementing my meals with packed food from home, I could have done all of it for under five hundred.

Fixing the car, however, meant using almost all of that.

“It’s fine,” I continued. “I did the virtual tour online.” Which, while useful on an intellectual level, didn’t give me a feel for the school at all.

“Damn. Well, did you get to UNT?” That from Jake. He was the only one I ever discussed UNT with and I kind of wished he’d kept it to himself. Coop straightened and frowned at me.

“I thought in-state schools were off the list entirely,” Coop said, shoving his empty plate away before taking a long drink from the soda.

I wanted out of Texas. I don’t know how many times I’d said that over the years. It was why I focused only on AP classes. They were acceptable at most universities.

“They are,” I said with a shrug. “But I needed backup schools for the list and the counselor wouldn’t shut up about it.”

“But UNT had a program you liked,” Jake—the traitor—pointed out. “You said they had a solid journalism school.”

“They do,” I admitted. “I also don’t know that I’m going to down that route anymore.”

“Since when?” Archie’s chair dropped onto all fours abruptly as he stared at me. “You wanted to be an investigative journalist.”

No, I’d wanted to be a war correspondent. I’d romanticized the hell out of it. “Things change,” I said, spreading one hand. “It’s not important. I’ll figure it out.” Some things were too personal, and while I kind of wanted to confess all the doubts that burgeoned to the surface over the summer, wanted to vent about my frustrations with working thirty to forty hours a week while my friends goofed off—well, the people I used to think of as friends—and how Mom was so busy at work lately we had to make appointments to see each other...

Appointments she often had to break because she was dating—again.

Dating and not telling me about it. I got it. Mom did not have the best track record. But at least she got dates... Putting a pin in that snarky comment, I finished my second slice.

“So, we still need to decide on our target schools,” Archie said drawing us full circle back to where they’d begun. *That*

was the part I'd missed. "Even getting into schools in the same city would be better than being across the country from each other, right?"

The denial glued to the tip of my tongue. The snarky comment hot on its heels collided with it and then bounced back unspoken. It was more than the weight of Archie's stare keeping me silent. It was the silent request in his eyes. It was the same look he'd had when he walked into homeroom three years before. *Don't leave me out here alone...* it seemed to request.

Angry or not, I couldn't abandon him. And I wasn't angry anymore. I'd made that decision.

Maybe it was time to start acting like it. "Harvard," I told him, not looking away and a slow smile eased the hint of panic edging his eyes.

"MIT," he countered, and I nodded slowly.

"NYU," Coop suggested. "If we're spitballing in the dark."

Jake shoved him. "Should they all be in New England? What about USC or UCLA?"

Bubba snorted. "Do they have good engineering departments?"

"Maybe, we're making calls for the list. I say UCLA." Jake shrugged.

He wanted to go to California? They didn't have seasons anymore than we did, at least not in the southern part of the state. *Ugh.*

"Don't look like that," Coop teased. "We all get to pick."

"I know. Five of us. Five schools. Harvard, MIT, NYU and UCLA?" I checked the last with Jake.

One nod. "I reserve the right to change it to USC after I Google it later."

A laugh worked its way around the table, and something loosened in my chest. First the coffee this morning and now

the pizza—in a way, life normalized again. I'd really missed these idiots over the summer.

“Yeah, yeah,” Archie waved him off. “Bubba, that leaves you. Where to?”

“Stanford,” Bubba said slowly. “I'll throw Stanford on the list.”

Northern California. Okay. Different.

“Great. Homework time kids,” Archie said, rubbing his hands together. “Take your school, research admission requirements, degrees, housing, and anything else you can think of. Take a glance at the other schools and see which ones fit your area of study.”

“And if they don't have a good program for what we want to study?” Coop asked. “It's an automatic discard, right?”

“We bring it up,” Jake said before Archie could answer. “We want a school that fits all of us, but we may have to make some concessions.”

Reasonable.

We didn't all want to study the same things. There was a chance that the best school for me wouldn't be the best fit for them.

My stomach kind of bottomed out at the idea. “One thing at a time,” I said before they could begin debating it. “Research first.” Archie's eyes grew brighter when his gaze fixed on mine. “We do the homework.” I glanced at Coop. “Then we discuss it.” Then Jake. “Figure out the pros and the cons.” And finally to Bubba. “Then we can make *informed* decisions on what to do next.”

“This is why you're the smart one,” Bubba said, his sleepy-eyed expression lighting up for the first time. “We're doing what she said...can I come over later and you can help me pull up the stats on Stanford?”

I groaned even if he didn't sound altogether serious. “Sure, just bring coffee if you want me to do your homework and mine.”

“I’ll help,” he said, grinning even as Coop glared at him. Though when I frowned, his scowl disappeared, and he slumped back in his seat.

We only had a couple more minutes before we had to head back to school, but none of us rushed. None of us brought up the fact it was our last first day of high school ever.

This time next year? We might very well be at one of those colleges.

Together or not.



THE RIDE BACK TO SCHOOL WAS SLIGHTLY MORE COMFORTABLE, even if I was still stuck in the middle. Archie traded with Bubba and I gained a whole quarter inch of space, though neither he nor Coop seemed able to resist their seat sprawl and I semi-roasted between them.

Jake had a reserved parking spot, so we slid right into a space not more than a hundred feet from a door to hall B. I had study hall next, so I swung by the room, checked in with the proctor and then headed to the library. After pulling the two books and checking them out for my TA period in Humanities for sixth, I found a table and got to work on my calculus homework.

Coop and I already divvied up our project for AP Lit and he said he might drop by after school to finish. One perk of him being my partner, he was aware of my desire to get things done promptly or well ahead of time. My work schedule did not allow for procrastination, not if I wanted to still get all the hours I needed and the sleep that I unfortunately required.

AP French included reading a book she gave us in class—ten pages a day. I snorted. I wasn’t going to read that slowly, but reading fluency in French was different than conversational French. I was really good at the latter, not so good at the former. I was kind of looking forward the challenge.

My study hour flew by, and so did my TA for Ms. Phillips. She’d been my Humanities teacher in 9th and 10th. As her TA,

all I had to do was put together some PowerPoints and help herd the kids in the right direction for study resources. Otherwise, it was like having another study hall, which worked for me.

By the last period of the day, I kept smothering yawns as I headed for Mr. G's room. Independent study for AP European History—I was lucky, G had said he'd proctor the class for me, if I wanted to do it. As a history nerd, I'd relished the chance and, sure, I could have gone for early release. I almost did, but then I kind of wanted to take the class, too. I caved and let desire win out over practicality just this once.

"Heads up," Jake said from right behind me as he reached past to catch the door and pull it out of my hands and open.

"Hey." What was he doing here? Of all of us, I figured Jake would have scored the early release, since he obviously didn't take delayed start.

He nudged me inside and then dropped his backpack onto a desk. Mr. G glanced up from his desk and grinned. "Afternoon Thing One and Thing Two."

I rolled my eyes. G was a great teacher—one of my favorites, if I were honest—but he'd been calling us the Things since 9th grade. "Hey Mr. G." I glanced at Jake as he stretched, the sound of his knuckles cracked as he extended his hands over his head and his shirt rode up baring those stellar abs I hadn't seen since the pool party.

Not ogling Jake, I fixed my attention on Mr. G. "I picked up the optional reading and the dummies guide you recommended." I still couldn't get over that last part. Who used a dummies guide for class?

"Dummies guide?" Jake frowned.

"Yes, Mr. Benton. The dummies guide." Mr. G held out a single sheet of paper. "Ms. Curtis—" I almost snorted at the formal names. Now he really was giving us a ration of shit. "—emailed me over the summer to prep for class, so she's already a step ahead."

"Not that unusual," Jake said in a bland tone.

“Here are your textbooks,” Mr. G said tapping them. “They’re yours, consider them my gift to your education. And this...” He added a sheet of paper to the top of each book. I joined Jake in studying the schedule. “Is my recommended reading schedule. You need to finish the texts up to World War II for the exam, but if you can get up to the 80s, you’ll do even better on the essay portions because a lot of classes stop at World War II.”

I nodded. It wasn’t that ambitious a reading schedule unless the text was teeny-tiny.

“Since we’re an independent study class, you aren’t going to have homework, but there are a half-dozen documentaries you should watch. They’ll help flesh out the academic material.” He pointed to the list at the bottom of the page. “Most of them are available in the library to check out, and I think a couple are on streaming channels.”

Jake grinned. “We can do pizza and the History channel. My kind of homework.”

I didn’t even snicker. Jake—like me—was also a history nerd. A carefully curated secret, he’d shared it with me. We’d been known to hide out on the occasional weekend over the last few years and binge the various documentaries on the History channel. I’d seen one over the summer and went to text him a dozen times.

Never sent a single one though.

My bad.

“Okay. Well, I trust you both to work it out. Meanwhile, I have copies to go make for APush. Make yourselves comfortable.” APush also known as AP US History made up three of his morning classes.

Then G was out of the room and it was just Jake and me.

Awkward?

Not awkward?

To be decided.

CHAPTER THREE

INDEPENDENT STUDY

The silence left in Mr. G's wake lasted all of 3.2 seconds. Jake dropped into the desk next to mine and the weight of his stare landed with a louder thud than his book. "You've been avoiding me."

"I went to lunch with you." Playing dumb was not my forte. Giving Jake shit used to be, so splitting the difference and wading into the middle seemed to be the way to go. I twisted to open my backpack. It was a cheap move designed to net me a few seconds out from under the pale blue of his eyes. Of the four guys, Jake and Coop had known me the longest. They were more likely to call me on my crap, but while Coop seemed to float on a current of zen through life, Jake possessed a laser-like focus.

His motion wasn't dictated by a current, but by his choices. If he was in this class, it was because he wanted to be there. Independent study was absolutely voluntary. Not once since we made our class selections last spring had he mentioned pursuing this particular course of study.

Nor had I admitted to it. I'd barely been speaking to them when final schedules came out. More, I'd actively been avoiding them. *Too busy. Too much work. Finals. Homework.*

And I'd skipped the end of year bash at Archie's with a drive to San Antonio and a weekend at Jennifer's place. Thankfully, she hadn't asked any questions when I'd showed up. We'd stuffed our faces with junk food, stayed up late, slept even later, and for seventy-two hours, I pretended I was a real girl.

Then it was right back home and to work. Summer offered a lot of excuses to keep my distance from all of them—except Coop.

With Coop, I'd had to work twice as hard to achieve only half the success. The only times I'd been unable to avoid any of them had been when they'd shown up at Mason's—which they had most weeks, sometimes alone, often together, and far too frequently with a girl or three showing up to join them.

"I'm not talking about today. You wouldn't have been at lunch or there for coffee this morning if Coop hadn't dragged you along." Nothing in Jake's tone suggested speculation. If anything, he sounded... almost disappointed. "Our last first day, and you would have blown us all off, just like you did this summer."

This again... "I went to Bubba's birthday party."

"For thirty-five minutes." Jake raised his dark eyebrows. "Tell me I'm wrong."

The urge to squirm under those all-seeing eyes crept through me and irritated me at the same time. I didn't owe any of them an explanation. "It was a boring party."

His snort echoed in the too quiet classroom.

Classroom.

Hell, we were still at school. Mr. G just left to make some copies. Granted, the teacher's lounge and copy machines were on the far side of the school, and it was a safe bet he wouldn't be back before the last bell—but *still!*

"Jake..."

"Uh-uh." Jake braced one hand on the seat back behind me and the other on the desk in front of me. "It's just you and me, Frankie."

"Clearly, unless invisible students enrolled this semester." Once upon a time, that joke might even have made Jake laugh, lame as it was. Currently, however, it earned me a blank stare.

I tried again. "We're at school, Jake."

“We’re in Mr. G’s room. We’re not seeing him again until tomorrow. That’s why I waited until we were alone.” So he’d been waiting all day for this? “You’re a private person, I respect that.”

Respect.

I clamped my mouth shut. Sometimes, if I didn’t think before I spoke, I forgot what a verbal filter was, if I’d ever had one.

“But you’ve been a ghost. You took off, skipped the end of the year party. Skipped the opening pool party. Didn’t show up when Archie had his tonsils out...”

His what?

I blinked. “What?”

“Oh, now you notice?” Jake’s eyes were hard. “Archie. Tonsils. Two weeks after school got out, he was in the hospital for an emergency surgery. We were there. Where were you?”

Dread curled through me.

“I didn’t know.” Oh crap. Clearly, he was fine but... “No one...”

“Told you? I called you, Frankie. So did Coop and Bubba. Archie asked. We lied for you, by the way.” Each word landed like an icy slap. Archie had been in the hospital, and I’d *missed* it.

There had been messages from the guys. Voicemails.

I’d just never listened to them.

“Then Coop covered for *you*.” The last surprised me, but it shouldn’t have. “He told us you and your mom were fighting, which... honestly would be weird since you and your mom barely talk.”

“We talk,” I argued, defensiveness flaring.

“Uh huh. Asking about the weather and if the coffee is ready isn’t talking. Or how was it you put it? Your mom has her life, and you have yours, and somewhere along the way you became roommates instead of parent and child?”

Okay. *That* was true, but... “Roommates fight.”

Jake snorted, but no mirth filled his eyes. “Why?”

“Why what?” Belatedly, I wondered if he meant why had Mom and I been fighting, not that we had. Fighting would imply caring. Mom *cared*, but she didn’t really *care* like other people’s parents. She did the best she could, and it worked for us. I was perfectly capable of looking after myself.

Jake closed his eyes, and I swore I could see him counting to ten, like a tangible thing or one of those cartoon blowouts. Of the four of them, Jake was the one who never let me get away with anything. Coop ignored my deflections, Archie would poke at them, and Bubba? Well, he just indulged me like it didn’t bother him in the slightest—part of why I’d gone to his birthday party, even when I’d told myself it was a terrible idea.

Seeing Rachel and Cheryl there had all but confirmed it for me. Though Cheryl, at least, had been sympathetic. She also thought their behavior was some kind of cute or how was it she put it? “*It’s adorable, Frankie. They actually care what happens to you!*”

Or what didn’t happen, apparently. It sucked when the people you thought were your friends turned out to be nothing more than sexist pigs, a kind of lurid joke on the high school experience where guys kept score based on how far they got with a girl or how...

Dammit. I wasn’t mad anymore.

Blowing out a breath, I twisted sideways in my seat and met his stare. “I didn’t know about Archie. I should have and I didn’t.” *That* was on me. “I had things to do this summer. It wasn’t personal, Jake.”

“Bullshit,” he countered, his voice softening a fraction under that single word. “It’s pretty damn personal when one of your best friends just ghosts you for no damn reason.”

Oh.

There’d been a *reason*.

But either I owned it and confronted them or I let it go. I'd let it go.

"I had to figure some things out," I admitted. It wasn't a lie. I did have a lot to figure out. More than just college and Mom dating, there'd been the reality of what did I want to face and more—*who* did I want to be?

"Like what?" Instead of irritation or anger, elements of concern crept into his tone and that just fanned the flames of guilt a little higher.

"A lot of stuff," I said, keeping it vague. "Some of it was girl stuff. Some of it life stuff. Some of it..."

"Stuff?" he offered.

Not really smiling, I shrugged. "Kind of." Great. Now I'd become one of those twittering girls who impregnated every comment with layers of meaning in order to test the people around them.

Like Presley.

She'd done that for years. Always testing the people around her, dictating whether she would be your friend one day and then freeze you out the next. The politics of being a girl was what my mom had called it.

Girls sucked.

The dense silence grew heavy and oppressive. Did I crack? I wanted to—and if I wanted to, was that cracking?

"High school is almost over," I found myself saying. "Sometimes—it feels like it already is." Graduation pictures in June. First round of college applications due by the first of October. Early admission decided on by November. Then the holiday breaks and the final class rankings and the breakneck dash toward AP exams and graduation itself. Most of the guys would probably have parties—the rumors of past graduation bashes had begun in freshman year and Archie took it as a personal challenge.

Even if none of them had a party, he would throw one that would probably dazzle the entirety of our senior class.

“Kind of happens when you become a senior,” Jake said. “But we’re not done yet.”

“I know, but...” I wasn’t even sure how to phrase this. It was a gloomy damn thought. Gloomier than Coop liked to hear, and Bubba would just give me that charming smile and tell me life had a way of working it out. Damn Boy Scout also had an irritating habit of being right.

Archie might get it. Maybe. Depending on the day.

But Jake?

“But you’re both ready to be done with this place and uncertain of what the hell you’re going to do after they hand us our diplomas?”

“I’m not even sure I’m gonna walk.” That admission staged a jailbreak, slipping through the bars before I could get the door shut on it.

“Frankie,” Jake admonished, straightening abruptly. “Why wouldn’t you? You’re in the top of the class—not just the top percent, but the top twenty people. You’re gonna graduate with honors and have a ridiculous number of college acceptances and probably enough scholarships to give you a full ride at the priciest of schools.” His mouth firmed and his head tilted as he eyed me. “You’ve probably applied for every single one you qualified for and have a stack of applications waiting to hit send on when you meet some arbitrary date or requirement they have...”

Well, he wasn’t *wrong*. Heat flooded the back of my neck and left my cheeks flushed and far too warm.

“Ha,” Jake said with a smirk. “See? I know you.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Those words stymied his smile, and he frowned at me. “Then what are you talking about?”

“Everyone—everyone earns a diploma. On May 18th, at fifteen minutes after three when our senior grades lock in—I’ll have qualified for graduation or not. That diploma is mine. You don’t have to walk to get it.”

The frown fell away from his expression and his eyes sobered. “Well, I guess... yeah, I guess you don’t have to actually walk to get that.”

“Graduation gowns and packages are expensive, Jake.” Talking about money was a taboo, but Jake got it. He worked part time to help out his mom and his younger sisters. The SUV had been a guilt gift from his dad. A return on an investment. His dad was still serving overseas and, while his sisters went to visit, Jake steadfastly hadn’t. Not once since him and his mom came back to the States.

“The base package is about sixty bucks—that’s cap, gown, and cord. You don’t need any of the rest of it. I mean who needs some fancy frame with the year on it?” In this, we were united.

“And sixty bucks is two tanks of gas on my way to school. Sixty bucks is a week’s worth of groceries for just me—not counting the cats.”

A flash of a smile appeared on his face.

“Sixty bucks for an outfit I have to wear over another outfit that I’ll *never* wear again? You can’t even donate it because they shift the shade of the gown each year.” They claimed they didn’t, but they did. There was a reason why they recommended you didn’t “borrow” one from a previous graduating class.

“I’ll pay for it,” Jake offered.

“Jake...”

“No,” he said, setting his hand over mine on the desk. “I know you didn’t tell me any of this because you were looking for someone to pay for the gown. I get it. I know... I know we give you a hard time about your job.”

A hard time? They’d been relentless, always teasing me that I worked too hard and it made me a dull girl. That was why they had shown up at Mason’s or dragged me out to movies. *Friends don’t let friends get dull.*

“But I clip coupons for my mom, I scan the sale papers, I’ll make the trips to the different stores to get the best deals

when she's on a limited budget." Child support didn't stretch as far as it used to, not when his youngest sister seemed to outgrow everything year after year. She was going to be tall—like Jake. His other sisters were more average in height, unlike me, but Louisa was almost 5'7 and she was in sixth grade and already taller than either of her older sisters. "You have plans."

"So do you," I reminded him. "This isn't about sixty dollars for a graduation gown. It's about all the things that come after it, *if* I get into the school I apply for, and if I get the scholarships or if I get the financial aid... It's not just about the money; it's everything."

Head canted, Jake frowned. "You're scared?"

"Fucking terrified," I admitted. For the first time, maybe ever, I'd said it aloud. Surprise filtered through his expression, and I forced a smile. Though I doubted he believed it anymore than I did. "Just had to figure that out. Had to put money away..." Because even if all I got was a local college, I had to go. I had to plan my future, and I had to make it work for me.

I wasn't going to... Shutting off that uncharitable thought, I exhaled harshly. "I really don't want to talk about money anymore."

He stared at me for a beat too long. For a tense second, I thought he wouldn't let it go. As much as I hated to admit it, I'd missed all of them. "Okay," he said, leaning back in his seat. Then he tapped the sheet on top of the textbook. "You really got a dummies guide?"

Just like that, all the air rushed back into the room and the discomfort bled out of my muscles. Jake wore a familiar patient expression and his eyes had warmed from demanding and chilly to teasing and cool.

It took me a minute to dig out the dummies guide from my backpack. When I held it up, he snorted.

"Read it yet?"

"Maybe," I admitted. Thankfully, his roll of the eyes this time was a little more lighthearted than his earlier scoffing. He tugged the book from my fingers and began to flip through it.

“The point is—they use different phrases and focus to tackle basically the same stuff the text does, but it’s distilled down. Think—a little more researched docudrama versus documentary.”

“Huh.”

Two pages in, I’d lost him to reading the dummies book. I didn’t mind. That was—familiar. Jake read a lot, it made him a fun person to debate the finer points of a text or a lesson with because he devoured books the way I did. After checking the chapter numbers for this week’s reading, I sprawled in the desk and twisted the chair in front of me so I could put my feet up. Jake mirrored my pose, only his feet were on my desk—at least he wasn’t in the way.

We were still reading when the bell went off announcing the end of the day. I finished to the end of the paragraph on the page and Jake held up a finger as I packed away my textbook and then he nodded as he snapped the book closed.

“Definitely going to stop and grab that on my way home.” He handed it back to me.

“It’s funny, right?” Because that was the thing that struck me. The author of the dummies’ book had tried to take facts and added snark to them, a turn of phrase here, a well-placed pithy comment there. All of it designed to soften the reader into absorbing the facts willingly. Since I *liked* history, it was almost like being offered ice cream to eat my favorite meal. I’d have done that anyway.

He snorted. “Probably funnier than it should be.” But I got it. He stuffed his books into his bag, then snagged my backpack and held it up so I could thread my arms through the straps.

Despite the fact the bell had rung and the stampede of footsteps and too many voices filled the hallway, neither of us hurried. One, because unless you were in the parking lot when the bell went off, there was always a long line of cars to get out. Two, the buses always took priority, so the bus lanes were closed and there were literally hundreds of students choking

the hallways as they headed out to get onto their respective buses.

Then there were the walking kids. I'd been one of those. The apartments were a solid twenty-three minute walk at a brisk pace, but at least most of the walkers were already across the street. I pushed the door open, but Jake braced it and then we wandered down the hall.

Looping my fingers through the straps, I didn't rush any more than Jake did. His parking space was a lot closer than mine, but instead of angling toward the Hall B outer doors where he parked, he trailed along with me toward the gym halls closer to where I parked.

"Do you have practice this afternoon?" I hadn't asked either he or Bubba for that matter. They'd come from the athletics hall that morning before coffee and Bubba's hair, at least, had been damp. But I hadn't really looked at the closely at Jake's. In addition to summer practice, the football team usually had two to three-hour practices at least three times a week, sometimes four if they were heading into playoffs. Morning practices were better than afternoons, at least in August.

"Not on Mondays," Jake said with a hint of a smile. "Morning practice on Mondays and Tuesdays, then afternoon Wednesday and Thursday. Big game on Friday."

Crap. First game of the year. Another "landmark last" as it were, especially for Bubba and Jake.

"Want to go grab some more coffee and work out a schedule for when you want to do EU history review? I figure we can keep each other honest." Jake hesitated a beat, then added. "Okay, you can keep *me* honest."

I laughed. "I wouldn't mind, but I gotta take Coop home." He was probably sitting on my car waiting impatiently for me. Or maybe he was off making out with Laura. She looked good, after all.

The snarky thought nipped at me, and I smothered it with a pillow.

“Eh, make him walk,” Jake suggested. “Or give him your keys and you can ride with me.”

I stopped in mid-stride and glared at him.

Give him my *keys*?

“Or not,” Jake backpedaled, raising his hands. “I forgot.”

I didn’t let *anyone* drive my car. Coop was lucky I let him ride *in* the car.

Speaking of the devil, there he was, leaning against my car with Bubba.

“You know,” Jake mused as we closed the distance, but he didn’t finish the thought. The afternoon heat threatened to smother us. The air was heavy and sticky. I made a face, already aware of the sweat gathering along my hair line and the way my shirt clung in the back. Coop looked cool as always, but at least Bubba had the grace to perspire.

“Heads up,” Jake called, and his keys flew on an arc. Bubba caught them easily. “Give Coop a ride home? Frankie and I are gonna go get something cold and go over our homework schedule.”

We were?

Really?

“Yeah,” Bubba said, tossing the keys up once before catching them, then he threw them back toward Jake. “No. I got dibs on Frankie. I asked her in calculus to go over the assignments with me. Can’t afford to fall behind in there.”

“Pfft,” Coop intoned dismissing them both. “Frankie’s mine this afternoon. We have an AP Lit project.”

That we already divvied the work on...

“Too bad,” Bubba countered, glaring at Coop. “Calculus is due tomorrow. When is your lit assignment due?”

Next week, but Coop only smirked. “Doesn’t matter, Frankie does all homework the day we get it. She’s never leaving anything until the last minute.”

“Exactly,” Jake tacked on. “Which is why we’re going to figure out our study schedule now. You two can wait.”

Before I could interject, a whistle cut through the three of them as Archie pulled up behind my car. He had an elegant old school Ferrari. Remember what I said about too much money? Archie didn’t flaunt it, except when he did. That car? Definitely flaunting it. But the hot orange coupled with the sleek lines meant it would stand out no matter who was driving it.

“Leave these bozos and run away with me, Frankie,” Archie yelled. “We’ll have the discussion in air conditioning.”

They were nuts.

Every single one of them.

“Hey,” Coop grunted as he straightened. “We’re talking serious stuff here.”

Bubba snorted. “Archie’s got her first period.”

“I don’t care, I had her before school.”

Jake scowled.

Yeah. They were nuts. And the sweat beginning to work its way down between my boobs was going to not only make me uncomfortable, but probably smell at the rate we were going. We couldn’t all fit into Archie’s Ferrari and Jake’s SUV was around the corner in the other lot.

Unlocking my car had both Bubba and Coop scrambling for doors. “You ride with Archie? I’ll drive Thing 2 and Thing 4?”

Jake frowned for a split-second, then relented. “Okay.”

Bubba grinned widely for a moment, but Archie looked as disgruntled as Jake for a moment.

“Thanks, because I really don’t want to turn into a sweat puddle.” Bubba opened the driver’s side door for me letting out a balloon of hot air from inside the car, then snagged my backpack before I could store it in the back. Coop fell into the

front passenger seat while Bubba climbed in back. He couldn't be comfortable back there, but he didn't issue a complaint.

I got the car started. Jake had slid into the Ferrari with Archie and they were arguing about something, or at least they were having an intent conversation based on what I could see via my rearview. The air conditioner blew more hot air for all of thirty seconds as we waited on the a/c to kick in.

Archie and Jake hadn't moved though. Twisting in my seat, I met Bubba's blue-eyed gaze, more awake than he had been all day for a beat, before I looked behind him at the other car.

Still arguing.

Rolling my eyes, I hit the horn and the pair jumped. Archie flipped me off and I had to laugh. The impatient scowl on his face was so put upon Archie that it reminded me of how much I'd missed him.

Ass.

Then the Ferrari revved, and he accelerated away. Backing up neatly, I threw the car into gear and followed.

"So..." Bubba said from behind me. "Before anyone else asks, are you free tomorrow night?"

CHAPTER FOUR

SCHEDULING

Fifteen minutes later, we were packed into the Crimson Cup. Bubba staked out the round booth in the corner while Archie placed the coffee order—iced coffee with two pumps of sugar for him, iced coffee with cream and no sugar for me, blended smoothies for Jake and Bubba, and a vanilla crème for Coop. Despite the sandwich in my backpack, I still perused the bakery case. They had muffins, cookies, coffee cakes, pound cake, and some croissants.

“Hungry?” Archie asked, and then added three of the chocolate croissants—bastard, I really didn’t need to eat those, and they were my weakness—along with a couple of the blueberry muffins.

Jake drifted over to wait at the counter with us, and Archie shot him an amused look. “We’re not running away together.”

“Not making Frankie try to balance five drinks by herself.”

“What am I?” Archie almost looked offended. Almost. Except he smirked.

“A pain in the ass,” Jake retaliated with a smirk of his own. Thankfully, the iced coffees were ready first, and I sucked down a deep gulp of mine even as Archie pushed the plate with the chocolate croissants toward me.

Evil bastard. I made a face and his grin only grew. Chocolate stuffed croissants were like my kryptonite. I could try and ignore them, I could aim to eat something healthier, but they pulled me in like a siren luring ships to their death.

Or in my case, extra pounds on the scale. Not that it would stop me from eating them. I spent thirty-two hours a week on my feet and moving. According to the pedometer I'd worn for a couple of weeks, I was clearing thirty thousand steps a week easily. I could afford the splurge now and then.

The fruit smoothies and Coop's vanilla crème came next. I took possession of the crème and the croissants along with my iced coffee and then led the other two over to the booth. Bubba and Coop were both sitting at the edges and both stood up. I handed Coop his crème and set the plate of croissants onto the table before I slid in, doing a butt scoot and hop to move around to the middle. Coop followed right behind me, and Jake rolled his eyes as he settled in near the edge. Bubba's legs bumped mine as he slid in closer, too, and Archie got the end where he'd been sitting.

Well, I wasn't going anywhere fast. After another drink from my coffee, I dug around in my backpack and pulled out my spiral-bound notebook, and the three-ring binder where I'd clipped all the syllabi and broken them down by subject. As the year went on, I'd add three ring binders to the classes that needed it, otherwise I'd work out of these two books.

Flipping the spiral-bound to the second page, I wrote the date out in pencil and then flipped to the syllabi for government. "Are we doing this in my class order, or do you want to do it in the order you asked me?"

Helping them with homework had been one of the supporting columns of our friendship for years. It was how I navigated the shark-infested waters between the various cliques. By high school standards, Archie and Bubba shouldn't even be friends. They ran in completely different circles and had for years. They had almost nothing in common, except Jake—who in addition to being into sports and probably Bubba's best friend was also into robotics and engineering, like Archie. Then there was Coop, who didn't do team sports or engineering, but he was a whiz at physics, even if he downplayed it.

I've had classes with all of them, but since freshman year, we hadn't shared one class with all five of us in it. The closest

had been AP Physics in junior year with Coop, Archie, and me. That had been great, or it had been until the week before AP exams. Shaking my head, I dispelled that thought and then eyed the guys who were all being conspicuously nonverbal.

In fact, Jake and Bubba were actively glaring at each other. Archie caught my gaze, flicked a look to the boys, and then rolled his eyes. Fine, they didn't want to volunteer? "Coop?" I shifted to glance to right.

He grinned. "Still want to do an escape room where all the clues are based off *The Death of Ivan Illyich*?"

"I think it's weird," I admitted. "But also kind of cool. How are we planning to present that? A model?" We could do a diorama, but that would take a lot of work to plant the clues in a clever and inventive way that was also easily translatable.

"We design the room with the clues in mind... have you ever done an escape room?"

I stared at him. "Nope." Never had the desire either.

"Project is due next week, so let's hit an escape room Friday, they're always doing them—they have one called the Budapest Express, I think it would be a perfect model for this."

That sounded great but...

"The first game of the season is on Friday," Bubba said. "You can't miss our last first game, Frankie."

"Then let's go to the escape room tomorrow," Archie suggested. He already had his phone in his hand. "You don't work until Wednesday, right? If not tomorrow, what about Saturday evening? You working days or nights on the weekend?"

"It's kind of our homework project," Coop pointed out. "Frankie doesn't even like football."

"I don't dislike it," I said, kicking Coop lightly with one foot. No, I wasn't a fan, but Jake and Bubba both played. Hating on it would be like them hating on my...well, on my

reading or something. Bubba didn't read like Jake and I did, and he'd never treat it that way.

"You don't have to go to the game," Bubba said almost immediately. "Would the escape room get out in time for you to meet us after?"

"No, she absolutely has to come to the game," Jake countered. "Then we all go out to eat afterward. Tradition."

We'd done that for the last two years—that didn't make it a tradition, exactly.

"Besides," Jake continued. "I kind of want to see what the escape room is all about."

"There are tickets for tomorrow and Saturday," Archie tossed into the fray, waving his phone.

"What time on Saturday?" Bubba had already asked if I had plans the following day, but he wasn't arguing about doing this the next day. Still... he probably needed tutoring, but he hadn't wanted to discuss it in front of Coop.

"Last one to start is at 10:40 at night."

I'd be done with work, even if I had evening shifts.

"I get off at six." I was due in at ten and I worked until six. Then I didn't go in until noon on Sunday.

"They have one at eight," Archie suggested. "That good?"

It would give me time to go home and shower, feed the cats, and get the laundry sorted to do on Sunday morning. "How much?"

"I got it," Archie said dismissively. "It'll be fun. So, five tickets for the eight o'clock. I'll pick you up at seven?"

"Why don't I pick her up at seven?" Jake said dryly. "I'll get everyone, since everyone fits in my car."

Which was true.

Archie made a face. "That works."

Next to me, Coop sighed and said, "So, if we go Saturday night, are you going to have a freak that we're not done with

our project by Monday morning, even if it isn't due until a week from Friday?"

Picking up one of the chocolate stuffed croissants, I flipped him off then took a bite of it. Jake snickered.

"Hey," Coop said before taking a sip of his crème. "I'm just saying. You get that little frown right here... when you think we're behind, even when we're a week ahead."

Flicking my fingers at him, I said, "Hush." After licking the chocolate off those fingers, I made notes in the spiral-bound. Escape Room. Budapest Express. *The Death of Ivan Illyvich*. Under that, I wrote the word *supplies* and underlined it.

"Don't worry about that," Coop said, leaning close and tapping the line. "I'll take care of those. After you see the escape room, you come up with the clues, then we'll compare. I know you've got a full schedule, so I can put most of that together and I'll send you photos or you can, you know, just come over. But we'll get it done."

Don't worry. Yeah, that would happen. But I added the notes to my list. That was one project locked down.

Archie leaned back in his seat, pulling apart one of the chocolate croissants. "I think we should get together every Friday after school. We'll get dinner before the game, go over whatever the assignments were for the week in government and economics, and knock those out. Then I'll take you to the game, if you wanna go."

"What if we don't have assignments that week?" Really, based on what Mr. Brewbaker had said during his intro lecture that morning, nearly everything we did would be in class, at least for government. Mr. Anderson handled economics and this semester that would only be Tuesday and Thursday, but still.

"There's bound to be something," Archie said with a shrug. "We can always do drills on terminology. The AP exams for Government and Economics are both big on

understanding the basic terms for everything. We always need to eat.”

If I said yes to that, then I was also stuck going to the games. And every single Friday? I frowned, then flipped to my phone and did a count of the Fridays for the semester.

“You work Wednesdays and Thursdays,” Archie said, building a case. “Mondays are probably going to end up being this, all of us grabbing coffee after school and going over study schedules and whatever new projects we have. I might need some help for Advanced Robotics...”

I snorted.

“... it could happen,” Archie argued. “Jake and I already have to build a robot this semester. You could help us tweak it.”

“Oh, so now I’m invited to Friday dinners?” Jake asked, his tone sarcastic.

“No,” Archie said with a grin. “Not even. You have games pretty much every Friday between now and the holidays, so you’ll just have to wait until next semester.”

“Ass,” Jake muttered, and Coop just shook his head.

“Look, I’m not saying yes to every Friday,” I finally said. “I know I have zero social life, but that could change, and I like to do other things and, sorry guys, that doesn’t mean going to every football game.”

I’d sooner be dipped in honey and rolled through fire ants.

“It’s fine, Frankie,” Bubba said almost immediately. “But you’re coming to the first game for sure, right?”

I didn’t groan or make the face I wanted to make, but I did sigh. “I won’t miss it. I’ll be right there and hopefully I can figure out when to cheer.”

They all laughed, only I wasn’t joking. Maybe I should bite the bullet and actually check out a book on football. I was probably the only person in the whole state who really didn’t see the point of that game. Still, I wanted Jake and Bubba to do great, and maybe I could be a tad more supportive.

Maybe.

Ugh.

After writing down the notation for Friday check-ins and possible homework dinners with Archie, I looked at Bubba. “How much time are you going to need for calculus?”

“All of it?” He raised his eyebrows.

“You’re not bad at math,” I reminded him. If anything, he was damn good at it. Yet every year he insisted I go over the work with him, broke down every line, and make sure he hadn’t missed anything. I got it, I was paranoid about my grades, too. But Bubba had never seemed that focused on them. Not until the last couple of years, and maybe that was why.

“I’d feel better about it if you could help.” That was the crux.

“Okay, we didn’t get homework today, but we do have to go over all the practice questions in the first two chapters by Wednesday.” Ms. Dillard said we wouldn’t get their first actual homework until Thursday. “So, why don’t you do chapter one, I’ll do chapter two. We can meet up tomorrow after school. I’ll go over yours and you go over mine. Whatever either of us doesn’t understand, the other one explains.”

“Works for me. Right after school? I don’t have practice until Wednesday afternoon.”

“Yeah, we can come back here or...”

“Hello?” Coop tapped my arm. “Ride home?”

I hated them all. “Or...” I made a face at Coop, before looking at Bubba. “You can ride home with us—wait, don’t you have a car?”

He grinned. “I’ve been riding with Jake to practice. Seemed kind of a waste to drive to school, too, but I can.”

“Nah, we can go over to Frankie’s tomorrow,” Jake said, grinning slowly. “You two can get your math on. Afterward, Frankie and I can work on history.”

“Get caught up on dummies first,” I told him.

“I intend to.”

“Well, if we’re all going to Frankie’s tomorrow...”

“No, we are not all going to Frankie’s tomorrow,” I said abruptly before Archie could turn it into a party. My words might have come out harsher than I meant because they all went quiet. “Bubba asked me if I was free to help him with something tomorrow, and I already said yes. So, tomorrow, I’ll drop Coop off at his place. Bubba and I can go over to his house. We’ll work on math and his project, then I’m going to go home and get other stuff done.” Or eat ice cream and watch Netflix. Whatever the hell I wanted to do.

I almost asked if that was all right with all of them, but I’d bite my tongue off before I asked for their permission for a damn thing.

“Sounds like a plan,” Bubba said, a slow grin curving his lips before he claimed a blueberry muffin. “Okay, so if all the academic stuff is done, when’s our first party of the year? I don’t want Frankie to miss it.”

“Good call!” Archie had his phone out again. “What are we thinking? Back to school bash weekend after this one? Saturday night when we’re all free?” He smirked at me. Because I’d already said what my schedule was, it meant I couldn’t duck the party with the excuse I had to work.

I hated them so much.

So.

So.

Much.



I ENDED UP HAVING TO RUN BUBBA BACK TO THE SCHOOL SO Jake could give him a ride home. It was almost six before Coop and I made it back to the apartments. Mom’s car wasn’t in her parking spot under the carport, but I hadn’t expected it.

“Want to come over for dinner?” Coop asked as we got out of the car. His phone rang at the same time and Laura’s name popped up on the screen.

“I’m good,” I told him. “I’ve got some stuff to do.” Like feed my cats, review my own homework, and write up some sample essays. I didn’t know what the questions would be exactly when they opened the application process, but practice couldn’t hurt.

“Okay,” Coop said. “I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Yep, you know where I’m parked.” I lifted a hand to wave at him, but I didn’t make it far enough away to avoid hearing him as he answered his phone.

“Hey Laura-babe, whatcha doing?” Or the next line. “Me? Nothing.”

Yeah.

I let myself into the quiet apartment, and barely got my backpack on the counter before Tiddles, Tabitha, and Tory assaulted me from all sides. The cats weaved against my legs and yowled their complaints. How dare I leave them all day? Where was their dinner? What a terrible human I was!

Laughing, I ran hands over each of them as I avoided tripping. They had access to dry food and water all day, both of which were more than half full. But they each got a half a can of wet in the evenings and they knew it.

It took me a couple of minutes to get the cans open and served out. In no time flat, the cats were on their meals like they lions falling on prey in the midst of a drought on the savannah.

I wondered sometimes if that was how the cats envisioned themselves. Did they see great big predators? Kind of like how I fancied myself a superhero sometimes? Or maybe a big shot reporter breaking the story of a lifetime? It was fun to fantasize about who I’d be in my favorite books or movie franchises, course those were usually focused on those great or terrible moments in their lives. We saw them at their highest or lowest, often both. We didn’t see all the boring crap in

between, which was where most of us, myself included, lived our lives. Or maybe that was just me.

After feeding the cats, I got the chicken out to defrost for Tuesday evening, though I needed to text Mom I might not be home. Considering the time, she was probably on the date I wasn't supposed to know about, so I'd text her later—closer to my bedtime. While my leftover lasagna heated, I carried my backpack to my room and changed into a sleep shirt. I had zero intention of going out again.

Dinner in tow, I set up in my room and turned on the documentary series I'd been listening to on YouTube, twenty-minute history videos excoriating historical dramas for their lack of accuracy.

Yep, I was a nerd.

After a bite of the lasagna, I texted the channel name to Jake on a whim, then pulled out my notes and began signing up for the various Reminds for each of my classes. Almost as soon as I signed up for French, there was a note from Mathieu the TA.

Commencez à planifier le plat français que vous souhaitez préparer pour le menu du mois de septembre. Vous devez faire une vidéo de chaque étape. Si vous avez des questions, contactez Madame ou moi-même.

Menu assignment. We'd done that last year, too. Only we hadn't had to video ourselves, just present it to the class in French, and detail what it was about the dish we enjoyed. Making a video would be a little more complicated.

I could use my phone to make the video. But what did I fix?

Peut-on réparer quelque chose?

I sent it to the Remind for the class. The app was useful; it let the whole class have one open text thread with the teacher, so in theory the teachers only had to answer once.

La nourriture de votre choix.

Mathieu answered pretty promptly. *Okay, so think about what to fix for class.* I dug out my notebook and added an item to research French recipes.

My phone buzzed.

JAKE: *THIS DUDE IS HILARIOUS! WHICH ONE ARE YOU watching?*

I glanced at the screen on my laptop. Then sent back, *Master and Commander.*

Jake: *I'm watching Patriot. When you're done, switch to Troy at the same time?*

I hadn't actually watched that one yet. *Okay. I have ten minutes.*

Jake: *8 here. I'll get it ready to go and wait for you to text before I hit play.*

ARCHIE: *YOU STILL WANT HOT COFFEE IN THE MORNING OR want me to bring iced?*

He didn't have to bring coffee.

Archie: *I'm bringing it either way, so just tell me what you want.*

I sighed. *Iced would probably be better while it's so hot.*

Archie: *Agreed. Want more croissants? Or they have those egg, ham, and swiss croissant sandwiches?*

A laugh escaped me as I stared at the message. *You don't have to feed me. But if you bring food, I'll chip in.*

Archie: *Pfft. Croissants and iced coffee. Meet in the cafeteria. I try to get there right at 7:45.*

That was earlier than I normally went to school. *Okay, will try. I'll let Coop know.*

Archie: *See you in the morning.*

By the time I sent Coop the change in plans and the video ended, I'd finished my lasagna.

I texted Jake I was going to be a minute and carried the dishes into the sink. I washed them up and then checked the fridge for something else, because I was still hungry. Yogurt in hand, I retreated to my bedroom. Tiddles had settled into his spot at the window and Tabby was on my pillow. Tory was under the bed, a fact I discovered when she tried to grab my feet when I walked by. Settled again, I sent Jake a text that I was ready, and the phone rang.

“Hey, Jake,” I said by way of answer.

“Hey, Frankie. Hit play in 3-2—1...”

Twenty-five minutes later, we switched to watching the Alexander the Great one. It took three more before I got him off the phone because I really did have some reading to do before bed.

Jake: *Those are awesome. Send me a list of all the ones you've already seen, and I'll catch up? We can watch more later this week. Maybe?*

Yep. Jake and me?

Nerds.

I sent him the list and then pulled out the World History text. I'd gotten a couple more posts from Mathieu in the Remind answering questions from other students and an email from him.

Huh.

Flipping open the email, I had to grin. It was a picture of a dish and the words *This is my favorite dessert. I'm also an expert in how it should taste, if you want someone to practice with.*

I emailed him back, in French, thanking him for the idea and his offer to taste test but it might take me a few tries to get it right.

He answered before I could even tab out of my email.

Then that will give us a lot of time to get to know each other. When would you like to start?

Oh.

That was almost a date.

And then I began to grin. The French exchange student hadn't gotten the memo.

Ha.

I'd show them

How about Sunday evening?

The guys had me pretty booked but...

Another prompt response: *It's a date.*

Well...how about that?

Grinning, I set the phone down and curled up to read about early European civilization.

CHAPTER FIVE

VARIABLES

Tuesday blew past almost as swiftly as Monday. I had to admit, French was a whole lot more interesting with Mathieu shooting me quick smiles during the assignment. If I'd had any questions about whether his "dessert tasting" date was a real offer, I didn't by the end of class. He motioned to me as the class ended, so I took my time about packing up.

Renee Miller scooted right up to Mathieu while I packed away my notebook, but he didn't linger with her as he slid his own backpack over his shoulder. He fell into step with me as I left the classroom. "If you have to talk to her..." I told him, motioning to where Renee had turned to talk to Madame.

"I cannot," he said in that delicious French accent, though his English was impeccable. "I have no say over grades. I just help the making of the projections and test your—conversational French."

"*Comment je fais si loin?*" I asked how I was doing so far.

"*Très bien,*" he offered with a chef's kiss. "Your accent is good, not as American as I would expect. Or as—Texan, is that the word?"

I laughed. We were almost to the stairs. Mathieu's dark eyes danced with the promise of mischief and his tousled hair didn't look remotely styled, yet he dressed impeccably from his Polo shirt to his slacks and nice shoes. Nothing about him said local boy.

It was great.

“Texan would be the word, born and bred. But, contrary to the pop culture opinion, our cities can be just as metropolitan as those found in New York or California.”

“I have never been to New York or California, so I will take your word for it.” At the steps, he hesitated and then pulled out a notecard. “The recipe.” He offered it to me. “If you are still interested in this dessert. There are others that I like as well.”

Grasping the card between my thumb and forefinger, I raised my eyebrows. “Is that a challenge?”

He slid his gaze to the side, another smile flirting at the corners of his mouth. “Perhaps? If you are one who likes challenges.”

“I might be,” I said, still holding the card, though he hadn’t released it. “But if I win the challenge, what do I get?”

“A surprise,” was all he offered, and I shook my head. He released the card, so I used it to fan my face once. “Hopefully, a couple of fun evenings?”

“Two, huh?” I eyed the recipe then him. “So the number of evenings hinges on how soon I master this? Cause that could take a while.”

His eyes grew a bit brighter. “As long as it takes. I will see you tomorrow, Francesca?”

“Frankie,” I corrected.

“I know,” he said, turning to walk backwards. “*Mais ton nom est magnifique. Comme toi.*”

Holy hell, my face was hot by the time he pivoted and headed off to his next class. I wish we shared more than just AP French, but at least I got him there. Still fanning my face, I darted up the stairs and barely slid in the doors of AP Lit before the bell rang. Ms. Fajardo gave me a laughing smile and Coop rolled his eyes as I sank into the chair next to his.

When he reached for my notecard, I jerked it away and then stored it in my backpack. I hadn’t had a chance to really look over the recipe yet, but I wasn’t tipping the guys off. I

didn't need them messing up what had the potential to be a good thing.

But your name is beautiful. Like you. The compliment could have been so dorky, but the way Mathieu delivered it? Wow.

Class turned into a fun debate about the merits of literature, particularly literature that was three centuries out of sync with the times...or was it? Even Coop rallied to argue a few points, and he didn't get passionate about much.

Ms. Fajardo pointed out that one of our ongoing assignments for the semester needed to be a journal. We could do the writing in class or at home, but we had to write every day—even on weekends. It could be a few sentences or pages, but we had to investigate literature parallels with our daily lives.

“What does that even mean?” Sasha Reader asked. “Picking out whether the lack of curtains in a classroom relates to our lack of a right to privacy at school?”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Ms. Fajardo pointed out much to the other girl’s chagrin. Sasha glanced at me with raised eyebrows, the *what the hell* clear in her expression.

“But why?” Sasha pressed.

“Because,” Ms. Fajardo answered, and without me even trying to get her attention, I knew she’d looked at me. “Frankie, why do you think we need to do this assignment?”

Coop nudged my foot with his, all but silently laughing at me. I hated getting called out in front of the whole class.

“Because the themes in literature are only themes because they serve as a metaphor for real life. Dickens wrote about the common man and his stories resonate over a hundred years later because we have orphans, we have foster kids, we have—single parent families—and financial struggles. We know what it is to be torn between a personal goal and what society thinks we should want. Literature should be like a flashlight, giving us a new way to look at our own lives.”

“Nerd,” Coop whispered even as Ms. Fajardo said, “Precisely. Now, you don’t have to be Dickens to keep the journal, you just have to write about what I would imagine are your favorite topics—your lives, how you are handling the day to day, what challenges are you facing, what goals are you setting... Before anyone starts to worry about who is going to see it, I will ask to see your journals once a week, but only to verify that you *have* written. You will not leave them with me. I will check them here in class, one at a time, and they will go home with you.”

She continued in that vein for some time and I sighed. I had never been much of a diary keeper. I’d tried once, gave it up as a bad effort when all I could do were write long, lonely letters about the things I wished I could do or short, stupid comments about the day to day things—like feeding the cats or waiting up for Mom to come home from a date.

If I’d had one at the end of last year, I might have written some horribly embarrassing and vitriolic comments about some of my so-called friends. Thankfully, not an issue. This assignment, however, might be. Coop, of course, slung an arm around me as we headed to lunch.

“Dear Diary, today in class, I had to prove that once again I’m the only person who actually does the reading and understands it...”

I shoved him, hard, and managed to elbow him in the gut at the same time. “Get off,” I ordered. “Ass.”

“Aww, c’mon, Frankie. You know I’m teasing.”

Whatever. I flipped him off and kept walking. Not that it proved a deterrent, because he trailed right behind me down the steps and toward the cafeteria along with the few thousand other students. I really, *really* hated that everyone went to lunch at the same time.

“Coop!” Laura materialized. God, did she have Coop low jacked or something? “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Well, you didn’t find me earlier so you mustn’t have been looking that hard.”

I think I just threw up in my mouth.

Ignoring them, I cut across the crowded lines toward the doors leading outside. There were a few picnic tables out there on the shaded breezeway. If I was lucky, I could score one before they filled up. Out the door, I angled across the grass toward the oversized breezeway between the main building and the addition they'd built right before my freshman year. Two of the three picnic tables were taken, but I slid onto the third one with nary a second to spare.

A pair of freshmen with trays stared at me, and I stared right back.

With a sigh, they turned and went elsewhere.

Good freshmen. Backpack off, I dug out my lunch—the sandwich from the day before, a bag of carrots, and a bottle of water. Before I could take a bite, a heavily laden tray slid onto the table across from me, followed by a blond-haired jock wearing a familiar smile.

“Hey, Frankie.”

“Hey, Bubba.” As irritating as they could all be, Bubba had the temperament of a golden retriever. Like the day before, he looked tired, despite his smile. He dropped his backpack on the ground and reached for the container of chocolate milk on his tray of—a hamburger, a slice of pizza, and small stack of fries and what...?

“What is that?” I pointed to the plastic packed item that was upside down.

“Pop tarts,” Bubba said with an unabashed grin. “Brought them with me this morning but forgot to eat them, so I figured I’d have them for dessert.”

God, that was a lot of food. I bit into my sandwich and shook my head.

“It’s frosted strawberry,” he said, holding it up like he was trying to tempt me. “I’ll share.”

“I’m good.” I motioned to my carrots. “Got my dessert right there.”

“Rabbit food and...pb and j, you’re just rocking the top of the line menu choices.”

“If it works...”

“...don’t change it,” Archie finished as he dropped onto the seat next to me. “Why are we eating at school?” Though Bubba was right there, Archie focused his attention on me.

“I don’t know, Arch. I’m eating here because I brought my lunch. Bubba appears to have staged a raid on the lunch line.”

Bubba laughed.

“Ugh,” Archie said making a face. “I’d rather leave campus.”

“No one is keeping you here,” I reminded him and took another bite of my sandwich. When he reached for one of my carrots, I pulled them away.

“I don’t want to stand in the line,” Archie said by way of explanation. “And I don’t want to eat by myself.”

“You’re not by yourself,” Jake set his tray on the table on my free side. His was piled higher than Bubba’s had been—in that he had two of everything.

“Do they not feed you at home?” I mean, I know it was a rude question, but damn.

“Eh, couldn’t make up my mind and didn’t know if you had actual food or—” He motioned to the carrots. “Rabbit food.” He set a burger and a container of fries in front of me.

“Great,” Archie said, shoving his backpack under the table and reaching over me to snag some fries.

Rather than deal with the lean and reach, I transferred the fries to Archie’s side along with the burger.

“Hey,” Jake growled, and reached past me to put them back. “Those are for Frankie. Go get your own.”

“You’re all determined to starve me, aren’t you?” Archie looked so morose, I couldn’t help laughing.

“Poor baby, nobody loves you.”

“Here,” Bubba said. “I’ll share.” He slid the Pop Tart over to Archie. I had to bite my lip to keep from guffawing. Archie *hated* Pop Tarts. He acted like they’d committed a crime against breakfast food.

“Thanks,” Archie said with a scowl. He turned to me. “I’ll trade you this for the other half of your sandwich, since you have a burger now.”

I didn’t want a burger, but it was kind of pathetic...

“What the hell is he doing?” Bubba murmured, scowling. Bubba didn’t glare at anyone. I twisted along with Archie and Jake to see what snagged his attention. Coop was strolling toward the parking lot with Laura and a couple of her friends. They were all talking in animated fashion, and he had an arm looped over her shoulders. Sunglasses hid his eyes.

“Being a dumbass,” Jake commented turning around.

“He likes her,” I reminded them. “And it’s not like you all haven’t had girlfriends.”

Archie snorted. “I’ve never dumped the guys for a girl.”

“You and Patty ate lunch together for two months last year,” I reminded him.

“We had a project and it was literally the only time we could work on it,” he retaliated. Then he stuffed a fry in his mouth.

“Whatever,” Jake said, nudging the burger. “Eat. I don’t care where Coop eats lunch. His loss.”

But Jake didn’t argue with me. They’d all had their girlfriends and there’d been plenty of times they’d individually or en masse disappeared down the dating rabbit hole.

“I’m not sure I’m burger hungry.” I held up the other half of my sandwich, only Archie snagged it then took a big bite.

Ass.

I punched him in the shoulder, and he winced, coughing hard a minute later. Served him right if he choked on it.

Bubba snickered. “Don’t take her sandwich next time, idiot.”

“I was trying to help,” Archie said with a wince, rubbing his shoulder. “Did you take up boxing this summer or something?”

“Or something,” I said, keeping it vague. The burger was not what I wanted, but I was still hungry.

“What did you do this summer, Frankie? We saw you at my party and at work,” Bubba nudged my leg with his foot. “But Coop said you were really busy and that stuff with your mom wasn’t great.”

Jake focused on the food in front of him, but Archie and Bubba looked at me expectantly. Apparently, Jake hadn’t shared his theories with them.

“Just stuff, things to figure out. Didn’t get to visit the colleges, but I did some virtual tours. Did you get the calculus questions done?” I’d finished my section before school because I’d been too tired to deal with it the night before and there weren’t that many.

“Most of them,” Bubba admitted. “I think the last one had an error in the question itself.”

“A typo?” Cause that happened. I hadn’t read through chapter one, because we covered the subject material the year before. Relenting, I took a bite of the burger and tried not to sigh. It was actually pretty good, and it already had ketchup on it. I didn’t eat burgers with anything except ketchup and cheese, and not always the cheese. Jake wore a small smile as he took a bite of his own and I bumped his shoulder lightly. “Thanks,” I muttered then reached for my bag to dig out my calculus book.

“You’re welcome,” he answered easily enough. I flipped through the book to the chapter one study questions, then read the last one on the list. Chewing the second bite of the burger thoughtfully, I frowned. Aware of the quiet around me, I kept my focus on the page.

On the third read of the question, I blew out a breath. “It’s a trick question and a really badly worded one.” Shifting to slide a leg under me, I pushed my food to the side to set the book on the table, and then leaned half over so the book faced Bubba right side up.

“This line here...” I tapped it. “It’s an if/then true/false question. The problem is the variables aren’t the same and they are asking if the functions are the same—which they seem to be, but are they really?”

Bubba frowned. “They’re not because the variables aren’t.”

“Bingo. Everything looks the same, but that one variable—unless it turns out to be equal to the same thing, which we have no way of knowing, thus it has to be false.”

“I hate trick questions,” Bubba stated, with a shake of his head.

I chuckled and sank back onto my seat before I reclaimed the burger. “Well, all you have to remember is if even one variable is off, then it’s not going to work. Functions can be the same— x can mean 3 times a variable plus 3 and y can mean 3 times a variable plus 3, but the variable decides whether the function actually equals the same.”

“Got it.” Bubba nodded. While he always asked for math tutoring, and we’d been exchanging study time for the last few years, he was an excellent student. Once he grasped a concept, he never lost it.

No sneaky variables would get past him again.

“You two still getting together after school?” Jake asked.

“As far as I know, so you are relieved of Bubba driving duty.”

Bubba snorted and Archie snagged more of my fries. Jake nudged his other packet between us then exchanged a slice of pizza for Bubba’s abandoned Pop Tarts.

Archie mumbled his thanks before he poked me. “You’re coming to the senior launch party, right?”

“That the one you’re planning for Saturday after next?”

“Yes,” Archie said. “It’s going to be a blast. Edward and Muriel are going to be out of town, so it will be just us.”

He called his parents by their first names. *So weird*. I’d never get over that. Mom and I might have our issues, but if I called her by her first name, she’d probably slap me upside the head. I’d probably call the sperm donor by his name—if I knew it. Since I didn’t, he just got to be sperm donor.

“You guys can all stay over, so pack overnight bags. The pool will be prepped, I’m getting it catered, and we’ll have some booze but in moderate amounts.” That was another thing I’d give them—they at least didn’t drink to excess at the parties.

I wasn’t spending the night, no matter how nice the party.

“Jeremy will take care of any issues, because he promised to chaperone.” Jeremy, his honest to God butler, *chaperoned* all of his parties, which meant he signed off on drinking and debauchery as long as they limited it to the pool house and didn’t wreck anything.

Yeah, my mom would never go for that, so I never mentioned it. We were really good at keeping those uncomfortable topics to ourselves. “I’ll be there,” I committed again. Maybe I’d bring Mathieu with me. Archie’s parties were legendary, and it would be nice to have someone to actually hang out with for the evening. I’d have to see how dessert prep went.

“Cool, you’ll get the blue room in the pool house. The rest of us can split the other two bedrooms...”

“Archie, I’m not spending the night,” I corrected him, then finished my burger.

“C’mon, we haven’t done a sleepover in forever. The guys were there this summer, but you bailed.” He eyed me. “And don’t think I didn’t notice.”

“I don’t care,” I told him as nicely as I could. “I have to work on Sunday, so I’m not spending the night. I’ll be at the

party. That'll have to be enough." I even raised my hand. "Scout's honor."

"It's enough," Bubba said before Archie could launch into anything else. "We just miss having you around."

Yeah, I'd missed them, too. "We're all going to get busy." They might as well accept that now. "You guys have the team, and robots and stuff and I've got work and grades and college essays."

"We know," Jake said, with a sigh as he pushed his mostly empty tray to the side. "You've always been focused. But we're not letting you just slip away on us. You need to have some fun, too."

"I know how to have fun." Though the argument sounded weak. "You'll see."

"Uh huh," Archie said skeptically.

But at least they shifted topics to the football game, and I could tune that out. Even when Jake bumped me and reminded me I said I'd be at their first game, like they were going to let me forget.

When we all split up to head to our fifth period classes, I checked in at study hall before diverting to the library. I caught sight of Coop and Laura in the hallway as I opened the library door. They were holding hands.

So cute.

Coop jerked a little when he saw me, but I just shook my head. Like I hadn't known about Laura? Did he forget they'd been making out this summer or something?

Whatever.

After I found a quiet table, I pulled out my morning homework to try and get that done. It saved my time to study at night. The notecard from Mathieu was tucked away neatly inside the inner pocket of my binder. Pulling it out, I read the recipe—he'd written it in French. The final two steps said chill for one hour then serve with a kiss and a smile.

It was...ludicrous and sweet all at once. At the very bottom was a phone number with a note that said for any questions, call. I entered it into my phone, after a quick glance around, then saved it to my contacts under the name *Dessert Option*.

Sometimes the guys got nosy when my phone was out. Coop once took a hundred selfies with my phone, no joke. Jake used to steal the phone to send texts to the other guys with dirty jokes in them. It was always in good fun, and I usually laughed, but after finding out they'd pretty much taken out an ad to inform everyone I was untouchable, some of the fun worn off. No one was to ask me out, no one was to bother me, and no one was to call me.

Rachel had taken great delight last spring in dropping that little nugget on me. The spring dance was coming up at the time, and I'd kind of wanted to go. With all the class of a two-ton bomb, Rachel had said, "*Good luck with that. The guys know you're untouchable. No guy is going to risk it and ask you out, so go by yourself or don't go at all.*" Cheryl had at least looped her arm through mine while I tried to wrap my head around that. She'd added, "*She's not lying. I mean, I know she sounds like a bitch, but Archie and the guys? They made it clear. No one touches you; no one dates you. There was a guy last year who was gonna ask. I'm pretty sure he got a black eye and busted lip from Jake because he'd been looking at your ass when he said he was going to ask you out.*"

Kent had been the only guy with a black eye right around then. Kind of cute and definitely funny—Kent and I had three classes together at the time. We'd actually started to hang out at lunch, then one day he started hanging out elsewhere, and that was that.

Rachel had shrugged. "*Don't believe us? Try asking out a guy. See what happens.*"

Cheryl sighed and given me a spontaneous hug. Cheryl had always been a hugger. "*It's sweet, how they want to look after you.*"

It was *not* sweet. They dated and frequently. I couldn't count the number of girls I'd caught them making out with over the last couple of years, so why did they get to date and I didn't? I didn't need big brothers, because I'd been an only child my whole life. I wasn't changing that now.

I hadn't gone to the dance, and it turned out Rachel wasn't wrong. Apparently everyone knew. The girls thought it was hilarious—well, some of them did. Not all of them found it funny. Some had stopped talking to me too along the way, I just hadn't noticed. I got that most of their girlfriends didn't like me, but whatever. The more I thought about it, the more I resented the idea the guys thought they got to make those decisions for me.

So, no, if Mathieu didn't get the damn memo, I wasn't going to let the guys know. *Nope.*

Not. Happening.

By the time it was just Jake and me in independent study, I had my irritation under control. We even watched a couple of the history buff videos rather than read. We'd just finished one when the bell rang as a text popped up on my phone from Coop.

Got a ride. C u 2mrw.

Jake snorted. "Well, I guess it's just you and Bubba then."

"I guess so," I said sliding into my backpack.

"Hey," he said, tugging me back before I could reach the door. "Text me when you guys are done?"

I raised my eyebrows.

"So we can watch more history buffs."

"I've got some other homework, too, so if I get it all done?"

"Sure, just—tell me when you get home. If you can watch cool, and if you can't that's fine. I'll be around."

Jake was being weird. "You okay?" We had headed out the classroom, but I stopped where the hall separated. I was

parked behind the gym.

“I’m fine,” he said with a grin. “Remind Bubba we have practice after school tomorrow.”

“I’m pretty sure he knows his schedule,” I said with a laugh. “But I’ll tell him, if it’ll make you happy.”

“Sure,” Jake said. I gave him a little wave before pivoting and heading for the exit.

So. Weird.

CHAPTER SIX

AUDITION

Without Coop along to drop off at the apartments, it took me only a few minutes to drive Bubba and me over to his place. I liked his house. It reminded me of those old sitcoms on *Nick at Nite* about families in the sixties. It was a two-floor sprawling house with big rooms and a huge yard. They had a swimming pool in the back that, while half the size of Archie's, sported a decent diving board and enough room to do laps.

"I should have told you to bring a suit," Bubba said as he let us in. I'd parked on the side of the driveway, so his parents could still get in the garage. His mom was a nurse, and she worked long hours. His dad was a counselor, though like Jake's dad, he'd also been in the military. It was a pity Bubba was an only child, like me, because his parents were so grounded.

"Oh hey!" Sarah Rhys called as we came inside buying me time to not respond to the comment about a bathing suit. "There you are." Tall, willowy and as golden haired as her son, Sarah hustled out to give Bubba a hug. "I wasn't sure I'd see you before I had to leave. I'm picking up an overnight shift. We've got people out sick. Your dad has group tonight, so he'll be late. There's pizza money on the counter and leftovers in the fridge." A smile warmed her face as she glanced at me. "Hi, Frankie." Then I was pulled into the group hug as Bubba laughed and tried to extract both of us.

If Bubba was a golden retriever, his mom was, too. She loved everyone, and she had a way of giving the best hugs.

Where my mom wasn't emotionally available on a regular basis, Sarah had made me a part of the family the first time I'd come over. I'd missed her this past summer almost as much as I'd missed the guys.

"Thanks, Mom." Rather than be embarrassed by her affectionate nature, Bubba just gave her a dazzling smile. "Hey, do we still have those guest bathing suits upstairs? I forgot to tell Frankie to bring one, and it's miserable outside."

Weren't we doing homework and tutoring? I eyed Bubba, but he and his mom wore identical bright smiles. Sarah gave me the once over. "Pretty sure we do and the black or blue one pieces in the top drawer on the right should fit you fine. Don't worry, they are all either new or laundered. And on that note..." She grabbed her keys. "Have fun, you two. Ian, don't overwork Frankie's brain. It's only day two!"

Then she was out the door, leaving us alone.

"What exactly does your mom think you're going to do to my brain?"

Bubba laughed and reached for my backpack. "She thinks you study too much. Probably because she hasn't seen you either, and you know she worries."

Yeah, but why would she worry about me? Bubba had my backpack in hand. "I thought we were going to study."

He carried them over and set them on the kitchen table before going to the fridge and pulling out a couple of sodas. "We are...definitely going over the calculus and then...I have a big favor to ask. But... it's just you and me. We have time. See the pool out there? You didn't swim when you came over for the party."

I sighed.

"Bubba..."

"Frankie," he said, setting the sodas down and facing me. Sometimes I forgot just how tall the guys were until we were face to face. He was well over six feet, all of them were, but Bubba and Jake were the tallest. Since I was 5'6, they towered over me. Tipping my head back, I raised my brows. "Look, I

don't know what all went on with you this summer. Or why you needed time away from us... If you want to tell me, I'm here. But I missed you. There's no one else here to bug us. We can throw on suits, get in the water and just cool off."

Despite the smile and cajoling tone, there was a real need underscoring it all. Irrksome as the boys could be, we'd all been friends for a long time. I never really set out to be in their back pockets. Honestly, I couldn't figure out how it happened. I'd have said at one point they'd become my best friends... *before.*

Right now, my friend needed me, so I set aside the rest of it and made a face. "Fine, but if you dunk me, I'm going to consider kneeing you in the nuts as fair retribution."

His smile was the sun breaking out of the clouds. "Sweet. The swimming part," he amended. "Not the nuts."

I laughed. "I didn't think you'd be excited about that." I let him herd me up the stairs before we split up, me heading into the guest room and him heading toward his. The suits were right where his mom said they'd be. The blue one was brand-new, like it still had the tags on it and there was the plastic in all the right places. A razorback, the suit fit me snugly and thankfully didn't cut so high I had to worry about wedgies.

Been there. Done that. Hated it.

I folded my clothes and left them on the foot of the bed, then slid my socks in my shoes. I debated leaving my hair in the ponytail but took a minute to braid it. Sometimes the elastic came loose and then I had a face full of hair. I'd considered cutting it a few times, because frankly the hair was a pain in the ass, but it also grew super slow, so no cutting until I was ready for it to be short forever.

The air conditioning seemed even colder after I'd swapped out clothes for the suit. There were swim towels in a cabinet by the backdoor to the pool. Bubba's bedroom door was open, so I headed downstairs. The patio door had been left open, like an invitation, and our sodas were on the table under the big umbrella. Bubba's parents had transplanted a couple of big palm trees to add to their landscaping. Between those, the

colorful furniture, and the pool, it was a little tropical paradise. They even had a soaking pool with a fountain in it that helped cycle the water through.

The scent of chlorine teased me as I padded over the hot stones. Bubba raised his head out of the water. Dressed in trunks and nothing else, he looked like he belonged in one of those commercials about how to cool off in the hot summer. Tanned, densely muscled, and built solid, he had a mouth-watering physique that I made a point of not ogling.

I'd had enough guys staring at my tits after they made an early appearance in third grade. In fact, Jake and I cemented our friendship the day he beat up Trevor Markham for deciding to squeeze one of my boobs. The odd, fleeting memory made me smile, and I shook my head. Jake had always been like that. He could pick on me, no one else could. So I guess his giving Kent a black eye had some precedence.

Besides, it wasn't Bubba's looks that made me appreciate him. It was his bright smiles and puppy dog eyes.

The guy in question released a whistle. "Damn, you make ordinary look good, Frankie."

Ordinary? I glanced down at the suit before picking up my soda and taking a sip. "It's a suit, Bubba."

"You could have gone for one of the bikinis." He gave me a playful leer and wagged his eyebrows. The look totally didn't work for him, and I snickered.

"Yeah, because I'm known to wear bikinis so often." Not that I didn't own one, but I'd never worn it.

"Huh," he grunted, swimming over to the side and pointing to his soda. "Do you mind?"

I carried his over and took another sip of mine before sitting down on the warm paving stone and putting my legs in the water. The pool was nice; the water cooler than the air but not cold. It felt pretty good. I'd left my sunglasses inside like a dork, so I just closed my eyes, lifting my face to the sun, and leaned back, hands against the pavement. I couldn't do this for long, I'd burn.

“Okay,” I admitted, eyes still closed. “This was a good idea.”

“You’re not actually *in* the pool yet,” Bubba pointed out.

“I will,” I said, waving a hand him like shoo. “But this is just nice.” Not running, not studying, not working or worrying, just sitting with the sun on my face, the warm breeze chasing away some of the sweat and the cooler water lapping at my legs.

With a laugh, he pushed away. The splashes told me he was swimming. He used to swim every day. He had weight equipment in the garage. He and Jake would run together, or had, wasn’t sure if they still did. Bubba was one of the most physically active people I knew.

I worked, sometimes forty hours a week, and he made *me* tired.

Still, I peeked to see his broad back rippling as he cut through the water. He made it look so easy—and good. Shaking my head, I sat forward, took another sip of the coke, then set it back down before pushing off and into the water. It was a lot colder against my sun-warmed skin. I blew out a breath and laughed. Bubba glanced at me from the other side of the pool and grinned. Shoving away from the side, I cut through the water, arm over arm.

I hadn’t gone swimming once this summer. Hell, the closest I’d been to a pool had been here at Bubba’s place and then it had only been to walk outside to get away from the noise to find nearly half the guests were either making out in the water or on the loungers.

Shoving those discomfoting thoughts away—the very vivid reminders of my isolated status and those behind that isolation—I kept swimming. I couldn’t match Bubba in speed, but I didn’t try to. We swam back and forth across the pool, our laps bringing us abreast of each other in the middle only to pass each other again.

After my tenth, I drifted back over to where I’d left my soda and leaned against the side. Bubba did another ten before

he finally swam over to join me.

“Good idea, yeah?” He wore such an open smile that it required I respond in kind.

“Not bad,” I admitted. “Been a while since I went swimming.”

“You’re always welcome,” he told me, laying his head against his folded arms and studying me. The sun was on his side, leaving me to squint, but I shrugged.

“You know how it goes.”

“I know you avoided us,” Bubba said carefully. “Avoided all of us, but you came to my birthday party, and you left before I could say thank you.”

Blowing out a breath, I looked at the soda rather than him. He wasn’t asking me why. He wasn’t even accusing me. He just thanked me for being a friend.

“Well, I already had your present,” I said, trying to keep it light. “It would have been a shame to waste it.”

His only response was a soft snort. “You’re the only one who got me music.”

I frowned.

“You’re the only one who ever remembers I play guitar.”

Another shrug. “You spend most of your time working out or playing football, Bubba. You don’t let other people see the instruments.”

He had three guitars, two classics and his practice one. The classics hung on the wall in his bedroom in cases to keep them safe. The practice guitar, an acoustic, sat next to the bed on its own stand.

“You still know how to play Godzilla?”

I groaned. “Sorta, I think. You taught me that in sophomore year. When was the last time we...?”

He raised his eyebrows as we locked gazes. “We can play today if you want.”

“I thought we were here to do homework and because you wanted to talk to me away from the others.” I hadn’t missed that. He’d been careful to not include Coop in the quiet request. There’d been tons of time after school yesterday to bring up whatever else was on his mind.

“Yeah...” he said, his smile fading. He braced his hands on the side of the pool and hoisted himself out. The water droplets glided over him as he left with a bit of a splash. Before I could follow, he stood and bent, one arm extended to me. Claspng his hand, I pushed against the side to climb up, though it proved unnecessary when he all but hauled me out of the pool one armed. When I stumbled, he steadied me, his free arm going around my waist. “I need to talk to you about the college thing that the guys want to do.”

Removing my hand from his chest, I ignored the sudden leap my pulse. Still dripping, he motioned toward the covered table. I grabbed a chair as he patted himself down. “I’m going to get us more cokes. You hungry?”

“I could eat, but...”

“I’ll order a couple of pizzas. You still like pineapple only on yours, right?”

Bracing a hand over my mouth, elbow on the table, I chuckled. “Yeah I still like pineapple only Mr. Meat Lover.”

A flash of another smile and he said, “I’ll be right back.”

My phone was with my backpack, but it was kind of nice to just sit in his backyard and listen to the breeze. In the distance, a dog barked. If I concentrated, I could almost hear the kids playing at the little park down the street. I’d always kind of envied Bubba for growing up in such a nice neighborhood. Mom and I lived in a decent apartment, and there’d been plenty of kids around when I was growing up—like Coop, although I think he and I were the only ones who had lived in that courtyard pretty continuously.

Bubba returned with both of our backpacks in one hand and sodas in the other. “Pizza will be here in thirty. I told them to come to the gate.” With the steady breeze, the water, the

shade and the bathing suit, I was actually comfortable, so I didn't complain about staying outside. He opened my can for me without asking, so I drained the dregs of the first one before rising to drop it and his empty in the recycling can tucked next to the fence.

Back at the table, he'd pulled out his calculus book and dragged his chair around so he could sit next to me. Feet braced against my chair, he pushed his notes to me, and I pulled mine out of my backpack. My phone slipped out and there were a couple of messages on the screen. None from Mom, so I just nudged it aside for now.

We sat, quiet, for about ten minutes as we reviewed each other's work and the practice questions.

"Well..." Bubba said after a minute. "That's anticlimactic."

A snicker escaping, I lifted my drink. "You don't have any questions."

"No, it all makes sense. I can even see why you made the choices you did." The wonder in his voice had always been a weakness of mine. Bubba never thought of himself as the smart kid. Hell, half the time, he acted like the only reason we kept him around was because he was the football player.

Nudging his leg with my knee, I smiled. "I told you last year, you have this. Math is just numbers. Music is math. You play music beautifully, so you just have to stop thinking of math as impossible."

"It's hard to not think of it that way," he admitted. "You remember algebra freshman year." I'd taken algebra in 8th grade, ahead of the others. "I needed you the whole year."

"Because it was a different way of looking at problems. You like concrete things, not abstracts—which is weird, because music is arguably an abstract."

"No, it's not," he countered. "Music is a feeling. It's a pulse, and I can follow the notes especially if they are designed to provoke emotions. The only emotion math provokes is ugh."

I laughed. “Well, I think you’re fine. We get real homework on Thursday. I’m betting she gives us an ungraded pop quiz tomorrow.”

He frowned. “Why ungraded?”

“Cause not everyone takes the ‘*do the practice questions*’ assignment seriously. Easily half the class blew that off because it’s not for a grade. So tomorrow, when we get to class, she’s going to hand out a pop quiz. Panic ensues. Some people will do fine because they’re good at it, some will freak out and do badly even if they did the practice questions, and then there will be those who can’t quite grasp it or pull it off. The point won’t be whether you can do the work or not...”

“But whether you’re giving the class attention to detail.” Yes, I had given him this same spiel before. “You know I hate tests.”

“You panic.” Some people weren’t good test takers. Bubba definitely fell into that category. It was why he studied and wanted me to tutor him. Why we would go over material he knew inside and out over and over again. “That’s why I’m telling you. The test—it’s going to have questions just like these.”

“You,” he said, putting his hands on the arms of my chair and leaning forward, “are the best.”

I snorted, but I couldn’t help smiling at his enthusiasm. “So, what was the issue with schools that you wanted to talk about?”

A knock on the gate interrupted us, and he reached past me for his wallet. “Hold that thought.” The brush of his warm arm against mine sent tingles through me. Casual touching had always been a thing with the guys—an arm around my shoulder, legs pressed together, bumping, tickling or playing. It never meant anything, no matter how they touched me, not even if I enjoyed it more than I’d cared to admit.

I was their study buddy. One of the guys.

I was also apparently the object of their ‘protection.’ Shaking that off, I packed away the calculus materials, his and

mine. A slip of paper fell out of his book. Amanda Winston's name was on it along with a phone number.

She wasn't in our AP class, and I knew the name, sorta, but couldn't place the face. Bubba set the pizzas on the table as I held the slip up. "Sorry, fell out of your book."

"Eh," he said, crumpling it in his fist and then dropping the wadded-up ball in his backpack with his book. "She handed me that on my way from 1st to 2nd. I forgot I had it."

"Is she nice?"

He gave me a blank look as he flipped open the pizza boxes and pushed the pineapple covered one toward me. We were still sitting side by side, so we had to rearrange our backpacks to give us more room. "Is who nice?"

"The girl who gave you her number? Amanda?"

"I don't know," he said with a shrug. "She's in my lit class—don't know why I got stuck with that first period. I should have taken AP to hang with you and Coop, but I don't read books like you, Jake, and now apparently, Coop do."

I rubbed his shoulder sympathetically. "You got Ms. Young though, right?"

"Yeah, she's funny. Which helps." He took a big bite and chewed. It took him two full slices of pizza before he circled back to my earlier question. I ate my slice slower, even though a part of me just wanted to fall on the whole medium and eat it at speed. It was really good, but if I ate that many calories, I'd have a food baby the size of a mini Volkswagen, and I still needed to fit back in my clothes.

"Jake and I are gonna start getting scouted. I mean Jake's already gotten a couple of offers," Bubba said, surprising me. Jake hadn't mentioned those. Again, we all hadn't really been talking, but if he'd already gotten scouted—that would have been last year, right?

"That's great. A full-ride football scholarship can save a lot of money."

“Maybe,” he admitted. “Harvard doesn’t offer athletic scholarships. They have a good financial aid department and stuff, but straight up? Harvard’s expensive, Frankie.”

“I know. But I like Boston—okay, I like the *idea* of Boston. I like the idea of seasons. I like the idea of an older academic institution with a lot of history to it and maybe a little prestige. I also like their journalism department.” It was actually high on my list.

“I get that,” he said. “And I know they’d be idiots to turn you down, but I was thinking, if football wouldn’t pay the way, then I need to concentrate on something else.”

“Well you were going to study music at one point.” He’d confessed that way back in the summer between freshman and sophomore years when he taught me how to play Godzilla. “You wanted to master some other instruments, maybe even kick off a band.”

His ears went red. “Mom and Dad used to pay for music lessons, but I let them lapse. Sports—they take a lot of time and... I don’t know if just liking something is enough to make it a career.”

“Talent is one thing—which you have, don’t get me wrong—but drive is the other. You have to know that. You wouldn’t be as good as you are at football if you didn’t have it.”

With a snort, he eyed me. “How do you know if I’m any good? You don’t even like the game.”

“I hear things. I have ears. People talk about how good you are. They talk about how many points you scored.”

“But it doesn’t really mean anything to you.”

I gave a little shrug and hid behind a slice of pizza as I murmured, “It means people admire you, so you have to be doing something right.”

“Well, I try... Anyway, here’s the thing—Harvard has a joint degree program with the New England Conservatory, which is in Boston, too. If I can get into that program—there might be some financial aid for it—and it means I could concentrate on music.” He gave me a little side-eye. “You

know, music fulltime rather than playing sports for admission then studying music on the side.”

“That’s great.” It would certainly remove him from the risk of injury on the playing field. “Jake wants to study engineering.”

“Yeah, he and Archie would be great at MIT, also in Boston,” he pointed out. “So, with Coop, even if we weren’t at the same school, we could still get a place together.” I let that slide for now. “But...to get into the program I have to get accepted at the school *and* submit a blind audition for a spot in the music program.”

“Okay,” I said blowing out a breath. “Early admission deadline is November 1st. Standard admission is January 1st. We need to know the deadlines for the audition. We should probably look at auditioning at all the schools if we plan to apply at all of them.”

Bubba’s smile grew. “Well yes, but that’s not what I actually need your help with. I mean I do, but... will you help me make the audition tape? I need to pick out a piece, practice it, and record it. It can be a duet, so you can sing on it, too, if we pick an arrangement that works well.”

Horror crawled through me. “Sing?”

“You have a gorgeous voice, Frankie-I-pretend-to-lip-sync-when-the-music-is-playing, but we had karaoke at Archie’s party way back when, remember?”

Ugh. I made a face. I hated performing in front of people. I’d only gotten up there because of a dare, and after I’d actually had my very first shot of whiskey. It had gone right to my head, so I’d belted out a Pink song like I knew what I was doing.

“If you don’t remember...” Bubba reached for his phone.

“Don’t you dare,” I said, pointing at him. “Just—don’t.”

They’d recorded me, the asses. The only saving grace was no one put it on YouTube, but the guys had trotted that thing out a dozen different times.

“I won’t,” he said immediately, then leaned toward me. “But will you help me, Frankie? I can’t ask the guys. You know how they get.” I did know. “You’ve always been supportive of my music.”

“So you have the essay covered?” I asked. My dry tone probably gave away my opinion as I tossed his audition idea around in my head.

“Well...” He grinned. “I won’t say no to help there.”

“I’ll help you by reading your practice essays and giving you feedback.” Then I groaned. “And yes, I’ll help you with your auditions.” His eyes lit up and then I was engulfed in a well-toned and definitely muscled hug as he all but lifted me out of the chair.

“You really are the best,” he said, standing and spinning us around. I read his intentions a split second before he started moving.

“Don’t you—” I didn’t get to finish as we were suddenly airborne and then splashing into the pool together.

We came up spluttering, but instead of letting me go, his hands lingered on my sides before he swung me around in the pool.

“Ass,” I said with a smack to his shoulder but all he did was grin.

Why did I say yes? Even as I asked myself the question, I couldn’t look away from the pure delight and relief on his face.

I knew why I’d said yes.

Because I was Frankie.

I was his bud.

“When do you want to start?” Like I didn’t already know the answer.

“How about tonight? We can swim, finish eating—do you have any other homework? I can help or you know, hang out then I can pull the guitar out and see what we can figure out?”

Yep.

I should have known.

“Okay,” I said, turning to swim toward the side. He gave me a squeeze before finally letting me go. “I gotta let my mom know I’m going to be late.”

“Yes!” Bubba fist pumped before he splashed backwards in the pool.

Dork fit him, too.

Big. Sweet. Adorable. Dork.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PERMISSIONS

Wednesday and Thursday flew by thanks to established routines. Every morning, I drove Coop to school. I sat next to Archie in AP Government and Economics. I sat next to Bubba in AP Calculus. I spent AP French exchanging smiles with Mathieu and we shared two more conversations as he walked me halfway to AP Lit each day. Coop still sat next to me in AP Lit, but his relaxed manner seemed to be absent, much as he was himself at lunch on both Wednesday and Thursday.

An absence that didn't go unnoticed by the others. Archie, in particular, seemed annoyed, maybe even more than necessary. Not that they asked me, other than was he coming? In truth, I was pretty sure he was off having lunch with Laura but after Tuesday, I hadn't seen him returning with her or her for that matter.

No, I didn't look. Wasn't even *tempted*. Well, not really anyway.

Study hall and my TA period gave me plenty of time to get most of my own homework done—which was good, because as I'd figured, they started laying it on thick Wednesday. Bubba scored an A on the pop quiz, even though it was ungraded. He'd also given me a thumbs up after he turned it in. We ate on campus Wednesday and off campus on Thursday, mostly because Archie had zero interest in the food and managed to intercept me before I got to the food court.

Likely another reason he was annoyed with Coop. I got the feeling Coop was supposed to corral me for lunch and he

hadn't since Monday. Maybe I should thank him? Though I doubted his reasons were altruistic. Lunch on Thursday was oversized subs and big, fat bags of salt and vinegar chips. We took Jake's SUV, only this time it was Archie and me in the back and I wasn't squished in the middle. On the way back to school, Jake booted Bubba to the back and I got to ride shotgun.

Last class of the day, AP European History, proved to be more enjoyable each day that passed. We made a habit of watching the history buff channel, focusing on European history wherever we could. I'd also started making flash cards using dates while Jake elected to make the flash cards using names. We tried to stump each other—oh, and he finished the dummies guide and we were both of the opinion that author rocked. It also gave us great context clues to use.

After school, Coop didn't need a ride on Wednesday, so I drove home, changed, fed the cats and headed in to work. I hadn't actually seen Mom since Monday morning, a fact that didn't dawn on me until I was heading to work. The chicken I'd gotten out for Tuesday's dinner hadn't been cooked—I'd put it in the fridge, but if I didn't cook it after work on Wednesday, it would go bad. Hopefully Mom came home and did that.

I kind of wondered if she'd come home at all when I'd filled the water reservoir for the cats and changed out the litter box. My bet was no, so I skipped looking. I took all the trash out with me and threw it in the dumpster before I headed off to work.

Archie showed up at Mason's fifteen minutes after my shift started. He parked at the soda counter and did his homework in and around chatting at me. Jake showed up with Bubba in tow ninety minutes later. They were freshly showered and still hot from football practice. I brought them their Big and Thicks, along with a smirk, when requested.

Thursday shifted things, though. The guys all still showed up—sans Coop—and Archie was in a terrible mood. His phone was right in front of him, and when I carried an order

out to one of the window tables, I saw Coop's name on the screen and a single message: *I said I'd take care of it.*

The fierce scowl on Archie's face when he saw the message made me give him a fairly wide berth the rest of the night. Archie didn't have Coop's zen or even Jake's bluntness, but he did have a kind of manic energy that scooped you up and tugged you along. So, when he got mad, it pretty much spilled over to the people around him. Except for Bubba. Bubba could usually cajole him out of the mood. In a pinch, I could—or at least, I could give him someone to vent to and I'd listen. I could count on the fingers of one hand the few times I'd truly had to pull him aside to do that.

As much as I liked Archie, I didn't like his temper and I didn't like where it came from—correction, where I thought it came from. Remember, he called his parents by their first names. Him and his father? They made Mom and me look warm and fuzzy.

That was bad enough, but Mathieu showed up while all three guys were still there.

I didn't want to ignore him, but I sure as hell didn't want to draw their attention to him. He came in with a girl I vaguely recognized as a sophomore and a couple of adults—maybe his host family? When I dropped by their table, I kept it as friendly as I did any customers, including offering recommendations.

Mathieu seemed surprised to find out I worked there, then he introduced me to his—yep, I called it—host family. Sophomore girl's name was Bethany and she was also new to the school. Excellent. Maybe she hadn't gotten the memo. That would be awesome.

“I would love to stay and chat,” I said after I had their order. “But it's a little busy tonight.”

“Go,” Mathieu told me with a grin. “Maybe another time.”

“That sounds great.”

Scooting to the back, I dropped their orders, then went to make their shakes. My feet were ready to fall off, but I still

had another thirty minutes to go. Thankfully, I got off an hour before closing tonight.

And the customers kept coming. We had full tables and most of the counter. Archie and company had set up camp, which I didn't mind mostly because they were easy to take care of. Zabra, the other waitress, had her half of the store and I had the other half. We juggled well between the two of us. Fortunately, most of the customers knew Mason's and came here for the Big and Thicks. They didn't mind waiting.

Marsha, our manager, came out from the back to start handling take out orders and get us caught up. She ended up serving Mathieu's table. I felt a sliver of guilt for that because I really did want to go back and see him, but between Archie's sour mood and the fact all three of them—never mind all four were there, apparently Coop showed up—it was better to keep my distance.

We still had a date on Sunday, and I promised myself I'd text Mathieu right after work.

“Coop doesn't want anything,” Archie said when I stopped to check on them before I could even ask. If I wasn't imagining things, there was a warning in his voice. Bubba let out a sigh and gave me a quick headshake.

Okay, he was right. I wanted no part of this disagreement.

“Actually,” Coop said, catching my arm before I could hustle off. “When do you get off?”

I glanced at the clock. “Fifteen minutes, if it slows down.” I wouldn't leave Marsha and Zabra in a lurch.

“Mind if I hitch a ride home?”

“I'll drive you home,” Archie said. “It'll give us time to talk.”

“Frankie and I are going in the same direction...”

“Not hardly,” Jake muttered, then shook his head and waved me off. “Go on, Frankie, we'll figure this out. I know you're busy and some assholes can just be patient.”

Coop glared at him.

Yep. I did *not* want a piece of that.

“Let me know,” I said with a fast smile and hauled ass. Thirty-five minutes later, twenty minutes after my shift I clocked out. I had three tables left but they’d park my tips and I could get those on Saturday—if there were any. Thursdays weren’t usually so busy, maybe it was a full moon. Part of the reason I liked having Fridays off. The others liked the extra money they got on Friday nights, and I didn’t like the headaches.

I made pretty good money on Saturdays and Sundays to make up for it.

The guys were out front arguing when I made it to the parking lot. Well, it looked like arguing. I’d counted out my tips in the back and turned the small bills into larger ones so I could fit them in my wallet. Seventy for a Thursday was pretty frigging great. No arguments here.

But now, feet sore and head aching, I really didn’t want to deal with the guys as Archie glared at Coop and the two argued back in forth in tones that carried but with words that didn’t. Instead of participating, Jake leaned against his own SUV arms folded while Bubba stood a foot away from the guys as if ready to wade in and separate them.

And fine, they could do whatever they wanted, but they’d parked right next to *my* car. So... I sucked it up and put two fingers to my lips and let out a shrill whistle as I approached.

That shut them up.

“Fuck,” Archie swore and shook his head. “You could cut glass with the tone you can hit.”

“Thanks,” I said, all smiles. “I’m done and going home. Is Coop riding with me or have you not given him his note yet?”

For his part, Coop’s smirk turned sour and he flipped me off. No Coop, I wasn’t on your side at the moment, I just wanted to go home.

“If you want to take him,” Archie said, almost reluctantly. “But you don’t have to.”

“No kidding,” I retorted, and Archie frowned.

“Wait,” he said glancing at me. “Why are you mad at me?”

“I don’t know,” I said considering them each in turn. Jake straightened abruptly with a frown. “Did you guys not give *me* permission to have an opinion?”

“Nope,” Bubba said abruptly, slinging an arm around my shoulder. “They didn’t, and they wouldn’t because that would be stupid. Ignore them, Frankie, they’re all cranky tonight.”

“Uh huh.” But the quiet request in Bubba’s eyes shut me up. Whatever it was they’d been arguing about, he wanted it over. *Fine*. I gave him a sideways hug and he smiled.

“Fine, I’m tired, so I’m going. Good night, boys. Coop, you want to go with me, get in the car or I’m leaving you.”

He was already circling the car when I hit unlock.

“Frankie,” Archie said. “I didn’t mean anything...”

“You never do. I’ll talk to you guys tomorrow, okay? Everyone go get some sleep. Especially you two—you have a game tomorrow.”

As much as they didn’t deserve it, I kind of wanted to cheer Archie up now. He’d had a crappy evening, and Jake looked from me to Bubba and back again twice. Finally, he gave me a small smile and tugged my ponytail lightly. “Night, Frankie.”

“Night, Frankie,” Archie echoed him.

Bubba winked. “Night, Frankie.”

God, we were like some twenty-first century Waltons. “Good night, John Boy.”

I was in the car with the engine started with Jake went, “Who the hell is John Boy?”

I don’t know why, maybe because I was tired, but that made me laugh. Coop was quiet as I backed out of the spot, and he didn’t say a word until after I’d pulled out onto the street and the lights of Mason’s faded behind us.

“You aren’t going to ask?” he said into the quiet dark of the car.

“Do you want to tell me?” I shot a look at him, but he was staring out the passenger window.

“Not really,” he admitted.

“Then I won’t ask.”

“Just like that?” Coop frowned and glanced at me, but I had to keep my attention on the road.

“Just like that,” I confirmed.

He lasted two blocks. “I’d ask you.”

“So, you do want me to ask?”

“No,” he said, then sighed and banged his head back against the seat. “I want a do over.”

“Well, sorry, time-turner is broken. We got what we got.” Then because it was Coop and he was usually better at not letting things rattle him, I said, “Show up at lunch tomorrow and Archie will get over it. You’re blowing the guys off for a girl and they don’t deal with that well.”

“Is that what you think I’ve been doing?”

It was what I knew he’d been doing, but all I said was, “That’s what they think, and that’s what matters, right?”

He didn’t say another word until I’d parked at the apartments. “I’ll walk you to your door.”

“It’s right...”

“I’m walking you to your door. Let’s go.” The snap in his voice was as annoyed as Archie earlier.

Ugh, sometimes...

Mom’s car wasn’t in the carport.

Coop paused as I got the door unlocked. Then he glanced inside the darkened apartment. “Mom out again?”

“Yep,” I told him. “Probably be home in an hour. See you in the morning?”

He nodded. “Thanks for the ride, Frankie.”

“Anytime.”

I closed the door and leaned against it tiredly, and then locked it before grabbing a glass of water. When I checked on the cats, they were all obnoxious in letting me know they’d been home alone all evening. The chicken was still in the fridge. I usually ate at work the nights I did because I got a free meal when I had a shift.

It was Thursday.

Closing the door, I shook my head. I’d throw it in the dumpster in the morning. After I showered and got in pajamas, I checked my phone.

Messages from Archie about Friday, a couple from Bubba with song suggestions, one from Jake asking if I was okay.

None from my mom.

None from Coop.

Throwing myself on the bed, I told Archie we were still on, but I had to feed the cats before we grabbed dinner. He said he’d pick me up at the apartment so I could leave my car here. That was cool.

I told Bubba I’d listen to the songs and get back to him. I queued one up to play and then texted Jake that I was just tired. Then I sent a message to Mathieu apologizing I couldn’t really hang out, but it was great to see him.

Jake: *You sure? You seemed pretty pissed at us tonight.*

I sighed. *Not pissed. Just tired. Archie bad mood. You guys fighting with Coop. I work there.*

There was a long pause, and I concentrated on the song. The first one was kind of sad. The second one was melancholy but had more chord changes—it sounded more complicated. To Bubba I wrote, *Close but either make them sob or make them feel real good. You don’t want that middling feeling at all.*

Bubba: *Good point. Thanks, Frankie. You’re the best.*

I smiled.

Jake: *You're right. We were asses. I'll take care of it. Night, Frankie.*

I blinked for a moment, then wrote *Thx Jake. Cu2mrw.*

I was half-asleep when I remembered I still had some reading left to for Government in the morning, I hadn't quite finished it in study hall. With a groan, I dragged the book out and cracked it open.

My phone buzzed.

Mathieu: *I enjoyed seeing you tonight as well. I am looking forward to cooking with you this weekend.*

I grinned. So was I.

Buoyed, I looked back at the work.

Ten pages.

I could handle it.

Definitely.



FRIDAY STARTED OFF EXHAUSTING. I HAD A FLAT TIRE. NOT A little flat, but deader than a doornail flat. Coop waited at my car, shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal tanned arms and sunglasses in place to keep the glare out of his eyes. "Your spare have air in it?" he asked by way of good morning.

It better have air in it. I unlocked the car and tossed my backpack inside before popping the trunk. He pulled out the jack and went to work loosening the lugnuts before getting the car up while I pulled out the donut.

It wasn't the best tire in the world, but it would do. Maybe if I swung by the discount tire place on lunch? Careful not to smear my pale blue t-shirt, I rolled it over. Between us, we got the tire off and the donut on. Coop put the flat tire into the trunk after he'd stored the jack.

We both stared at the donut for a minute.

“That’s a piece of crap,” he said, almost conversationally but took the wet wipe I offered him to clean his hands.

“Yeah, I’m not a fan,” I admitted. “But I’ll go over to the place at lunch. All it has to do is get us there.”

He gave me a skeptical look. “I’ll go with you if you want.”

“I can handle it,” I said, waving him off. “You should eat with the guys. You and Archie need to make peace.”

He answered my comment with a quiet snort. “Archie will get over it. Besides, I’d rather have lunch with you.” My skepticism must have shown because he spread his hands. “What? I’m not allowed to want to eat with you?”

“Do you want the counter argument alphabetically or numerically?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it and finally went quiet until we got to school. We were later than normal and my phone, which had started buzzing while we were changing the tire, continued to buzz as I hunted for a spot. My favorite one had already been claimed. I snoozed, I lost.

Dammit.

The corner wasn’t the best spot, but I would get a chance for a new space at lunch.

“You know, I get it. I was busy this week,” Coop said as we took the long walk toward the building. I’d fished out my phone and found messages from Archie, Jake, Bubba and... Cheryl. Huh. I hadn’t heard from her via text in a while.

Long enough, I kind of forgot I had her number.

The message wasn’t a message but a picture.

It was from Bubba’s birthday, all of the guys with their various girlfriends and a message that said, *Fair warning, homecoming info goes live next week, and these girls are ticked that they haven’t been asked yet.*

“What the hell is that?” Coop said, leaning over my shoulder. I had to pull my phone away before he could take it

and I closed the message. “Why is she sending you that?”

“A picture from the party?” I shrugged. “No idea.” Yes, that was a lie. Cheryl was a pretty decent sort. Rachel had been kind of bitchy—more harsh than bitchy— about it, but Sharon, Patty, and Maria were a lot bitchier. If they hadn’t been asked out, they were probably going to start making noise in the guys’ direction. The warning could have been for them or for me.

Sharon hated me. While the feeling wasn’t mutual; I wouldn’t be in a hurry to cross the street to put her out if she was on fire. Maria wasn’t much better. We had been friends PJ—pre-Jake. AJ—after Jake—she turned into someone I didn’t know. Which made no sense. I got it, the guys were cute, and they were my friends, but Sharon and Maria were supposed to have been my friends, too.

Oddly enough, Rachel and I had been balanced on a knife’s edge of love/hate for years, so we got along exactly the same. Where the doors had once been open to me, wandering from group to group, they’d begun to close. I didn’t know why and, sometimes, I wasn’t sure I cared.

We were down to 176 school days left to getting out of this joint and I had enough on my plate.

“Yeah, but why send it to you?” Coop frowned at me.

Okay. I paused and faced him. “Don’t play dumb.”

He blinked.

“I mean it. Don’t play dumb. It’s insulting to both of us. The picture wasn’t a news flash. I actually showed up at that party—remember?”

At his slow nod, I switched the Instagram app and opened it. First picture on the list, and I didn’t have to look, was Coop with Laura. I didn’t know where it was taken, and I didn’t much care about the tags. I didn’t follow Laura on IG, I followed Coop.

At the image, Coop compressed his lips then looked up at me. I tabbed to the next one, it was Archie looking pretty

sharp as he walked in with a stack of coffees and Patty had tagged him. She'd even added #boyfriendMaterial.

There were more, and the guys were always there. All of them, tagged by other people. Oh, I got tagged, too. Usually in a group photo with the guys and always #TheBoys. Again. It was fine. At least I showed up in pictures now. In the past, I'd always been a faint presence in the background, but I excelled at not standing out. Preferred it.

Coop sighed. "For what it's worth, that's an old picture."

"For what it's worth, I don't care—except that you seem to want to lie to me about it for some reason. Coop, date Laura, don't date her. But don't date her and then pretend you aren't. That's...rude as fuck." The harsh language dragged his attention up. I cursed. When appropriate. Working at Mason's, I'd had to school myself to watch my language. "Don't treat her shitty or like a thing." That would make me lose respect for him faster than anything.

"I don't even know if I want to date her."

My phone buzzed and Archie's text showed up in all caps.

WHERE THE HELL R U 2?"

He always seemed to lose words when he got mad.

Had flat tire. Just got here. Be in cafe in a sec.

Meeting Coop's gaze, I said, "Then you should figure that out. Leading her on? That's as crappy as lying to your friends."

"We are still friends, right?" The intensity in his eyes pinned me in place. "After whatever this summer was? We're still friends?"

"Yes, Coop," I said with a sigh. "We are. I may not always like the things you guys choose to do, but...we've been friends for years. I'm still your friend. I'd like to think you guys are still mine, and it's not just about telling me what to do."

He frowned. "When do we tell you what to do?"

My phone buzzed and so did his.

Shut up and get in here. The message was from Jake to him, and on my phone, Bubba had texted *Need us to come get you?*

Coop made a face. “What a bunch of pushy bastards.”

I laughed. “I seem to recall someone *dragging* me to the cafeteria and lunch on Monday.”

With a shrug, Coop said, “Didn’t say I wasn’t one...” On the way to the cafeteria though, he said, “I really don’t know about Laura.”

“Then figure it out,” I told him. Not that I had much in the way of advice to offer him.

Our coffee and friends were waiting for us. Thankfully, since Archie brought me an iced coffee, mine was supposed to be cold. The conversation remained stilted; whatever beef really was between the guys they were talking around it. Archie frowned about the tire, though.

“I can follow you at lunch in case you have to leave your car there.”

“I am not leaving my car there,” I argued. “And I have study hall in fifth, so I can miss it if I have to, but I need the car this weekend.”

I also needed the money I’d already made this week, but I’d figure it out.

“I don’t mind,” Archie repeated on our way to government. “Could use a break from around here to be honest.”

“You okay?” It wasn’t the norm for Archie to admit to needing anything. Not—real. He was fun, he teased, he played, and he could be extravagant, but the words *I need help* or *I need* rarely crossed his lips. Like it was a crime or something or maybe Archie just hadn’t ever had to ask for what he needed.

Not that I was one to talk.

“I’m fine. Coop’s pissing me off. Jake and Bubba are really focused on the game tonight,” Archie admitted.

“Edward and Muriel are getting ready to go out of town and you know what that’s like.”

I made a face. His parents traveled—a lot. They seemed like nice enough people, and they certainly spared no expense with Archie, but they were never around. I hadn’t seen Mom since Monday morning, and I wasn’t altogether sure she’d been home. She had to have been, but I’d also been busy and working so maybe we just missed each other.

So I got it, sort of.

“Okay, how about this,” I said compromising a step away from the classroom door. “Think you can grab some tacos and then meet me there? My treat?”

“I can grab them, but you don’t have to pay for them.”

“If I don’t pay for them,” I countered, “I don’t eat them.”

He glared and I smiled.

Yes, Archie was generous. Sometimes too generous, but I didn’t want him to ever think he had to have money to be our friend or that he had to pay to be accepted. Besides, I’d forgotten to pack a lunch earlier and breakfast was the ice coffee I was still sipping. If I didn’t get something at lunchtime, I might actually turn into a hangry bear and that would suck for the afternoon.

“So, what do you say?”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “You shouldn’t have to pay.”

I rubbed his arm. “I don’t have to. You would, I know that, but I like things to be a little more even.”

With a grunt, he bumped my shoulder and then we settled at our desks prepared to be dazzled by the formation of the federal government and why there were specific powers allocated to specific sections of it.

Yay.

As it turned out, the teacher had a quiz for us, so color me lucky for having actually remembered the reading the night before. After, he discussed the projects we would be doing this

semester, including examining judicial cases considered controversial, and how each of the three branches of the government played a crucial role. Archie mimed snoring, but I didn't mind. Sometimes these things went places we didn't know which was the reason we studied them.

Calculus turned into a free study period since we had a substitute, so Bubba and I spent the hour making lists of songs for him to consider. While I'd never auditioned for a thing in my life, I knew what made people talk. How many singing and talent shows were on television? I pointed that out when I pulled up YouTube on my phone and scrolled the various clips. The ones with the most hits had some kind of emotional resonance—either really sad or really uplifting or just powerful and empowering.

That gave me a few ideas, too, and I added those to his list—there was a guy who took songs and played them in minor keys, which could change something bouncy and uplifting into something haunting. That might actually be the way to go. When I sent him the channel via text, Bubba eyed me and then said he'd check it out after the game.

I didn't get as much time with Mathieu; he had to tutor a couple of the girls who were struggling with the French novel we had to read. I actually liked reading in French more than I cared to admit. Even when I didn't recognize a word, I could decipher it from context clues. The girls who needed tutoring however spent more time flirting than working. Not that I could blame them—he was sexy adorable. He did walk me to the stairs, though, and asked if he could bring anything on Sunday for the preparation, but I told him I'd pick everything up after work. Then I made sure he had my address.

It didn't occur to me to ask if he needed a ride, but he had my number. He could call. All through AP Lit, Coop drove me nuts. He couldn't stop fidgeting. He had his phone out, then up, then out again. I tried not to watch him, but it was hard to miss all the movement. A message on his screen appeared with Laura's name.

Focusing on the text and our assignment while not reading it took effort. My phone buzzed in my pocket, but I didn't dare

take it out, then it buzzed again. On the third one, I scowled and shifted as if I was getting something out of my backpack before retrieving my phone.

Ms. Fajardo was having a one on one with another student and they had gone out in the hall, but I'd still prefer to not get busted playing on my phone.

Coop: *What do I do?*

The message made no sense until I realized it was the third one. The first two were a copy of the message from Laura—*yes, Coop, I really wanted to read that.*

Apparently, she'd asked him out that night, and her next message said it was important.

I gave him a mystified look, then mouthed *What do you want to do?*

Coop: *Go to the game with you and Arch.*

I typed in: *Then tell her sorry I have plans, thanks for asking.*

Was it that hard?

The biting at his lip was so non-zen it irked me. What was this thing with Laura that it had him so upset? The idea irritated me, but it was swiftly followed by the thought that it was none of my damn business.

Sighing, I hid my phone under my book and went back to work.

After class, Coop hooked his arm through mine and followed me out to my car. "Look," I told him. "If you don't want to see her, then break up with her."

"But we're not actually dating." Coop argued.

"Coop?" I shoved my stuff in the backseat and Archie appeared right behind us in his orange Ferrari. "Have you spent the last week with Laura at lunch and after school?"

"Kind of."

I stared at him. "What does *kind of* mean?"

“I mean—she asked me to have lunch cause she wanted to talk on Tuesday, and she was kind of upset that I hadn’t called the last few weeks. She’s nice and...so after school I figured I’d make it up to her for being an ass. Then we ended up making out. It was an accident.”

“What’d you do?” Archie called. “Trip and fall on her mouth?”

I bit my tongue because that was some funny shit.

Coop glared at him. “No, I just—she’s nice.”

“So, date her.” Archie spread his arms. “See if we care.”

Yeah. No. “Then figure out what you want before you break that girl’s heart,” I warned Coop. “If she is nice then she doesn’t deserve to be jerked around. If you just want to score, and she’s a relationship girl, then walk away. Because that’s really not fair to her.”

“What she said,” Archie pointed to me. “We gotta go, Frankie. I want to make sure you get to the tire place before I go grab lunch.”

Coop glanced at the school then at us, and I raised my brows at Archie. Coop clearly wanted to tag along.

“Fine. Get in the damn car,” Archie said. “Let’s just go, but he buys his own tacos.”

“I can do that.” Coop hurried around to my passenger door, and I stared up at the sky.

Why did I like these idiots again?

CHAPTER EIGHT

GAME NIGHT

As promised, Archie followed Coop and me back to my apartment. He slotted his car into the parking space next to mine. “The tire looks good,” he said as I climbed out. I glanced at the rear tire on the driver’s side. It did look fine. “You sure they just patched it?”

“Said it was a nail,” I told him. I, for one, had been relieved. The guys there had gotten the nail out, patched it, and refilled the tire. Twenty-five bucks and four tacos later, I was out of there. “Don’t forget I owe you money,” I reminded Archie.

He snorted as he trailed after us toward the courtyard. He’d brought the tacos, but with Coop’s intercept, I hadn’t given Archie the cash, and the snot hadn’t reminded me.

Instead of diverting toward his apartment, Coop followed us. Archie cut a look at him and then me. “Did we invite him to dinner?”

“Be nice,” I said as I unlocked the door.

“The answer is no,” Coop told him. “She didn’t invite me and neither did you.”

“Just checking,” Archie responded with a hint of a smirk.

Tiddles waited just inside the door but cut off mid-yowl at Archie’s voice and then the cat was smoke as he vanished out of the kitchen and down the hall. “Don’t let the cats out,” I said as I juggled my backpack in and carried it through the kitchen toward the living room. The place was mostly neat, though I still needed to run the vacuum and probably should

dust, but it wasn't like Mom and I were using the living room at the moment.

I hadn't specifically checked, but her car hadn't been in the carport and her bedroom door was always closed. I had no intentions of checking it right now. "There's water in the fridge," I called. "And I think some sodas. Need to shop this weekend." That would excuse the scarcity inside it. Not that it was bad, but seriously, the last grocery shopping had been the Wednesday before school started, and I'd done it.

Thankfully, I'd tossed the bad chicken so that wasn't sitting in there to scream out, *look at me, I'm wasteful*. Tory stretched out from under the bed to rub against my legs as I toed off my shoes. Football game meant outside, which meant hot, so I wanted to change into fresh shorts and a lighter shirt. Fortunately, school dress code was a little lighter at football games than it was during the school day.

"Hey, Frankie," Archie knocked on the doorframe, and I pivoted, hands on the buttons to my shorts. His gaze dipped to my hands and he backed up a step with a wince. "Sorry."

"It's fine, what did you need?"

Coop popped up behind him. "We were debating dinner."

I glanced from one to the other. "And?"

"Archie said you two needed to study, but you'd swing back by here to get me for the game." The look in Coop's gray-green eyes said he didn't believe it. Archie on the other hand merely raised his eyebrows, almost a silent entreaty to agree with him.

We didn't *actually* have to study. We were both caught up on the reading, and we could quiz each other on terms, but somehow, I doubted that was what Archie meant. "Well, this started out as a study date," I reminded Coop. "You were there when we made plans on Monday."

Disappointment flickered through his eyes, and Archie's smile grew a tad smugger. "Okay," Coop said raising his hands. "I guess I'll see you guys in a couple of hours?"

“Yep,” Archie replied, giving me a wink before he followed Coop up the hall. Rolling my eyes, I shut my bedroom door the whole way and got changed. The deep blue halter top worked for school colors and I pulled out my favorite pair of denim shorts. They just barely cut off where my fingertips hit my thighs, so they’d pass visual inspection. Well worn and a little faded, they were super comfy and just thick enough to protect my ass from the hard metal bleachers.

Leaving my sneakers next to the bed, I dragged out a pair of sandals and slid those on before pulling my hair all the way up into a ponytail, then finished with a baseball hat.

Archie was messing with his phone in the kitchen when I came in to get the food out for the cats. “Your phone buzzed,” he said, waving to the living room. I glanced at my backpack. It was exactly where I’d left it and didn’t look like he’d opened it. Thankfully, I hadn’t left the phone out.

“Thanks.” The lure of wet food was enough for the cats to overcome their reticence toward strangers.

“In the mood for anything specific for dinner?” Archie asked.

I shrugged. “Not pizza? Or burgers.” I’d had the former a couple of times this week, and I served the latter all the time at work.

“Sushi? They do some good stuff at the hibachi place.” He glanced at his phone. “We have time. We could do hibachi, talk while he’s cooking, work up our plan and then eat.”

“Hibachi’s a lot of food.” Even if my stomach gurgled at the idea of some grilled steak and shrimp. Oh, why did I think of that? Now even my mouth watered at the idea.

“That’s what takeout containers are for. We can bring the leftovers back, since we have to come get Coop anyway.” He made a face at the last. “Could always just text him once we’re at the restaurant to find his own ride.”

“Don’t be mean,” I chastised. The cats had plenty of food and water. Their litter box would be fine until morning. I opened my backpack to pull out the spiral-bound notebook I

used for government, and the folders with our vocab for both classes.

“Not being mean. He knew you and I had plans. Not my fault he’s been an idiot all week.”

“Maybe not,” I said, tucking those under my arm before retrieving my wallet. I fished out one of the twenties Mom left me, and then stowed the wallet in my back pocket before I grabbed my phone. When I offered the twenty to Archie, he shook his head and held up his hands.

“Nope. And can’t make me do it.”

Sighing, I closed the distance and backed him right up to the table then stuffed the twenty in his back pocket. He grinned.

“You know some people have to dance for that much money.”

“Sure thing, Magic Mike, but you brought me tacos.” I patted his cheek and retreated ignoring the way he grinned a little wider. There were messages on my phone.

JAKE: *NORMALLY WE HIT MASON’S AFTER GAME, BUT WHAT IF we went somewhere else?*

Jake: *Maybe Emilio’s?*

I LAUGHED AND ARCHIE LEANED OVER MY SHOULDER TO STARE at the message.

“Good thing you said no pizza,” he murmured. In the cool air-conditioned kitchen, he was warm. I was dressed for outside, not in.

“Right?” I said with a glance. He was really close though and my nose brushed his cheek. He gave me a little bump and backed off a step.

“You ready?”

“Yeah, let me just answer Jake—and Bubba.” There was a message from my mom, too.

Hey look, she remembered I was alive. Go me.

BUBBA: *WE COULD DO PAPA PETE’S IF YOU DON’T WANT Emilio’s.*

IT WAS STILL PIZZA.

I SENT BACK *EITHER IS FINE.*

“No it’s not,” Archie argued. “Emilio’s is a lot better.”

Then added, *But Archie whined that Emilio’s is better.*

“Hey,” he said with a mock scowl. “I did not whine.”

“Then stop reading over my shoulder.” The fact he kept closing the distance was giving me goosebumps. Or maybe it was just the air. “And it’s freezing in here.” Not that I planned to turn the a/c up. It was just being in the halter and shorter shorts.

“C’mon, Frankie,” Archie snagged my folders from where I tucked them and wrapped an arm around my bare shoulders. “I’ll keep you warm.”

“Get off,” I said with a gentle elbow he avoided like a pro. I grabbed my keys and checked Mom’s message after I shoed Archie out the door.

MOM: *LONG WEEK. REALLY LONG WEEK. NOT GOING TO MAKE IT in before you go to bed, probably out before you get up, too. Sorry, baby. Hope the first week was great. See you Saturday after work?*

Except I had plans Saturday after work and, to be honest, I didn’t think Mom was coming home, but I couldn’t really call her on that because maybe she was.

Going out with the guys Saturday to do escape room thing. Left you a note about it.

Mom: *Oh, that's right. Okay. Well, I'll see you soon. I'm going to the grocery store on Sunday, leave a list on the fridge of what you need.*

I stared at the message for a beat. Archie had descended three of the stone steps but paused to look at me. "You okay?"

I frowned. No. I really wasn't. I hadn't left Mom a note. We made the plans for the escape room on Monday after school, I'd meant to tell her about it, but I hadn't really seen her and...

She just lied to me. Granted, I lied first about the note.

Or maybe she was distracted. I had been.

"Frankie?"

"Yeah," I said, shaking it off. "Fine, sorry, just sorting something out with Mom."

The look on his face said he didn't believe me, but he waited for me to send her another message.

Will do. We're out of pretty much everything.

But she didn't respond. There weren't even dots suggesting she was writing anything. Well, whoever he was, I hoped he treated her right. She was that distracted; it had to be a guy.

A message popped up from Mathieu, and I cleared it before Archie could see it as he came back up to hook my arm with his. "Okay, new rule for Friday nights," he told me as he gave me a gentle tug and got us moving toward the car. "No parent talk."

I laughed. "None at all?"

"Well, if you want to talk about her, sure. I'll listen. Edward and Muriel have given me vast experience in the realm of distance where parents and kids are concerned." At his Ferrari, he unlocked the car and opened the passenger door

for me as he slid his sunglasses back into place. “But definitely not a requirement.”

“You know...I don’t even know if I want to talk about her.”

“I get that.” Though the sunglasses hid his warm, brown eyes, I didn’t have to see them to know they held a knowing kind of sympathy. “So, don’t have to. I’d much rather talk about something a lot more interesting.”

“Such as?” I slid into his car and accepted my folders and notebook.

Before closing the door, he grinned and said, “You and me, of course. We’re vastly more interesting.” The butter soft leather of the seats was warm against my legs, but thankfully not hot and the interior of the car smelled like leather, too.

I stole a quick look at my phone, but I didn’t dare open the message from Mathieu just yet. Not when Archie would just lean over to take a look. He and the other guys were the reasons I hadn’t had a date in three years. They had apparently taken it upon themselves to make sure guys who looked at me twice didn’t look again. The fact Jake beat one up hadn’t been lost on me. No, I was keeping Mathieu to myself. I’d find time at the hibachi place. “You do know that it’s vaguely narcissistic to talk about ourselves.”

“And gossipy to talk about everyone else,” Archie countered as he started the car. The a/c blew cool air almost immediately, but it was warmer in the car and the chills from earlier went away. He backed out of the spot smoothly. As we pulled away, I thought I caught sight of Coop leaning against the wall of the other apartment building, but the angle and shade didn’t give me a good look. “That said,” Archie continued. “Feel free to tell me all about Bubba, Jake, and Coop.”

I snorted.

“You spend more time with them than I do.”

“Not true. Coop rides with you every day and he’s barely shown up at lunch this week.”

“He came today,” I reminded him. “You know how it goes.” Was I defending Coop?

“I know how *he* goes,” Archie said, his gaze on the cross traffic as he waited to pull out of the apartments. “I know he’s been blowing us off for his accidental girlfriend.”

“You know, if you’re jealous,” I murmured. “You could call Patty. I heard a rumor homecoming tickets go on sale next week.” It seemed earlier and earlier every year, not that I cared. This time next year, I’d be at college. Sure, the sports culture would be there, but the year wouldn’t be demarcated by dances and social events.

Or at least I hoped like hell it wasn’t.

“No,” Archie retorted in a voice that was a cross between a snap and laugh.

“You like Patty,” I pointed out. “You two were all over each other last year.”

“Correction,” Archie said, then paused as he accelerated smoothly and shifted gears. The Ferrari had a sweet purr to her when she got going. Not that he could really open her up around here, but I kind of wished we could. “We were all over each other for exactly six days during which I discovered that intelligence and conversation mitigate sex appeal.”

I frowned. “What the hell does that mean?”

“She’s stunning and relatively smart, but the girl and I have zero interests in common. I’d rather go to the dentist than go out with her again.”

“Wow.” That was harsh. I shifted sideways to stare at him. “Archie...”

“What? I didn’t say that to her face. I’m honest, but I try not to be an asshole.”

I almost didn’t want to ask. “What *did* you say to her?”

“Just... I had fun, but we weren’t clicking and thanks.”

And... thanks. I opened my mouth, then closed my mouth and then bit my tongue. He’d thanked her. They were all over

each other, practically climbing into each other's clothes, and he signed out of the relationship with a thanks.

"You know, it's really not my business." I folded my arms and focused on the road in front of us, but we were at a stoplight.

"Frankie," he said, his tone sobering. "I didn't have sex with her and then blow her off."

That was not even where my mind went. Well, it did, but... "I didn't say you did, but you were definitely copping feels, and you were definitely under the shirt."

"Yeah, and so was she," he admitted without an ounce of shame or remorse. "Kind of happens when you date. Feels good."

Not that I would know. I pursed my lips.

"Don't do that," he said with a sigh. "Please?"

"I'm not doing anything."

The Ferrari leapt forward with a bit of a roar as the light changed.

"You're judging me. I get enough of that from my parents." He sighed. "You've never judged me."

"Too be fair," I said, my own conscience kicking in. "I'm not judging you precisely. I'm just trying to understand."

"Understand what?"

"You and the guys, you all date, go a little crazy—then it's done, and you act like it's nothing. And the girls..." I sucked on my lower lip. He said they dated for six days? Yet she'd been at Bubba's party *with* Archie, right?

"And the girls?"

"The girls act like it was something. They get hung up on you—on all of you. Look at Coop."

"Coop and the tripping and the falling on her lips? Yeah, I'll pass on looking at that one. I don't kiss girls by accident."

When I kiss someone, it's because I wanted to, and she knows she's been kissed."

Yeah, I bet she does. Archie could be a lot of fun; I imagined when he poured all that charm on someone, it would be amazing. "But that's my point, Archie. You kissed Patty, and I'm pretty sure you meant it at the time."

He was driving farther than I expected, but he wasn't speeding, so I didn't ask. "I did mean it at the time, and then I didn't. I didn't want to kiss her anymore. I didn't want to hang out. I didn't want to talk to her eighty-nine times a day on the phone or text with her all the time. We weren't really dating. We went out a couple of times, made out a couple of times..."

"Did you get her off?" I had no idea why I was asking this. Morbid curiosity?

"Well, it would have been rude if I didn't," he admitted. "Especially after she..." Suddenly, we swung into a parking lot, and he slotted the Ferrari neatly into a parking space. With it in park, he leaned his head back. "Yes, Frankie, I got her off. She got really enthusiastic and... it was a handjob more than a blowjob. It would have been rude to not at least return the favor, and I try not to be a user." He wasn't looking at me, he was staring at the building. "And, because I can practically hear you wondering, I gave it a couple of days after that. The more she texted me, the more I dreaded it, so I broke up with her."

"It was after Bubba's birthday party." That wasn't a question.

"Yeah," he said quietly then sighed. "So I'm the asshole who didn't have sex with her."

Unbuckling my seatbelt, I turned to sit sideways. "Archie you're not an asshole. If anyone in this car is one, I am."

He frowned and stared at me. "You're not..."

"I am... I didn't even know you'd had your tonsils out. I totally missed that. I wasn't there for you at the hospital, and I didn't see you after."

“It’s okay,” he said, the confusion in his expression clearing. Tugging his sunglasses off, he stared at me. “You were busy this summer. It happens.”

“I shouldn’t be too busy for my friends. Even my irritating ones who drive fancy cars—and me—nuts.”

“I drive you nuts?” He grinned, seeming delighted by the idea.

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “But I am sorry I wasn’t there, and I wasn’t...okay maybe I was judging about Patty a little. But the four of you have gone through a lot of girls the last couple of years. Some of them were my friends.”

“Were.” It wasn’t a question.

I nodded.

“If they aren’t still your friends, they weren’t in the first place,” he pointed out. “I get it. We’re a bunch of possessive bastards, and we’re not giving you up for some girl.”

I laughed. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Well,” he said, giving me a long look. “Maybe it’s what I meant.” He turned the engine off before climbing out. He circled the car, but I already had my door open. He blocked the door for a sec, studying me. “If one of our exes is giving you a hard time, you need to tell us.”

“I didn’t say anyone was giving me a hard time.”

“No, you didn’t,” he agreed with me, backing up a step so I could get out of the car. I slid my phone into the other back pocket before I followed him toward the door. “But I mean it. If someone is giving you a hard time because of us, you need to tell us. We’ll take care of it.”

“Yeah okay, Big Archie. I think I can take care of myself.”

“Agreed,” he told me with a broad grin. “But you don’t have to because you have us and we’ve got your back. No one is going to mess with you and, if they try, they’ll learn very quickly we don’t let that happen.”

Inside, the dark ambience took a second to adjust to even if I'd had sunglasses on. "You do realize that sounds kind of menacing," I warned him in a low voice.

"Good," he grunted, catching my hand as the hostess greeted us. "Two for one of the hibachi tables, and we'd like a private one." He handed her a credit card and I sighed as she led us through the restaurant and around the various half walls to a hibachi table that could seat nine. She disappeared with his credit card as a waitress came by to offer us drinks and then gave us time to peruse the menu.

"Why do you do that?" I glanced down at the menu, but most of my attention was on Archie.

"Pay for privacy?" He shrugged. "Because I can. Because I have to share you all week long, if I'm lucky to hang out with you at all. And because you deserve to have someone look after you for a change. I managed to talk you into a Friday date, so I want to make the most of it. Is that okay with you?"

And that was what I meant about his charm. "Would it matter if it wasn't?"

He took a long breath, then said, "Yes. I can tell her to seat us with others." When he brushed his hand over mine, an awkward feeling slid through me. This felt more like a real *date* date than just a study date. "But it might make it awkward if we start grilling each other on vocab terms, too."

Reality check served.

I shook my head. "It's fine. Besides, we have to eat soon or we're going to end up at the game starved."

"Tell you a secret," Archie said after squeezing my hand then flipping open his own menu. "The guys won't know if we're there or not. As long as we know the score at the end of the game, we can be as late as we want."

Except—I would know I wasn't there, and I didn't want to lie to them. "Coop would know," I pointed out.

Archie made a face. "Yeah, yeah. Next week, Coop gets his own ride, and you and I get a proper dinner we don't have to rush."

I hadn't agreed to next week. Not yet. "We'll see," I said noncommittally.

"About what?" he asked.

"Maybe I'll have a date, and I can find out if his interesting factor matches his hotness factor."

He frowned and opened his mouth but the waitress and then our chef arrived. After we placed our orders, he kept giving me the side-eye, but our chef was funny and entertaining. I'd seen the volcano trick with onions a dozen times, didn't make it any less fun. And the guy could flip shrimp tails right into his hat, not one miss. The spinning eggs were also a fun act.

Eventually, he'd done the fried rice and veggies, steak and shrimp for me, steak and scallops for Archie and our show was over leaving us with our food and our drinks.

"Who exactly are you dating?" Archie asked, pinning me with a look.

"Does it matter?" Yes, I'd tweaked him.

"Yes, it does. You don't date."

"I never said I didn't date."

"I didn't say you said you didn't date, I said *you* don't date. I've known you since week one of freshman year, Frankie. You don't date guys and you don't date girls. You barely notice when someone's flirting with you. Who the hell are you dating?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Archie didn't stop staring at me, so I had to say something. I went for the truth. "I'm not."

"You're not?" He focused on me, studying my eyes like they might tell him something else.

"No. I said maybe—you know, like Coop." Then I smirked. "Maybe I'll trip and fall on someone's lips."

His answering scowl was not what I was going for at all. He went silent as we both took a couple of bites and when the

silence dragged out, I sighed.

“Archie...”

“It’s fine,” he said, waving me off. “You were teasing me, I get it.”

I was and I wasn’t, but...

“Look, maybe we should go over some of this, so you’ll see the value in doing it regularly.” He tapped the folders and gave me a quick smile. “Don’t want you to think you could be out tripping somewhere instead of with me.”

Yeah. Maybe I should let the whole dating issue go. Yet, there was a message waiting on my phone from a guy I was kind of excited about getting to know. Based on Archie’s reaction, I really needed to make sure they *didn’t* know about it.

“Okay,” I said, playing along. “You wanna go first or me?”

CHAPTER NINE

ESCAPE ROOM

On Saturday night, Coop already sat on the steps to my apartment when I got home from work. I smelled like a combination of too many burgers, sweat, and some chocolate syrup I'd spilled earlier. The first Saturday following the first full week of school and Mason's had been full all afternoon. Awesome tips, but brutal on the rest of me.

Coop waved. "Your mom was heading out when I got here."

Hey, someone had seen my mom. Good to know I didn't need to file a missing person's report.

"Yeah?" I kept it noncommittal. "Cool. I need a shower." The guys would be there in thirty minutes. "So you can come in, but you gotta wait."

"No prob." He followed me inside, leaning forward to sniff my hair when I dropped my keys on the counter. "Why do you smell like a cheeseburger?"

"Ugh." I pushed his face away with a light shove. "Because that's all I served today. I think I've got grease in my pores." If I never ate a burger again it would be too soon.

"Maybe Mason's should offer a new special," Coop teased, opening the fridge and pulling out one of the last two cokes in there. He popped the top as he followed me back toward the bedroom. All the cats scattered as I dropped to sit on the bed and pulled off my shoes.

Flopping behind me, Coop sprawled on his side. "Think about it, you could do a juicy chicken sandwich or something

then it would be Chick and Thick.”

I groaned.

“I think I’m on to something. Or maybe you just like it big and thick.”

After throwing my socks in the dirty clothes and shoving my shoes under the bed, I flipped him off. “I’m going to shower. Get your shoes off my bed.” I bumped his legs and he sat up, then toed off his shoes with a smirk before relaxing back against the headboard.

“Take your time.” He held up his phone at the same point Tiddles leapt onto the bed and strutted up to rub against his hand. “Me and my boy here will hold down the fort.”

The black cat let out a little yowl before he bumped Coop’s hand again. Rolling my eyes at both of them, I dug out a clean pair of jeans and a tank top—then debated a t-shirt instead but the jeans were bad enough. I had a dark blue half-lace tank top that I’d picked up earlier in the summer and hadn’t had a reason to wear yet.

“I like that,” Coop said when I pulled it out.

With a snort, I held it up to myself then eyed him. “You can’t borrow it.”

My turn to get the middle finger. I grinned before I got out clean panties and a bra, blocking his view of the drawer so I could avoid the comments.

“Be back in a few.” My bathroom wasn’t an en suite. It was in the hall. A tidy, tight little room. The cat’s litter box was also in there, tucked into the cupboard under the sink. We’d unscrewed the doors on it years ago, and they were stored in Mom’s closet or mine. But the location meant I was particular about keeping the litter box clean, which I’d done that morning before work. Dumping the clean clothes on the counter, I studied my appearance in the mirror before turning on the shower to heat the water.

I’d been courting a breakout earlier, but it looked like the zit hadn’t made an appearance. Ugh, good. I stripped out of my work clothes and left them in a heap and pulled my hair

out of its bun. My scalp ached, but I used my nails—or what little I had of them—to massage some feeling back into it.

The shower took me under ten minutes, including washing my hair because I had to get that hamburger smell off. I wouldn't have time to flat iron it, but my curly hair wasn't new to the guys. Out of the shower, I wrapped a towel around my hair, then used a second to dry off.

Muscle aches I hadn't realized I had made themselves known. My feet hurt. My legs hurt. I think my ass even hurt, but that could just be sympathy pains. Cracking the door to let the humidity out, I hung up my towel, ran some lotion over my arms and legs, slapped on some deodorant, then pulled on the bra and panties before tugging the blue lace tank top on. I gave it a critical eye. It looked even better than it had I the store, solid panels covered my boobs and the lace was dark and dense enough you had to pay attention to realize it was revealing at all.

Jeans went on last, but they were soft, ripped, and worn in all the right places. One perk of hitting my max height when I was fourteen—most of what fit me then still fit me and my favorite jeans were still my favorite jeans. The washed out color of the jeans looked good against the dark blue top.

Dressed, I pulled the door wide and tugged off the towel and shook out my damp curls. Everything was already pulling upward. I remember in junior high, one of the girls told me how much she envied me my hair. What she didn't get was those curls meant I had two styles—one where the curls looked okay and the other where I was Captain FrizzGirl

Did I want to put on cosmetics?

With a snort, I settled for a quick brush of my teeth, facial moisturizer, and lip gloss. The gloss I stored in my pocket in case I needed it later. Dirty clothes under my arm, I shut off the light in the bathroom and headed back to my room.

“Hey, Frankie, what's *dessert options?*” Coop had my phone, which I'd stupidly left next to my wallet on the dresser.

Dammit. I shoved my dirty clothes in the hamper and crossed the room to pluck the phone away, but he twisted to hold onto it.

He repeated, “Who or what is a dessert option?”

There was a message on the screen, but I couldn’t see it, so I tackled Coop. We’d played this game before, because the brat loved to do keep away. Was it very zen? No, but it could be fun...except for when I really didn’t want him looking at my messages. He grunted as I managed to land on his back, but he had my phone under him, so I had to squirm an arm between him and the bed.

“Give me my phone, Coop.”

“Aww... c’mon. You changed your password so I couldn’t see more than the ingredients...” His muffled response didn’t do anything to cool my temper.

“Give me...” I grunted. There, I could almost feel my phone. Before I could snag it, Coop gripped my wrist and rolled. Suddenly, I was on the bed, and he was on top, unrepentant grin in place as he pinned me down.

“Do you still have the touch ID enabled?”

Oh crap. He moved my hand so he could press my thumb to the phone’s button. Aggravation and the deep desire to keep Mathieu private collided as I wrenched my hand free and managed to get my knee right between his thighs. Only the fact it was a struggle kept me from truly slamming it into his nuts. But the pressure stilled him, and he stared at me...

“Give. Me. My. Phone.” My wet hair had been rubbed all over the duvet. There’d be frizz galore no matter what.

The teasing fled his expression, and he handed me the phone before putting a hand on either side of me on the bed. Still half-hovering over me, he said, “I’m just playing, Frankie.”

“Well, I wasn’t having fun.” I glared at him and, for once, he didn’t retort with a joke. Only after he glanced down between us, did I lower my knee so he could get off me, but

then his gaze lingered for a moment on my top. Specifically, to where my top had rolled up.

“Nice bra,” he said. It came out almost weak, and he rolled off me finally, but not fast enough that he missed getting hit in the face with my pillow. “Ow.”

“Jerk,” I muttered, sitting up and pulling the top where it was supposed to be. I should probably change it. Then I ran my fingers through my wreck of a hair.

I looked at the phone. Mathieu’s message just suggested two different ingredients. It was a response to a question I’d sent him earlier in the day. He recommended real cream and butter over the alternatives. Panting, I shoved away from the bed. The duvet was half off and now both pillows were on the floor.

Coop caught my arm. “Frankie...”

“What?”

“Sorry.” He gave me a quick smile. “I really was playing. Your phone buzzed, and I thought it was the guys.”

“So you had to look?” I raised my eyebrows. Irritated didn’t begin to cover it.

“I didn’t think you’d care,” Coop said carefully. “You didn’t used to mind.”

“I didn’t?” Since we were on the topic... “When you would steal it and send messages to the guys or my other friends? Poking fun or telling jokes? Or when you would fill it with goofy photos and then post them to my Instagram?”

Uncertainty hovered in his gray-green eyes. “I’m going to go with all of the above. If you didn’t want me to do it...”

“What part of *give me my phone* did you fail to understand?” I hadn’t even *had* a date with Mathieu yet. Right now, we were just going to make a dessert. Well, I was, and he was going to supervise. But I *liked* him, and I liked the *idea* of him.

Coop? Coop would spoil that if he outed me to the guys. Then Jake or Archie would do something stupid. If I had any

doubts about their reactions, Archie's intensity at dinner the night before made it clear.

He spread his hands. "I'm sorry, Frankie." No caveats, no excuses, just an apology. "I guess we don't play like that anymore."

I glanced at my phone when it buzzed. Coop's did at the same time, and he looked past me to the bed. When I glanced over my shoulder, Laura's name was on the screen with three plus messages highlighted. The second message was from Archie.

Archie had sent me one, too. When I faced Coop once more, I raised my eyebrows, "Still tripping on Laura?"

He grimaced. "I thought if I didn't answer..."

"Cause ghosting is the way to go. Grow a pair, Coop. Date her. Don't—" But I hesitated, there was something in his expression. "You didn't just kiss her. You had sex with her."

For some reason, that bugged the hell out of me. My stomach dropped and my chest hurt. Coop didn't deny it. Instead, he shoved his hands into his pockets and backed up another step. "It wasn't..."

"What? You tripped and fell on her naked? What wasn't it?" All at once, I was furious and hurt, and the last thing I wanted to do was have this conversation. Heat raced over my skin and my throat hurt.

"I didn't—have sex sex. I...thought about it, but I didn't have a condom." The last part was mumbled.

"So you almost had sex but you didn't?" That didn't make it better. If anything... "And that's why she keeps texting you. You told her you'd make it up to her." I knew Coop. I'd known him for a long, long time. He lived to make people happy. Part of that zen attitude came from not rocking the boat, avoiding upsetting others and just—go with the flow. If Laura's flow was getting naked and doing the horizontal mambo, Coop would get on board. Course, apparently the lack of condom slowed that down.

“She wanted to get together tonight,” Coop admitted. “But I had plans with you guys.”

The sudden banging on the back door interrupted us, and I let out a shaky breath. *I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not cry.* The chant sustained me as I brushed past him and headed to the kitchen. I didn’t have to guess who it was, so I opened the door and the other three were just there.

Jake, in a black t-shirt and jeans, looked like he just rolled out of a bad boy magazine with his dark hair and pale blue eyes. Bubba dressed in a blue t-shirt with the logo of some defunct television show on it and jeans. His hair was wet and his smile wide. Archie was right behind them, requisite rock band t-shirt tucked into his jeans and an iced coffee in his hand which he presented to me like a bouquet of flowers.

As one, their smiles faltered then Jake looked from me to behind me. The frown on his face deepened into a scowl. “What the fuck did you do?”

He pushed past me and stormed through the kitchen to the living room where Coop stood. “I didn’t do...” But Jake had him by the shirt and Bubba was right after him. Archie pressed the coffee into my hands and moved so he was between me and the guys.

“Stop,” I said, but Jake shoved Coop once, twice—the third time Coop stumbled and there was a crash.

“Let them handle it,” Archie told me, but I shook him off. Dammit, why didn’t they listen?

“Coop didn’t do anything,” I yelled and put the coffee on the counter as I got around Archie and into my living room. Bubba was already trying to get between Jake and Coop, but Coop’s zen had evaporated. Anger filled his eyes, the likes of which I hadn’t seen in a long time.

“What the hell did you do?” Jake demanded. Even Bubba being there didn’t seem to dissuade the argument. I had to catch Jake’s arm to keep him from striking Coop. That shoved me between all three of them.

“Stop. It.” I screamed each word. The neighbors were probably calling the cops.

Jake glanced at me. “Frankie...” The heavy concern in his voice didn’t make up for charging inside or breaking the coffee table.

“Don’t you Frankie me.” I’d had it. With all of them. “This is my *apartment*. I live here.”

As one, they each backed up, save for Archie who stood in the kitchen doorway. His eyes were narrowed, and he looked from me to Coop and then back again.

The table was in pieces. Coop had bits of wood clinging to his shirt and there was a cut on his arm. Bubba raked a hand through his hair. Concern radiated off him, but it had nothing on the anger pouring off Jake. Coop didn’t help it with the guilt staining his own reactions.

“Your shirt is torn.” Jake said, motioning to me. I glanced down. The strap on the right—sure enough—the lace had a tear in it. The solid bits were wrinkled. “You look like you’re ready to cry... and your hair...” Jake finished on a hint of a growl as he glared at Coop again. “What did you *do*?”

“We were wrestling over her phone,” Coop admitted. “I’d never fucking hurt her.”

“Wrestling? You’re a foot taller than she is! Why the hell would you be wrestling with her?” Jake demanded not seeming appeased one iota.

You know, it would be almost cute that he wanted to defend me, but I wasn’t helpless. “Stop. It.” Repeating myself had already grown old. “Coop didn’t hurt me.”

“You looked upset when you opened the door,” Bubba interjected, his tone cautious. Unlike Jake, he focused on me and not Coop.

“We were goofing around. I didn’t take Frankie seriously when she said to give her phone back and—we wrestled. I’ll pay for the shirt, Frankie.” Apology hung in the crease of his every word.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Jake dismissed Coop like he wasn’t there, and I ran a hand over my face. How was I supposed to explain the broken table to my mom? As it was, I’d have to replace it.

All of this because Coop wanted to read my messages? Or was teasing about it? Because the guys couldn’t...

“You guys need to go,” I said abruptly.

“Frankie,” Archie said as he finally entered the fray. “We can take care of the table. The guys are gonna clean it up. Just tell me where you...”

“I don’t know where Mom got it, Archie. We’ve had that table my whole life. So—who knows? You can’t just buy a new one and replace it. Money doesn’t fix this stuff. And—right now, I just want you guys to go.”

“We got tickets for the escape room,” Coop said slowly. “You know for our project?”

“Then go and have fun, because the only room I want to escape is the one without all of you in it.” My comment stung Bubba, and he didn’t cover his swift frown.

I would not cry. Maybe it wasn’t their fault but...

“Fuck, Frankie—” Jake raked a hand through his hair and nudged some of the broken pieces aside before he caught my hand. “I’m sorry. You looked upset and your hair is a mess and your shirt is torn... think about what it looked like. I... I’d kill anyone who hurt you.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” I told him and pulled my hand out of his. “It’s not your job to protect me. Even if helping was the goal, you didn’t even wait to find out what happened. You just attacked Coop.”

“To be fair, Coop’s been an idiot lately,” Archie supplied, oh so not helpfully. “It’s not a stretch to think he’d upset you.”

“Arch,” Bubba said with little censure. “Give her a break.” After a glance at his watch, he said, “We have a little time. Let’s clean this up and then we’ll figure out a way to apologize to Ms. Curtis.”

Did they really not listen to me?

“Yeah, Bubba’s right,” Jake said, then he put his hands on my shoulders. The warmth of his palms reminded me of how cold it was in there, and I half wanted to shake him off and half-wanted to just get a hug. The weight of the whole week seemed to bear down on me. Mom not being home, the flat tire, Coop dating Laura, the guys telling every single person at school I was off-limits. The chances of me getting a real date before high school was over had dropped from narrow to not a chance in Hell—and this... now they were fighting.

“I’ll clean up,” I told them. “Just—go.”

“What about...?”

“Hey,” Bubba said, drawing me away from Jake. He slid an arm around my shoulders. “Take a breath. We kind of stormed in here like a bunch of assholes. You just got off work. If we’re late, we’re late. We booked the whole experience—Arch, you can call them, right?”

“Yep,” Archie said. “I’ll take care of it.”

I shrugged out from under Bubba’s arm. “Stop it and *listen* to me.” Jake had already picked up the largest segment of the table and Coop had knelt to grab the splintered and broken legs. They really had done a number to it. And Coop was still bleeding... “Coop, you need to go clean up your arm. Jake, leave the table alone. Archie, I don’t want to go to the escape room...I don’t want to go out at all. I just...” I met Bubba’s worried blue eyes and had to fight the urge to scream. “Guys, I just want to call it a night. This is not what I had in mind and it’s been a really, really long day. So—just—go. I’ll see you later.”

Then I took the coward’s way out, I fled back to my room and shut the door. Tiddles sat in my window, Tabby poked her head out of the closet, and Tory began to purr from somewhere under the bed as I flopped down. *I will not cry. I will not cry.*

I was so damn tired. *School. Work. Mom. College. The guys.* The crush of it made it hard to breathe. Sitting up, I looked at the tear in my shirt again and sighed. It was new. I’d

got it on a whim because I liked it and now... Stripping it off, I threw it across the room, then unbuttoned my jeans and dragged them off before kicking them into the corner.

I had just pulled open the drawer on my dresser when a light knock preceded the door opening. Really? Mom came back now? Of course, she did.

“Shit,” Jake swore, and I sighed.

Great. I was just standing there in a bra and panties... you know what. Who cared? “It covers as much as a bikini and considering what Maria wasn’t wearing when she was grinding on you at Bubba’s party, I’m pretty sure you can handle it,” I said. If I sounded hostile, maybe it was because I *was* hostile. “Why are you still in my apartment?”

Jake leaned in the door and met my gaze, not once letting his eyes dip. “Because we screwed up, and maybe you weren’t upset before, but you are now.”

“I’ve been upset for months. Today is nothing new.”

Surprise stamped across his face.

“Yeah, I know. You didn’t know, right?” I threw his answer out for him. But the frustration swelling in me just seemed to redouble with every word. “Maybe you should ask yourself why I ghosted everyone. Or, I have a better question—why are you guys free to date who you want? Get off who you want? Almost have sex with whomever you want? But *I’m* untouchable?”

The door pushed open wider. Bubba stared past Jake, but his ears went red, and he dragged his gaze from my chest upward swiftly.

“Nice,” was Archie’s only comment.

“Still wearing as much as I would in a bikini...and, shock, you are all still here.”

“To be fair,” Archie said, nudging Bubba over so he could squeeze inside. “We weren’t leaving you the mess or the explanation for one. For another, you’re our friend. We do care.”

Nice. They just skipped right past the rest of my comment. Slamming the drawer shut, I tugged the t-shirt over my head and then pulled out a pair of sleep shorts. They were old boxers I'd probably stolen from one of them at some point. Awkward if I gave a damn at the moment.

I stepped into them and tugged them up. "Nice," I responded. "Could you possibly care about me a little less?"

"Frankie," Bubba said, his tone soothing. "We're—you said something a minute ago about dating."

"Oh, you listened?" I smiled. Trust Bubba to actually hear me. Maybe Coop had, but I couldn't see him at the moment. "Thank you, I appreciate that. Better than Archie and Jake are doing at the moment."

Jake sighed. "I heard you, I just didn't know what you were talking about."

Despite the fact Jake said it with a straight face, Archie's half-laugh, half-snort undercut the sentiment entirely. At least I wasn't alone in staring at him. "Frankie...none of us are dating. Not you. Not me. Not them. Well—him." He pointed past Jake probably to Coop.

"That's not what I said," I told him. "Why have the four of you told everyone I'm untouchable?"

"Well, we didn't say that," Bubba said slowly.

Closing my eyes, I counted to ten. Five bucks said they'd never expressed the thought in those exact words. But... it wasn't just about what they'd said. "Jake, did you beat up Kent in sophomore year because he wanted to ask me out?"

Silence greeted my question and Archie folded his arms, but Bubba rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. I waited. Jake sighed. "Yeah, I kicked his ass—not because he wanted to ask you out but because he was pretty sure he could tap that. You don't date, Frankie. You don't need some guy at school perving on you."

Did he actually hear himself?

“Jake’s not wrong,” Bubba said slowly. “You don’t date. We know you don’t. You blow off every guy who has ever flirted with you. A couple of the girls thought you might swing that way, but...” He actually went a little red.

“Are you really mad at us because we made it clear you’re off-limits?” Coop asked, finally joining our conversation. He had to eel between Bubba and Jake to even get in the room. “Because we didn’t want anyone making you feel uncomfortable?”

“Did it occur to you to ask me what I wanted?”

They really thought they were all in the right.

“You made it pretty clear what you wanted,” Archie said bluntly. “I’m not going to apologize for having your back. You can’t ask any of us to apologize for protecting you.”

All at once, the tired hit again. I couldn’t do this. “You guys need to go.”

“Frankie,” Jake said taking a step toward me, but I held up a hand.

“Don’t. If you guys want to protect me so bad, just—go. I have to work tomorrow, I’m tired. I have to explain that table to my mom and I still have homework. Right now, I’d really rather be alone.”

They glanced at each other and then back at me.

“Call you tomorrow?” Bubba said and I just waved a hand at him.

“We’ll pay for the table,” Jake volunteered.

“I can take care of it,” Archie added. “We’ll plan another night for the escape room.”

I trailed after them as I herded them out. Coop dragged his heels and when he turned around, I shook my head. “I’m tired, Coop.”

“Can I come over tomorrow?” he asked, his voice low and far more sober than I think it ever had been.

“I have to work,” I reminded him. “And I’m busy tomorrow evening.” No, I wouldn’t explain it, and I ignored the looks the other three sent my way.

“We’ll see you Monday,” Bubba said, clapping a hand on Coop’s shoulder and tugging him out the door. I didn’t say anything, I just closed it after them and locked it.

Leaning against the door, I closed my eyes. Tired didn’t begin to cover it. On the counter, my iced coffee sat there, condensation sliding down the side of it. Picking it up, I took a sip and then stared at the living room. The table was gone. All of the damaged pieces were picked up and, except for needing to be vacuumed, it was like the table hadn’t been there.

The vacuuming took me a minute. I went ahead and did the whole living room, since I got it out. Afterward, I took my coffee back to my room, fixed the blanket on the bed, and then ran a comb through my hair before I braided it. It was a wreck anyway, but at least a braid kept it out of my face.

All four of them had messaged me, but I wasn’t in the mood. I answered Mathieu, thanking him for his advice, then put the phone in *do not disturb*. YouTube cued up on my laptop, I curled up with the cats.

I didn’t make the rules, but apparently I had to play by them.

CHAPTER TEN

HARD TRUTHS

Mom took the destroyed coffee table pretty well—Sunday morning. Interestingly, I heard her coming back in, so I knew she hadn't been home all night. But she slipped into her room, and by the time I headed to the kitchen, she came out and played it like she'd been there. Considering how the night before ended with the guys, I couldn't bring myself to call her on it.

At least one of us was getting lucky.

The moment that thought alighted, I grimaced. That would take a lot of brain bleach to get out.

“So, you have work today,” Mom was saying as she added creamer to her coffee. The groceries she brought in—this morning—I reminded myself had at least included bagels and cream cheese, so I was having a toasted bagel for breakfast along with my coffee. “What else?”

“Working on a French project after work. I'm making a dessert, or at least practicing it. I have to prepare it, then prepare a video—you know, like a French cooking show—do it all in French, then present it to the class. Tonight is kind of dry run.”

“Oh. Do you need me here? Or can you handle it on your own?” At least she'd asked, but she also looked—relaxed. More relaxed than I'd seen in a long time, and her reaction to the broken table had been wry humor.

“I'll be fine,” I said, skipping over the fact Mathieu was coming over. “You're going out?”

“Yes.” She avoided looking at me as she turned to the toaster and fed a bagel of her own into it. “Have plans with some of the folks from work.”

I took another bite of the bagel, mostly to give my mouth something to do that didn’t involve me snorting derision or saying something rude. Mom didn’t like a lot of the people she worked with or at least so she often said. Then again, Mom had been working for the same company for years. She’d put in her time and then some.

Asking her once why she stayed when she seemed so unhappy had backfired. She stayed because it put the roof over our heads and the food in our fridge. I learned to leave it alone after that.

“I’m glad,” I said finally after I washed down the bite. “I’m glad you seem to be making more friends there.”

Oh, that sounded awful and I winced. But Mom just gave me a tight smile. Bagel ready, she set it on a plate, then took it and her coffee into the living room. I stayed at the little table in the corner of our kitchen and ate the rest of my bagel. My phone lay on the table next to my plate, facedown. I’d left it in *do not disturb*.

After finishing my bagel, I wiped off my hands and then double-checked my recipe for opera cake. The multiple layers required a lot of different ingredients. I had most of them, but I would have to stop at the store after work. The whole thing would take at least a couple of hours, and it looked complicated as hell.

Was I crazy to try and make something like this? There was an elegance to the dessert, and it looked delicious. At the same time, it was what Mathieu described as his favorite, and he was going to be here to play along.

Well, if it was a disaster, I had time to try a simpler one—like chocolate mousse, which I happened to freaking love. I was adding the last item to the list when the text from Jake came in.

Jake: *Are you still pissed?*

That was it, nothing more, just the single message. If I hadn't been staring at the screen, I wouldn't have seen it. I'd made a point of not reading their messages mostly because I didn't want them to see the read receipt. I was still mad. The night before, I'd actually worried if I caved and read the messages, I'd look for a reason to get over it.

Nope.

Morning came and I was still mad at them. All the anger I thought I'd let go of over the summer just boiled in my blood. My head hurt I was so pissed. Pressing the phone off and locked, I slid it into the pocket of my shorts then grabbed the laundry basket from under the table. "Going to grab my laundry," I called.

"Okay," Mom answered, her tone distracted. I bet, if someone asked her in two minutes where I was, she'd have already forgotten. I stuffed my feet into flip-flops and headed out the backdoor. The laundry room was off the courtyard next to ours. Ten on a Sunday morning, and it was already hot and steamy. Even with the doors propped open, the air in the claustrophobic room housing three washers and three dryers seemed to have a physical presence. The heat swelled the room, making it seem heavier, even if it was dryer sheet scented.

I'd timed my return perfectly. The dryer kicked off just as I stepped inside. Two of the washers were agitating loudly and a second dryer continued to run. I set my basket on the floor and checked the chipped linoleum table for folding. It was mostly clean. I swiped a hand over it looking for lint or dust. Nope.

I had a week's worth of school and work clothes, not to mention a handful of pajamas in this load. I dragged the items out to the table to start separating.

Midway through folding the shirts, I glanced to the shadow in the doorway and, really, I wasn't remotely surprised to see Coop standing there. He leaned in the doorway, dressed in a tank top and shorts, his own feet stuffed into flip flops, too. The sunglasses hid his eyes, but not the downturn of his mouth or the frown he wore.

“Coop,” I greeted him and went back to folding my shirts. The panties were already in the basket. I needed to get jeans and shorts next. Bras were stuffed in the stack still.

“So you *are* talking to me.”

“I’m not playing that game. I can be polite.”

“Except you’re not answering any of us, and you kicked us out last night.”

“Well, you were all a bunch of assholes last night.” I told him, turning and setting the stack of shirts in the basket, then dropping a bra in there that I’d uncovered before I snagged my jeans. Hell, I hadn’t even gone out in the ripped pair the night before, but I’d washed them anyway.

“Frankie... I get that we broke the table.” He straightened and raked his hand through his hair. “And I shouldn’t have been messing with your phone. You shouldn’t have had to wrestle with me to get it back.”

We were dancing down the yellow brick road to an apology, I could almost feel it. Course, any minute now, the flying monkeys were going to show up.

“But...”

Yep. There they were.

“But you said you were pissed at us over dating.”

I snapped another pair of jeans out and then folded them in half before setting them atop the others.

“Are you really that mad at me about dating Laura?”

I almost laughed. “And off to the poppy fields we go.”

He sighed. “Okay, so I’m not following what you’re pissed at us for. So rather than worry about what you’re mad at everyone else for, will you talk to me like I’m five and tell me what I did wrong?” He sounded so plaintive that I wanted to make it better for him. “I want to fix this, but...”

“But you don’t know why I’m mad? Or you don’t know how to fix it?” I had the shorts stacked up, so I added them and the jeans to the basket. Two more bras went in and then I

started matching the socks. Fortunately, I pretty much wore the same white socks, so everything matched.

“Yes.” He closed the distance between us to lean against the washers next to me. “C’mon, Frankie. I hate it when you’re mad at me.”

I wasn’t really a fan of being angry with him either. When I had the last set paired, I tossed them all in the basket and then picked it up. “Fine, but not in here. It’s hot.”

He nodded and reached for the basket, but I didn’t let it go.

“I have it.”

Raising his hands away, he backed up and then led the way out of the laundry room. At least there was some shade in our courtyard and along the way, if we took the long route. The lack of privacy in the courtyard meant I needed to spit it out before we got there.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe I want to do all the same things in high school that the rest of you are? That I want to go on a first date? Maybe I’d love to get asked to go to a dance or ask a guy to go a dance. That I’d like to have the crappy stories about the guys I just don’t click with and the crazy ones about the guy I didn’t stop kissing long enough to get out of the car and go in to see a movie?”

The blank surprise on Coop’s face was a humbling enough answer. I shook my head.

“That’s why I’m angry. Because the four of you decided I didn’t get to do that for some reason, yet not a one of you keeps it in his pants. You may not have had sex because you didn’t have a condom, but you’re hardly a virgin.” None of them were. I knew exactly when each one had scored the first time and with who.

See, there are some things I could have lived without knowing.

“It might even be fair, if there was some kind of parity where you told me about your issues with Laura, and I could bring up the crazy crap I had to put up with from Mac.”

“Mac Harper?” Coop’s eyes narrowed.

I sighed, turning to face him. He had to stop abruptly or collide with me. “No, dipshit. Mac was an example of someone I *might* be seeing.”

He frowned. “But you’re not seeing him.”

“I’m not seeing *anyone*.” Itsy bitsy little lie, but I wasn’t seeing Mathieu *yet*. “Because you, Aramis, Athos and Porthos decided I needed to be protected and that no guy at school was allowed to ask me out.” At least Coop read enough to get my point about the Three Musketeers.

Folding his arms, Coop frowned. “Okay. We did that. Sorta.”

“Sorta?” I raised my brows.

“Well, we didn’t take out an ad, Frankie. We just... made it clear that we weren’t going to let anyone pick on you or take advantage. Guys can be pretty shitty to girls, if you haven’t noticed.”

I swear, I didn’t laugh but that was some seriously whacked shit. “No kidding,” I said in the most deadpan voice I could muster. “You know what’s shittier?”

“What?”

“Friends who go out of their way to sabotage you. I had to hear it from Rachel Manning... that the reason I didn’t have a date to the spring dance was because no guy would *ever* ask me. No guy would dare, so if I wanted to go to that dance, I had to take my self. But isn’t it *so* cute, how you guys the made sure no one would ever bother me? I’m practically untouchable.” I almost had Rachel’s insincere bitch tone down. It wasn’t quite fair to Rachel, as she’d been in a mood at the time, but I *wasn’t* in the mood to be fair to anyone. She’d gotten some pleasure out of slamming me with that. Mostly ‘cause she’d hit on one of them, and they’d shut her down, so instead she used me to get back at them.

I got the politics of it, but the thing was, my feelings had been the ones hurt.

“You and the guys—you took your dates and you partied.”

“You came to the dance,” Coop said. “I didn’t think you cared about the dating thing.” When I scoffed, he held up his hand. “No seriously, I’m not making this up. I’ve seen a lot guys hit on you... yet you never respond.”

What the hell was he talking about? Why did they all keep saying that?

“That’s the thing,” Coop told me. “You never noticed. I thought—I thought you were just shutting guys down. You didn’t want to flirt or to go out with anyone. All I wanted to do...” *Him*, not the guys. He was making a distinction. “I wanted to have your back. I don’t want someone to do to you...”

“What you’re doing to Laura?”

He frowned, and then glanced down. “I broke up with Laura last night.”

Sweat tickled at the back of my neck. “I’m sorry.”

With a shrug, Coop said, “I shouldn’t have started seeing her again. She really isn’t the girl I want to date.”

“Then I’m proud of you.” I meant it.

He smiled. “Can I carry the basket for you now?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m fine.” Turning, I continued toward our courtyard with Coop falling into step.

“We’re okay, right? You and me?”

At the steps to my apartment, I glanced at him. “I don’t know...and I’m not saying that because I want to make this worse. But I’m mad. The mad—it doesn’t just go away because you finally get it. You guys—you made a decision about me and you never even asked me. I think that was the hardest part. I spent most of my junior year wondering what was wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“Yeah, well, I feel like I was the only girl who never got asked out. Even if I hadn’t wanted to go... I could have at

least said no. But I didn't get that chance. I don't know if I'll get it this year. I'm busy, and I have a lot to do, but I do know that you guys? You made it worse."

Coop kicked a rock and sent it skittering over to bushes. "I didn't know."

"Well, now you do. Anyway," I said with a sigh. "I need to go put this stuff up and get ready for work."

"You still have plans tonight?" His eyebrows were up, his expression hopeful. "Or was that basically a way to blow me off?"

"Believe it or not, I do have plans, and I'm not changing them."

I made it up three steps when he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Something new," I told him. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

But I didn't wait for his answer as I let myself in.

"I don't know," my mom was saying. "I've barely been here this week. I can't just plan an entire week away." Her voice was muted, but it carried from the other room. "You're tempting me..." When she laughed, I paused. I don't think I'd ever heard my mom laugh like that. "Okay," she said, her voice getting quieter. "She'll be back in a minute, so I need to get off the phone. Yes. Tonight. I can't wait."

I was torn between gagging and laughing. She sounded really happy. And she hadn't heard me come in, so I opened the backdoor as quietly as I'd closed it, then slammed it shut. "I'm back," I called.

After locking the door, I kicked my flip-flops under the table and then carried the laundry through. Mom was coming out of the bedroom, her cheeks a little rosier and her eyes a little brighter.

I was still trying to wrap my mind around Mom and her secret boyfriend when she followed me to my room. "I know I haven't been around much the last few days," she said.

“It’s fine,” I told her. “I’ve been really busy.” Not a lie. “School’s is going to be crazy this year.”

Standing in the doorway, she frowned. “Maybe you could take on fewer hours? I know the boys and you had plans this weekend, and you said you went to the game on Friday?”

“Yeah, Jake and Bubba did great. We won the first game.” I put my laundry away. “I don’t want to take shorter hours. They cut me back for school already. Right now—barring expenses...” Like a new coffee table or getting my tires fixed. “I could have everything I need to make the move and to supplement myself while I find a job up there. Harvard’s a long way away.”

“Sweetie...you know you’re putting an awful lot on getting into Harvard.”

I shrugged. “Aim for the stars. Even if I miss, I’ll still be above the clouds.” I’d seen that on a sign when I was five. I’d never forgotten it. “Besides, I know I need financial aid and everything else.” And then some. “But if I don’t try, I definitely won’t get in.”

“It’s almost seventy thousand a year with housing.”

“I know, Mom. I also know it’s going to be worth it.” And I really didn’t want to have this conversation. “You let me worry about it. You got stuff to do with your work peeps tonight, and I gotta get ready for work.”

Mom nodded slowly. “You’ve been applying for scholarships, right?”

“Like my life depended on it. I won’t find out about the big ones until spring.” Might not find out about Harvard until then.

“All right, I know you have everything under control. You always do, but—I want you to have some fun this year. You work so hard.”

“Hard work is what the pays the bills.” Quoting her to her may not have been the best idea based on her grimace.

It was weird, some kids said they couldn't stand their parents—like Archie. He and his parents were strangers. Then there were people like Bubba who won the lottery with the cool, supportive parents. Coop and Jake didn't do too shabby, because they seemed to have good parents who were supportive. My mom was supportive for some parts, though she usually tried to get me to aim lower rather than root me on. I didn't hate her, but we didn't always speak the same language.

Sometimes, we felt more like roommates than parent and child. You know, I just don't feel like unpacking that emotional baggage. I should just store it in the closet until I sat down with a therapist some mythical day in the future.

Unlikely, but it could happen.

For now, I got my laundry put away, grabbed a quick shower and got changed. Work wasn't so bad. We had a post-church lunch rush that tapered to a steady, but manageable trickle. Bubba showed up without the guys around the middle of my shift.

He grabbed a seat at the counter and, when I swung by to get his order, I told him, "I'm kind of busy." Granted, of the four of them, Bubba had been the most reasonable, but he wasn't blameless in the scenario.

"It's fine, I can wait." The smile he offered looked hopeful, and I tapped the counter. I got his soda to him before I checked on my other tables, but it was semi-quiet by the time his burger was ready. After I served him, I grabbed the silverware bucket and napkins and started rolling the silverware there at the counter so I could talk to him. Usually, they didn't like it when we did it there, but if it was quiet—kind of like it was now—nobody complained.

"Hey," Bubba said, studying me. "Still mad at me?"

"Disappointed if I say yes?"

"Maybe?" He tilted his head. Someone as big as Bubba shouldn't be able to pull off cute or endearing, yet he could

manage both. “Look, I’m really sorry about what happened at the apartment yesterday. We were total jackasses.”

“You were,” I agreed. “But it wasn’t just about the apartment.” Because Coop hadn’t gotten that.

“Yeah, I kind of got the feeling...and I didn’t know you liked Kent...” He wiped his hands on a napkin. “I feel like I should apologize. I mean the guy was a jerk. I’m the one who overheard what he said, and I told Jake and Arch about it.”

“I never said I liked Kent.” In fact, I really couldn’t stand Kent. “The point wasn’t him—it was everyone.”

“Okay, you said that. But, Frankie, don’t get me wrong here, I want to make this right. You don’t flirt.” He shifted on the stool, leaning a little closer. “The truth is, I know guys who’ve been hung up on you—you never seemed to care. You shut guys down all the time. You utterly destroy them and keep right on moving.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” It was hard to shut anyone down if they didn’t express their interest.

“I’m talking about the fact that, since I met you, you’ve never had time to flirt or date. You never had time for guys. You’ve been razor focused. School. All the way.”

“I hang out with you guys,” I argued, still rolling the silverware. I’d gotten nearly all of it, and so far we’d been lucky. The tables were still mostly finishing their drinks or doing homework and no one else had come in. “I make time for you.”

“You did—before this summer,” he pointed out. “You did for school stuff. For studying. Frankie, if you weren’t tutoring me, I wouldn’t see you that much between your schedule and mine.”

Did he really believe that? “We’re friends.”

He made a face. “Yeah, we are.” Then he stuffed a french fry in his mouth, and I got the last of the silverware wrapped. “Look...maybe we didn’t handle it the right way—maybe *I* didn’t. I want to do better and fix this. I don’t want to not see you.”

“I don’t want to *not* see you, either, Bubba. But I want to do what everyone else gets to do. I want to get asked out, I want to go on dates, I want to have stories to tell and experiences and maybe they’ll all suck. Maybe I’ll be like Archie and find out that what I think they’re like and what they’re really like isn’t the same thing. But I want to have that chance.”

He studied me, a tiny frown tightening his brows. “So, you want us to back off?”

“I want you to be my friends.”

Another frown.

“If you can’t do that then, yeah... I want you to back off.” As much as it pained me to say it. I didn’t want to lose the guys, but at the same time... they didn’t get to dictate everything. It wasn’t fair.

“Okay... Frankie?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you go to homecoming with me?”

I stared at him. Was he making fun of me?

“What?”

“Will you go to homecoming with me?”

Was he really asking me out? “What about Sharon?”

“I’m not dating Sharon. I don’t have a date to homecoming. It’s a school dance and you want to go. I’d like to take you.” He took a last sip of his soda and then pulled out a few bills and stacked them next to his plate. “Don’t answer right now. Think about it... the big asks start next week. I’m going to ask then.”

“Are you serious?” Because if he was really giving me shit right now...

Leaning over the counter, he kissed my cheek. “See you tomorrow, Frankie.” Then he was out the front door, and I was still standing there gaping like a fish.

Was it Bubba's way of making up with me? Placate me by asking me to the dance? Bubba wasn't mean. Not usually.

It wasn't until after I rang up his check that I realized he'd left a card with his cash. It was just a notecard that said *Message in a Bottle, that's my song. Let me know what you think.*

Tucking the card into my pocket, I shook my head. I had no idea what just happened. By the time my shift was over, I was thrilled I had the next two days off, but I still needed to find some oomph for my pseudo date and I still needed to swing by the grocery store.

While I waited for the a/c to cool down the car, I checked my messages just in case Mathieu had to cancel.

Dessert Options: *Is seven still good?*

I grinned. *Yep. Just got off work and I'm going to the grocery store. Do you want anything for dinner?*

Dessert Options: *I thought I would bring over some leftover roast and potatoes my host family made yesterday. I have enough for two meals.*

Wow. That would be great. We can heat it up and eat while we do the nine million steps to make the cake.

Dessert Options: *I will see you soon.*

A little thrill went through me. This was really gonna happen. I checked the messages from Jake and Archie. Their last messages had been from earlier in the day.

After talking to Coop and Bubba, I had to admit, maybe part of the issue had been me. Maybe I hadn't been clear.

Talk tomorrow after school? I sent it to both of them.

I got almost immediately replies.

Archie: *Yes. Coffee in the morning?*

Jake: *See you then.*

I told Archie yes and then leaned my head back. I just had to make it clear to all of them that I was going to date, too.

That I appreciated the fact they wanted to protect me, but no more untouchable.

I glanced at the time on my phone and swore. I needed to get going. I wanted to wash off the burger smell *before* Mathieu got there.

Maybe it wasn't a date-date, but holy crap, I had a date!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FRENCH CONNECTION

Mathieu turned out to be a prompt guy. I was still hopping into a clean pair of shorts after a high-speed dive through my shower, a quick brush of my teeth and the swift rifling of my t-shirts before I finally landed on a plain baby blue one when he knocked on the front door. White shorts probably weren't a great idea for cooking, but they made my legs look tanner and they looked even better with a t-shirt.

Tiddles yowled his displeasure as I darted around him. I'd argued with myself about cosmetics all the way through the grocery store. I didn't tend to wear makeup, so I stuck to what always worked for me—lip gloss. Only I hadn't been able to find my gloss, so I stole one from Mom's room and found a roll of condoms in the drawer.

Yep, all things I don't need to know about my mom.

I paused and took three deep breaths before I unlocked and opened the front door. Where my back door had a set of concrete steps leading to it and a hint of a porch, the front opened up into the courtyard where there were boxes of bushes and flowers and landscaping to line the sidewalks. Coop's door was catty-corner to ours, so I didn't dare glance over there.

If he saw Mathieu, he saw him, but I was just relieved the guy had made it.

"My apologies," he said in his gorgeously accented English. "I am not usually so prompt, but Mrs. Wheeler said

prompt is better here.”

The apology amused me, I gotta admit. “Prompt is fine,” I said, pulling the door wide to let him in. Tall—maybe not as tall as my guys, but tall enough I had to look up—with rich, chocolate brown eyes and dark brown hair with a natural curly wave that made me think of the word tousled. His tousled hair was gorgeous. “And I should have mentioned...I have cats.”

“*Oui?*” He smiled, and the strength of it just lit his whole face up. “I love cats.”

“Whew.” Once he was inside, I closed the door and he held up a canvas bag.

“I brought supper and some iced tea. It’s actually quite good. I will admit, however, the penchant for drinking cold tea must be uniquely American.”

Chuckling, I led him to the kitchen. Now that he was there, I didn’t really care that my hair was still damp or that I’d just got off work. “It gets pretty hot here, so cold drinks are better. I, myself, love iced coffee.”

“I shall have to try that. I am working on eating only American foods and tex-mex while I am here.”

I made a face at the Tex-Mex comment, I couldn’t help it. Texas had a *lot* of Tex-Mex and sometimes I got tired of it.

“You don’t like the food?” He removed the Tupperware containers. They were much larger than I expected. In fact, they looked like fully served meals rather than leftovers.

“I like Tex-Mex fine. I’ve had Spanish tapas before and those are good and tacos, fajitas and enchiladas—they are all great. But I eat it all the time so it’s not...”

“It’s common, not as appealing,” he finished for me.

I popped open the lids and then set the first one in the nuke with the lid resting on top and started it warming the food before getting down a couple of plates. “More or less. Where I work, we serve burgers all the time.”

“Those were very good,” he complimented me in all seriousness. The sincerity in his tone made me grin. Okay, my

face was going to end up aching at this rate.

“I’m glad. Next time you come in, try the bacon cheeseburger. The applewood smoked bacon is pretty good.” We sold a lot of them.

“I shall.” He glanced around our kitchen and then at me. When the food came out of the nuke, he took over serving it onto a plate as I got the second one going. “I am... a little nervous about tonight,” he admitted.

Surprised, I stared at him before I turned the nuke back on to get the food heated. “Why?” I mean, I was definitely nervous. A real date—okay a real pseudo-date, he might not think it was a date. I did.

“You are very beautiful,” he told me, his eyes gentling. He kept stealing glances at me as he got the now steaming food onto a plate.

Warmth scalded my cheeks, so I shifted to get him some silverware.

“You are very popular with the boys—you have boyfriends? Yes?”

Boyfriends? As in plural? “I...”

“This is fine,” he hurried on to add. “I find competition healthy, but I was uncertain that you would accept my invitation... At first it was just about getting a chance to know you. But the more I have seen you this week, the more I see why your boyfriends are so protective.”

“Are you talking about Coop and the guys?”

“The tall blond one who walks with you to lunch?”

“That’s Coop.” The microwave beeped, and I jumped a little. He carried his plate over to the table and set it down, then returned to serve the food out of the second container onto a plate for me. “They’re...”

“Protective. I have noticed. I thought to ask you to eat at lunch, but they are always there.”

The observation made me uneasy and nerves fluttered in my stomach. “This is probably better.” I motioned to my kitchen. “We’ll have more time.”

“Yes, and we can work on the dessert.”

The dessert. Yep. That was what we were going to work on. I got out some glasses and then we sat down with our respective meals. Instead of sitting opposite me, Mathieu moved his chair so that we could sit closer. It was a little weird, but not uncomfortable.

“Thank you for dinner,” I said, lifting the iced tea glass. He touched his glass to mine.

“This would be a better toast with wine.”

“I don’t drink,” I warned him. “It’s not really legal for us to drink under 21 here, but I’m not a fan.” After the whiskey incident and the karaoke. Better to stay clean and sober.

“If you ever come to France, you should come to a meal with me there. We will have wine.” He grinned. “The legal drinking age is 18 at home.”

“Ahh...” Wait. “You’re 18?”

“Almost. My birthday is tomorrow.”

“You should have told me.” Not that I would have had the first clue what to get him.

“You are making me my favorite dessert. You have a beautiful accent and a gift for my language. This is a perfect way to spend my birthday, even if tomorrow I will be at school.”

“Here’s hoping the opera cake turns out good.” It would really suck to bomb his favorite dessert.

“I am positive I will enjoy it.” He motioned to the dinner. “Do you like it? Mrs. Wheeler makes the most wonderful roast. Not as good as my grandmere, but much better than Mama.”

I couldn’t help laughing at the very conspiratorial tone, but my first bite of the meat proved him correct. Even after

microwaving, it was tender and there was a good spice to it. “This is good,” I told him.

“Excellent.” Relief blanketed his tone. The fact my enjoyment seemed to ease some tension in him relaxed me. All the nerves just drained away. He *was* nervous. Just like me. “I thought it would be wrong to not treat you to a real date before this evening, so I wanted you to enjoy it.”

A real date.

“I’m having a really good time,” I promised him, and he sat a little straighter in the chair. After that, we both stopped trying so hard. While we ate, Mathieu told me about the process of becoming a foreign exchange student, why he’d chosen to come to the States, and what he looked forward to.

He was only here until Christmas. That part kind of sucked. It was a semester exchange, but his host family had been great so far, and he was enjoying his classes. We didn’t share many because he wasn’t taking AP courses, though he did admit a lot of the coursework was pretty simple compared to home. What intrigued him were the people, the culture, and what we emphasized over compared to what he did in his own classes.

Turned out, he also attended a version of a boarding school so the fact he attended a public school here without a uniform—which explained why he was dressed so sharply the first week—was also an experience. After we were done, I rinsed off the plates then pulled the recipe out and laid it down. He leaned in so we could look at the steps for opera cake side by side.

He smelled pretty good, like sandalwood and something a little muskier. Maybe his soap or his cologne, and at this distance, it wasn’t hard to notice he’d shaved. His face looked baby smooth—not that I was staring hard.

Much.

“This takes a bit to make,” he said. “But it chills well and it’s divine. Do you want me to record as you go?”

“Well—” I hesitated. “What if it comes out terrible? I thought we’d just do this for us and give it a practice run.”

“The taste of the food is important, yes. But cooking should be an experience—a sensual one. Because food has so many textures and flavors. Desserts especially.”

Okay, that made my toes curl. There was something a little naughty about filming a sensual experience. “If we record it,” I said. “I’d rather use my phone, so I can do the editing for the project.” I hope that didn’t come across like I didn’t trust him to film me or do something with the footage. I didn’t think he would, but this was a first date and the guys still had that karaoke they held over my head.

“*Oui*,” he said in all seriousness. “But I will be an excellent director, yes?”

“Fine.” I checked my phone and cleared the messages from the guys then quietly went through and put their individual threads on do not disturb. No sense in having those pop up while Mathieu had my phone. Rolling it over to the video camera setting, I handed it to him.

“One tip I will give you—the best chefs introduce what they are going to make first. We lay out all the ingredients, we film that bit. Then we get the first layers done. And we show them what you did. We take snippets so I will not film the whole time. I want to help, too.”

My work ethic wanted to argue that point, but it was his birthday the next day. “Sounds like a plan.”

Together, we got everything out and then Mathieu wanted me to practice my intro. He corrected my pronunciations a couple of times, but always in good cheer. I kind of wanted to go check my appearance, but he insisted I looked wonderful and that I glowed. Kind of hard to ignore those kinds of compliments. The next two hours flew by as I discussed opera cake and why I wanted to try it and the multiple layers that it required from the sponge cake to the croustillant to the chocolate ganache and coffee buttercream. Each layer took some very specific steps to create. We’d get one done, then move to the next.

Coffee syrup was weird to make—it was basically water, sugar and instant coffee brought to a boil in a saucepan. Mathieu’s mood elevated with each step and there was an eagerness in him that was contagious. The ganache and the buttercream led to more than one mess that he caught on video and I laughed as I pointed out the small flaws in French. It wasn’t until that video segment was done that he cleaned the bit of ganache from the tip of my nose.

“It was adorable,” he insisted. “Don’t re-record, trust me.”

Rolling my eyes, I agreed. Despite all the various layers, I cleaned as I went—the dishwasher would be fully loaded and the kitchen smelled divine. But it wasn’t until we were putting the layers together that I began to think I was going to pull this off.

It had been a blast. Mathieu, as it turned out, was not only easy on the eyes and a lot of fun, he was also very patient as we worked our way through the dessert. Compared to the night before, the evening had been a dream come true. As we put the last layer into place, I lifted my hands at the end in a dance of delight—all on video but who cared? I did it.

It looked perfect.

“Now it must be chilled and the last of the glaze goes on in an hour.” Mathieu beamed at me. “This has been a most wonderful birthday. It smells like home here.”

I couldn’t imagine spending my birthday this far away from my home, but then again... maybe I could. We set it up in the fridge then took care of cleaning up the rest. Mathieu and I sampled some of the remains of the layers and the coffee buttercream was to die for. In fact, I insisted on letting him finish it with some of the remaining sponge cake, which he did with great relish.

Once everything was cleaned up, we reviewed the video and I was surprised by just how relaxed I appeared. I’d been nervous about the whole thing, but I’d spent most of those “videoed” moments talking to him rather than the camera.

“You are happy with my direction?”

“I love it, thank you for doing this.”

“Your dish will be the best,” he told me in all confidence.

I went to grab my laptop and offered him a soda. We moved out to the sofa in the living room and I introduced him to some of my favorite YouTube channels. He wasn't a history nerd like me and Jake, or into music like Bubba, or even the DIY videos and robotics like Archie, but he did like the architectural videos. He even pulled up a few of “home oddities” in France of places that were just too strange not to be real—like a huge windmill home that had been converted to all these different levels for one person. It was so tiny, yet so perfectly done.

At ten, my timer went off and we abandoned sitting side by side to retrieve the opera cake. We added the chocolate glaze then I cut off a section while he recorded me as I completed my bit about making the opera cake, because dessert was a kind of home away from home.

He applauded and blew me a chef's kiss before we set the plate on the table between us. With a fork each, we cut into the opposite ends and took the first bites.

It was...divine. I might have moaned at the flavor, but the look of pure ecstasy on Mathieu's face just made my whole night. He leaned over and cupped my face then pressed a kiss to each cheek before he leaned away.

“Vraiment merveilleux. Je vous remercie.”

I don't know what summoned the blush harder, the fact he'd kissed me or that he'd seemed so overwhelmed by the dessert. It was getting late, so I offered to give him a ride home rather than bother his host family. He didn't want to drag me out, but I kind of wanted more time with him. I also insisted that he take the dessert for his birthday, but he tried to refuse.

I would have to make another one anyway, and that was what finally convinced him, though he did slice off a third of it and told me that I had to keep it.

As he explained, I could eat it on Monday in his honor, so we could still share his birthday together even if we were both occupied.

Once we had the cake boxed up and the Tupperware returned to the bag, I went to grab my keys and wallet. In flip-flops, I let us out the back door and locked it up. When Mathieu took my hand, I got another little flutter moment, but it had nothing on the stomach dropping sensation when I caught sight of Coop just as we got to the car.

He was wandering down the sidewalk like he was coming back from the store on the corner. “Hey, Frankie,” he said by way of greeting, but it wasn’t me he was looking at.

“Hey Coop—Coop Brennan. This Mathieu Domienier.”

“Hey,” Coop said, still staring at the guy. No. Not at Mathieu. At the fact Mathieu held my hand. I almost let go but instead I gripped it a little tighter. I was *allowed* to date. “It’s late, isn’t it?”

“Francesca is giving me a ride home.” Okay. He hadn’t really used my whole name that evening, but wow it sounded both weird and hot when he did it.

“Don’t have a car?” A hint of insult rolled in those words.

“No, he doesn’t. Like a few of my friends,” I told him. Hopefully he got the *back off* vibe. “Anyway, we need to go.” I unlocked the car and Mathieu had to let me go to circle around to the driver’s seat.

“Is it far?” Coop asked.

“Is what far?”

“About fifteen minutes, I believe,” Mathieu answered. “I am staying with the Wheelers.”

“That’s over at Lakeside, right?”

“Probably,” I told Coop. “It’s fine, I’ve driven at night before.”

“Yeah, but it is getting late. I can ride with you so you’re not coming back on your own.”

Seriously? I stared Coop. “I’ll be fine.”

Not waiting for his answer, I waved Mathieu into the car and then slid into the driver’s seat. As I started the engine and turned on the headlights, I caught Coop frowning at us. I waved and then backed out. My last glance of Coop was him on his phone.

Mathieu had given me the address, so I just let the phone’s GPS tell me where to go.

“Maybe you should have let your boyfriend come,” he said, and I was glad I’d always been a cautious driver because the comment surprised me.

“Coop’s not my boyfriend. He’s a friend, probably my best friend most days. Not today, but most days.”

“Hmm...” The noncommittal sound irked me. “I know when I make another man jealous.”

I snorted. “If he knew I made you dessert, *that* would make him jealous.”

Another *hmm* and I had to resist the urge to snap. “Look, Coop is Coop. It doesn’t mean anything. And I’m really glad you came over tonight.”

“As am I.” Then another block passed before he said, “I would like to see you again.”

Really? We were doing this now and not later? Didn’t guys usually wait until a couple of days after a date to ask for another date? Or maybe it was a French thing? Despite the chaotic toss of thoughts, I managed to say, “I’d like that.”

“Good,” he said, his smile clear in the word. “Are Sundays better nights for you?”

“There’s a party next Saturday...” My stomach knotted but I pressed on. “Friends of mine are having a back to school bash. It’s gonna be a lot of high school seniors, swimming pool, music—probably some illegal drinking.”

He chuckled. “I would love to go with you, Francesca.”

Thrilled didn't begin to cover it. All too soon we were at the Wheelers' place and Mathieu turned in his seat. "You are sure your boyfriends will not mind if I take you to the party?"

"I don't have *boyfriends*," I reminded him. "I don't care if they're okay with it. I'm okay with it, and I had a really good time tonight." Better than I could have imagined if he would stop bringing up the guys.

"Let me know if I should bring anything..."

"I'll pick you up. I'll let you know what time later this week?"

"I look forward to it. *Au revoir*." This time, he pressed a kiss to my lips—a gentle one, just a brush, but an honest to God kiss.

"Au revoir."

I sat there in the car, watching him walk up to the front door like an idiot, but I didn't want to miss a minute of it. Once he was inside, I had to restrain myself from doing a crazy dance in the seat.

I kind of wanted to hope on the phone and text—the guys and tell them how awesome this had been but...

Yeah. No.

Waving my hand at my face to cool it, I got myself together. The drive home was spent humming along with the radio. *First date. Great dessert. Perfect guy.*

Real kiss.

I was about delirious when I pulled back into my spot and even giggled as I locked the car and headed for my door. How was I ever going to get to sleep tonight?

Not even Coop sitting on my back steps could diminish my mood. "Did you get lost?" I teased. "Or forget your keys?"

He'd done that before.

"Nope," he said, standing as I strolled up. "Just wanted to make sure you got back safe after you dropped off Frenchy."

“Mathieu,” I corrected him lightly. Coop was right behind me as I unlocked the door.

“Whatever,” he said. “Your mom wasn’t home tonight?”

“Nope,” I said and actually grinned about it. Mom still wasn’t home and, based on all earlier observations, I was going to bet she was shacked up with the boyfriend somewhere. Gross but, hey, if Mom was happy...? “She’s got a boyfriend.”

I hadn’t actually said it aloud before. It sounded weird.

Coop frowned. “Is that why she’s been gone a lot?”

It really had been a lot if Coop had noticed. “Yeah, I guess. I haven’t seen her much.” The kitchen still smelled like opera cake, and I swore I could smell some of Mathieu’s cologne—or maybe that was just on me. I couldn’t sniff my shirt without getting a weird look, so I skipped that. The cats strolled out of their various cubbies, all of them complaining. They’d stayed scarce while Mathieu had been there.

“Something smells great,” Coop commented as I opened the cans of food and gave the cats their dinner, albeit a little late. “You guys eat dinner here or something?”

“Yes, we did,” I told him. “Made dessert, too. Something for French class.”

“Yeah?” He glanced around, but the rest of the opera cake was in the fridge.

“Want to try it?” I relented.

“Is it good?” He squinted at me, and I rolled my eyes. After I tossed the empty can, I got the cake out and sectioned off a slice. Coop let out a little sigh. “Okay that is definitely the source of the wondrous smell.”

One small slice and a fork later and Coop groaned. “You guys made this?”

“I did,” I told him proudly. “It’s Mathieu’s favorite, so he offered to give me some pointers and we had a lot of fun.”

His rapturous expression gave way to a frown as he studied me.

“What?”

“Was tonight a date?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I hope so?” I was dying to talk to someone about it.

“So it was a *maybe* date? Like a *date* date or a study date?”

“Do you really want to know?”

With a long exhale, Coop nodded. “It’s what you wanted to do right? Talk about your dates?”

A grin spread across my face, and I bounced over and hugged him. Coop caught an arm around me and squeezed me back. “Yes, yes, I did and thank you.” I danced back and then clapped my hands. Giddy, I was giddy. “He’s a foreign exchange student, and he’s amazing. He’s funny and sweet and really nice. He brought dinner over with him tonight, and he helped me lay everything out and did the video for me while I put it together... It was... it was fun. Then while it was chilling, we watched videos and... it was just good.”

Coop nodded slowly. “You’re happy?”

“Yeah,” I told him, squirming a little. It was kind of embarrassing. I didn’t do this giddy girl thing. I’d never really gotten to do it. “I had a lot of fun.” And he kissed me was on the tip of my tongue, but I kept that part to myself.

“Okay,” Coop said.

“That’s it?” I raised my brows, but he shrugged.

“Okay. You had a date. You had to drive him home, and he didn’t take you out or anything, but it was a date and you’re happy. So...”

“So?”

He sighed. “Is that it? One and done or...?”

“I invited him to the party on Saturday,” I told him. “He said he wanted to take me out again and—the schedule is

crazy, but there's the party."

"The party. That's awesome." He did not sound enthused.

"And on that note, go home Coop. I need to get ready for bed and I'm tired." My mood was too good to let him spoil it.

Catching my arm, he tugged me back and seemed to search my face. "You like this guy, Frankie?"

"Maybe? I don't know. He's—yeah, I like him. I liked how it felt."

A slow nod, but Coop wore this unreadable expression. "We still on after school tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you talked to the guys?"

"Uh huh," he said. He tugged my hair once. "Lock the door behind me. I'll see you in the morning."

"Night, Coop."

"Night."

I leaned against the door after he left and let out a breath. I'd actually been more nervous about Coop's reaction than I had Mathieu's kiss. And the French guy was definitely out of the bag. Coop did not keep secrets well.

My phone buzzed, so I pulled it out.

Dessert Options: *You got home safe?*

I grinned. There were a bunch of other messages. *Crap.* The guys. I'd muted them. I'd fix that in a minute.

Yes, I did. I had a really good time.

Dessert Options: *As did I. Good night, Francesca.*

Head back, I closed my eyes.

Nope. I'd look at the guys' messages in the morning. I was in a good mood, and I planned on sticking to it.

NEWS FLASH

Archie: Who was she with?

Jake: What do you mean she was *with* some guy?

It's like 10:30 at night.

Bubba: Coop? Dude, you don't drop a bomb like
you found Frankie with a guy at her place
and then just stop. Who is the guy?

Archie: Are either of you close to their places?

Bubba: No. Give him a minute.

Jake: If he doesn't answer by the time my shoes are on...

Coop: Some guy named Matthew. French.

He came over to make dessert. She's back...it was a date.

Bubba: ...

Jake: ...

Archie: Who the fuck is Matthew?

Coop: Guy from her French class.

They made a dessert. He was at her place for a few hours.

Definitely a date and she's...

Bubba: She's what?

Jake: She's all right, isn't she? Do you guys know him?

Archie: Never heard of him. I'll find out soon enough.

Coop: She's happy. Leave him alone.

Jake: ...

Archie: ...

Bubba: Explain?

Coop: You heard her. She wants to date.

She was really happy tonight, so leave the guy alone.

Archie: She's *our* Frankie. I don't know who this jerk is...

Jake: What if he's a perv?

Bubba: I asked her out.

Archie: ...

Jake: ...

Coop: ...

Bubba: Figure I should tell you. Saw her at work earlier.

She told me she wants to date.

Wants to do all the things we've done.

Wants to go to dances. I asked her to homecoming.

Archie: ...

Jake: ...

Coop: Did she say yes?

CHAPTER TWELVE

MANIC MONDAY

Monday was off to a really weird start. Coop and I got to school with plenty of time for coffee, but Archie was a no show. Bubba and Jake ran late at practice, so I just hung out with Coop and played games on our phones. Archie wasn't in Government first period, either. When the teacher wasn't looking in my direction, I sent him a text. I had earlier—when I got up. Including answering his question about whether or not I'd really had a date on Sunday, which came in about fifteen minutes after Coop left.

Coop was a damn gossip, so no way he hadn't ratted me out. There was no answer to my texts, so I sent another.

Missing you in gov. Will get your hw. Hope all is okay.

By the time the bell rang, the message was still unread. Bubba caught me three steps out of the door. "Hey," he said, panting a little. Had he run all the way down here from his class? AP Calculus was upstairs, not far from his first period.

"Hey," I said with a grin. "Didn't get enough running in practice?"

"Yeah, I got plenty, but Coach went over because we had to go over the game from Friday."

"Go over what? Didn't you guys win?" I had my fingers tucked into the straps of my backpack as we walked side by side up the steps. The fun part of walking up the stairs with Bubba was I didn't have to play dodge with other kids. They just got out of his way.

“Yeah,” he said, chuckling as he turned sideways to block another guy from cutting down the stairs to where I was. At the top, we angled toward the wall and that meant I walked along the lockers and he took the outside line. “Anyway, win or lose, we go over the game. What we did right, what we did wrong, then we run the stuff we did wrong and get it right.”

“Nice.” I really didn’t get sports. “Is he allergic to just saying *good job, apparently what we did last week worked, let’s do more this week?*”

Bubba’s grin stretched. “Sure, he could. Doubt it’d be as motivating *as get off your butts, boys...*”

I laughed. Second week and class got serious. Homework would start coming hot and heavy. My phone buzzed a third of the way through class, but I couldn’t look at it, not and take notes at the same time. I was pretty sure I understood the processes and equations we were going over, but I’d rather be sure than just think I might be.

Right toward the end of class, the teacher told us to go ahead and start on our homework if we wanted. Five minutes to go. I glanced at Bubba who made a face and I grinned. “You’ll be fine,” I mouthed, and he mimed hanging. Rolling my eyes, I added, “Call me later if you run into trouble.”

“Can do.” Bubba said. “We’re still getting together after school, right?”

“I planned on it, but Archie’s not here.”

“He’s not?” Bubba frowned. Oh, that was right, they hadn’t been there for coffee, either.

“Nope, just me and Coop in the cafeteria earlier.” I slipped out my phone and glanced at the screen.

DESSERT OPTIONS: *I CONFESS, I ATE OPERA CAKE FOR breakfast.*

Grinning, I typed in, *Happy birthday. See you in five.*

I TABBED OVER TO ARCHIE'S MESSAGE. HE HADN'T REPLIED, and he hadn't read my message. After I set it down, I caught Bubba glance away toward his desk. Before I could ask, the bell rang.

"So," Bubba said, falling into step with me. "I'll send a text to Archie, but I figured we'd go off campus for lunch today."

"Yeah? Um..." What did I have on my to do list? I had some reading for government, problems for calculus, and my French project was now mostly done. "Not pizza?" Cause sure, why not?

"Not pizza," Bubba promised. "Subs, maybe?"

"Oh, that does sound good, actually." We were almost to French class when I realized Bubba walked me all the way and Mathieu approached from the other direction.

Crap.

"*Bon anniversaire*, Mathieu."

"*Merci*," he said with that open grin of his. My stomach did that little flip flop because Bubba actually eyed him.

"So this is Matthew. I'm Ian," Bubba introduced himself.

"Hello, Ian," Mathieu greeted him. "*Un autre petit ami, oui?*"

Bubba frowned as he studied Mathieu, and I touched his arm. Anything to distract. "I'll see you at lunch?"

He gave Mathieu a look then me. "Yeah, lunch. I gotta go." Then he jogged down the hall, because I'd been right, he'd gone out of his way to walk me to French.

Mathieu gave him a speculative look, then glanced at me. "*Il est jaloux.*"

No, Bubba wasn't jealous. He was my friend.

"*Il est mon ami.*" I flicked my fingers at him and slid into class before the bell rang.

“*Si tu le dis,*” he murmured as he followed me inside. Smartass. If I say so...yes, I said so. Still, Mathieu was funny, and class flew by, and it was fun. We ended up playing a game show in French, and Mathieu made a great host. Even better, a couple of the girls kept trying to flirt with him, but he didn’t respond. After class, he waited for me outside.

“You are busy for lunch today, yes?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go grab subs with the guys.” I’d invite him, but honestly, I really didn’t want to deal with them.

“Tomorrow, too?”

“Not yet.” I did eat with the guys pretty regularly, but... as evidenced, they didn’t always eat with me. “Want to grab something tomorrow?” Crap. “It’s your birthday, I should...”

“No, no. Don’t cancel your plans. Trust me, the cake...” He did the chef’s kiss thing again and beamed. “Perfection. I took a picture of it for Maman. She was very impressed. Yes, I would like to have lunch tomorrow—it is Tuesday so Tacos?” His cheerful grin made me laugh, and I glanced down the stairs and the back at him. “Or burgers?”

“You’re on.” Then I had to go. He gave me a little wave before turning to his next class. I sighed as I descended the stairs.

“Hey,” Coop said from right next to me, and I nearly leapt out of my skin. It was only shock locking my jaw shut that kept me from squealing out loud. A low chuckle escaped him, and he looped an arm over my shoulder. I almost punched him.

“You scared the crap out of me,” I complained even as he squeezed my shoulders and rubbed my arm.

“Well, that’s what happens when you walk and dream at the same time. You were a million miles away.”

“Not quite that far,” I said. The adrenaline had me hopping.

He chuckled. “Tell me we didn’t have an assignment over the weekend.”

“Nope, journaling starts this week.”

He made a face, and I couldn't blame him. On the other hand, I actually had something to write about so, that might not be too bad. As I slid into my desk, I checked my phone. Still no Archie.

"Have you heard from Arch?"

He gave a shrug, which wasn't really an answer. Class kind of dragged. Archie could have been sick, but I'd texted him on Sunday about after school and coffee. He and Jake had both seemed fine then. Worry for Archie nibbled at me all the way through class. Afterward, I headed for the parking lot, Coop in tow.

"Where's the fire?" he asked.

"Lunch," I reminded him, and he frowned.

"We're going out?"

I slid to a stop. "Yeah. Talked to Bubba this morning about going to get subs."

"Huh," Coop said, almost but not quite smiling. "Did he? Cool. I could eat subs."

"Right?"

The guys were really being weird. I should have yelled at them over the summer and let them get the weird out before school started. I headed for Jake's car, figuring that was where they would be, but Jake caught us in the hallway.

"Hey, where are you two off to?"

Okay. It was official. We'd crossed from weird to downright strange. "Let me guess? Bubba didn't tell you about lunch either?" It was an easy enough mistake.

Jake shot a look at Coop then at me. "Guess not. Where we going?"

"Subs."

"I'll text Bubba, and tell him we'll meet him there."

"Didn't he ride with you?"

“Nope, brought his own ride for a change,” he said over his shoulder, but he muttered. “Now I know why.”

When I glanced at Coop, he just gave me a helpless shrug. Whatever. I was starving.

Jake opened the front passenger door and waved me into his car. Coop took the backseat and sat in the middle.

“Have you heard from Archie?”

Jake had been stuck at football practice that morning, too.

“Yeah,” Jake said. “He was just in a mood. He’ll probably make afternoon classes.”

“Oh. I texted him, but he hasn’t texted back.”

“Maybe he’s sleeping,” Coop suggested.

Maybe. I sighed. Bubba pulled into the parking lot of the sub place at the same time we did, and I stared.

Bubba had a motorcycle.

Since when? With my wallet in my pocket, I left the backpack in the car. “Bubba! Where did that come from?”

He went from a glare at Jake to a sheepish look at me. “It was supposed to be a surprise. That’s why I asked you to lunch.”

“You wanted me to ride on it with you?” I studied the bike. It was beautiful, black with blue detailing and a wide seat. I didn’t know anything about bikes. “I’ve never ridden one.”

“Well, then it’s a date,” Bubba told me. “I’ll follow you home tomorrow, then give you a ride to my place. You can take your first ride on the way back to school, too, if you want.”

“Your place?” Jake asked, his tone—different. “Why are you two going to Bubba’s place?”

“Calculus,” Bubba answered without missing a beat. We had to work on his music selection, and we had lists to compare, but he wasn’t telling the guys, so I kept his secret.

“Pretty much,” I told Jake. “Sorry, I’d invite you, but you maxed your math credits.”

He’d lucked out on the math credits.

“Yeah, lucky me,” he said pushing away from his SUV. “Let’s eat.”

After the initial weirdness, the guys seemed to calm down while we ordered our sandwiches, but no sooner did we sit than Jake eyed me from his seat right across the table. “So, who’s Matthew?”

“Subtle,” I told him.

“Wasn’t trying to be. Coop tells me there’s some dude we don’t know at your house in the middle of the night, so I get curious. Who’s Matthew?”

“Leave her alone,” Coop told him, his tone less relaxed and more brisk. He’d snared the seat next to mine, leaving Bubba to sit next to Jake.

“What?” Jake glared at him. “I don’t know who the guy is.”

Rather than endure a round of arguing, I nudged Coop’s foot with mine. It was sweet he was being protective, but I could handle Jake. Mostly. “He’s a foreign exchange student, so immune from your little memo.” Okay, that was a wee bit petty. “He’s also in my French class. He’s sweet. I like him.”

“Sweet,” Jake repeated. “Huh.”

“Sweet,” I confirmed, then took a bite of my chips as I thought about the kiss he’d given me the night before. *Definitely sweet.*

“Why was he at your place so late? And why did you have to take him home?” Were they not going to let this go?

“He seemed like an okay guy,” Bubba said, idly. “Nothing special, but okay.”

Jake twisted in his seat. “When did *you* meet him?”

“Walked Frankie to French,” Bubba told him, then took a big bite of his sandwich looking enormously pleased with

himself. “He speaks pretty good French, too.”

“It helps that he *is* French,” I reminded Bubba. “And before you guys get too crazy, I’m going to have lunch with him tomorrow.”

“Where?” Jake asked.

“If I tell you, are you going to show up?”

“Worried your new guy can’t handle us?” Jake retaliated.

“No, I’m more worried you’ll try to chase him off because whether I date or not seems to be more about you than me.” I’d only eaten half my sub, but I wrapped what was left because I wasn’t hungry anymore. “I like this guy, Jake. I’d like to see what the fuss is about.”

“You want to date.” Blunt and to the point. Coop bumped his shoulder to mine. Solidarity, at least he was on my side. Bubba gave me a small smile, hey, maybe that was two of them.

Two for, one against and Archie—not present so abstaining. “Yes, I do.”

He scowled and took another bite of the sandwich. God, was it just that awful to believe?

“You work Wednesday and Thursday?” Jake checked.

“Every week.”

“You’re going out with Archie on Friday?”

Well... “Maybe? I mean it’s a study date so, it depends on if we have homework.”

Bubba hid a smile. “What about meeting Jake and me after the game? I know you don’t always like to go, but—we can grab something after and hang out for a bit.”

That got him another glare from Jake and Coop actually laughed. “That sounds good, I’m down for that if you guys don’t mind me tagging along.”

“Not a bit,” said Bubba. “Frankie?”

“Well, we’re doing our study thing after school? Figure out where we are on everything? Can we sort it out there?”

“Sure,” Jakes said, still eyeing me. “You *are* going to the party on Saturday, right?”

“Yep. And bringing Mathieu.”

“That new superhero flick opens this weekend,” Coop suggested. “Want to check it out with me after work on Sunday?”

What were they doing?

“Or we could do that Friday, they have late showings.”

Really? *What* were they doing?

“Let’s figure that out closer to the weekend.” I got to see Mathieu on Saturday, but I didn’t want to be too busy in case we could get together on Sunday again.

After that, they shifted a little to talking about the game from the week before the game coming up that week. When lunch was over, Bubba motioned to his bike and looked at me. “Want to give it a shot?”

I was nervous, no lie. “I’ve never ridden one.”

“It’s easy, I’m going to do all the work, you just sit on the back and hold onto me.”

That sounded too easy.

“You can just ride back with us,” Jake said. “You don’t need to freak yourself out.”

I hated the idea that it made me nervous. “Do you have another helmet?”

My palms were sweaty.

“Yep,” he unhitched it from the side of the bike and held it out to me.

“She’s in shorts,” Jake said.

“It’s a six-minute ride, and I’m going to go slow,” Bubba told him. “Relax, man. You’re way too tense.”

That didn't help, either.

Coop eyed me. "You sure?"

"Nope," I admitted, earning surprised looks all the way around. "But I want to give it a try. Maybe it'll be fun." Because Jake seemed dubious, I asked, "Would you mind bringing my backpack back to school?" I'd handed Coop my leftover sandwich to hold for me.

"Of course, I'll bring your backpack back to school. Study Hall, right?"

"Yeah, but I usually just go to the library."

Jake grinned. "Good to know."

Bubba straddled the bike, and then tugged on his own helmet before he glanced at me. Blowing out a breath, I flashed a grin at the guys before climbing on behind him.

"Arms around my waist," Bubba said over his shoulder after he got the engine rumbling and I had to lean in, but I wrapped my arms around him. Sometimes I forgot how much muscle he packed. The whole bike vibrated; I could feel it right to my bones. He walked the bike backward, and I shifted my head to look, but I didn't want to pull away.

Jake and Coop climbed into his SUV and before Bubba even made it to the turnout, they were right behind us.

"Hold on," Bubba ordered, and then we were off. He accelerated out of the lot and onto the street. The speed limit was 40, but it felt like we were flying.

I almost whooped. It was insane and over way too fast. I was still grinning as he rolled into the lot and slid his bike into the spot right next to my car.

With me squashed up against him, I don't think he could have missed my laughing during the ride. He grinned at me as I slid off from behind him. My legs were a little rubbery, and my heart was going way too fast.

"Fun, right?"

"Oh my god...when did you get this?"

“Right after my birthday,” he admitted. “Mom said I had to take the motorcycle safety course, get certified. Finished a week before school was done and then got the bike on my birthday, but Jake and I always ride together, so I didn’t think about it much.”

I pulled off the helmet and ran my fingers through my hair, pushing it back off my face.

“What made you bring her today?”

“You,” Bubba said. He secured the helmets and then pocketed the keys before waving me on.

“Me?”

“Yep. You were right... what you said on Sunday. You should get to experience it all. I didn’t realize we were holding you back.”

“Thanks,” I said, really touched.

“Now you can say you’ve ridden a motorcycle with a potential date.”

Wait... what?

“Want me to bring you over to my place on it tomorrow? That’d be two rides.”

Admittedly, an exceptionally cool idea, but... “Bubba? Potential date?”

He glanced at me, one hand on the door to let us back in the school. “Homecoming, Frankie. I was serious.” I couldn’t look away from the intensity in his expression. “You want to date. I want to take you on a date. Remember that—the asks are coming. You’re getting one.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Bubba wanted to date *me*?

Heat flushed my face, and I had to hurry up and go inside, so I stopped gaping like a fish. Jake caught up to us with my backpack and my sandwich, apparently Coop had to jet for class. Then both Bubba and Jake walked me to Study Hall before taking off for their classes.

Bubba had been serious, and I had no idea what to do with that info. At all.

Homecoming?

I checked in with the Study Hall proctor then diverted to the library. I found my table in the back and sat there, trying to figure it all out in my head. Bubba said he was serious, and he brought it up, not me.

A thump against the table dragged me back to the present. Jake grinned as he dropped into the chair next to me and slid a book over.

“I thought you had science or something this period?”

“I did, but I swapped it for Study Hall,” he smirked. “Got the go ahead this morning, but I had to go pick up the slip beforehand.”

“So now we have two classes together?”

“Imagine that,” he said, then tapped the book. “I read that yesterday. You’re going to love it.”

It was an alternate history. I flipped it over and read the back. “I heard about this. I just hadn’t had a chance to read it yet.”

“Now you have to.” He bent to the side and pulled another book out. “I got book two. Figured we can just go in tandem?”

Not unusual for us. “Okay...”

He cracked his book open, and I glanced at my backpack. I should be doing homework, but I didn’t have that much, and this sounded good. Opening mine, I started reading. The hour flew by. Just before the bell, Jake said, “See you in AP Euro.”

I chuckled. Outside the library, we went our separate ways. Instead of reading the alt history books in AP Euro, Jake pulled out the first round of study cards and quizzed me. Then I hit him with mine. We were betting number of answers with M&Ms, I scored way more than he did the first round, but he damn near took all of mine in the second.

Toward the end of the period, Jake glanced at the clock then at me. “You really want to date?”

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“No,” he said slowly. “I wanted to ask you out freshman year. I did ask you out.”

“When?”

“Wow,” Jake mouthed the word, and then shook his head slowly. “You really don’t remember?”

“No,” I said slowly. “We’ve been hanging out and doing things...” We had for years.

“Yep. I asked you out to the movies, just you and me, and you laughed. Then teased me about picking on you. After that, the only time you went to movies was if it was all of us. Friend-zoned from the beginning.”

Friend-zoned.

“Jake, I didn’t—you never said you were asking me out, out.”

“Didn’t think I had to,” he said.

“But you’ve dated...”

“Who?” Jake raised his eyebrows. “I go out with girls, sure. Sometimes they ask me, sometimes I ask them. But that’s pretty much go to a party, go to a movie, maybe make out, and then I’m on the phone with you. You’re the one I want to see every day.”

Heat swamped the back of my neck.

First Bubba.

Now Jake?

“So you want to date? I’m in. Just to be clear—I want to take you out, Frankie. You and me. If I get to make out with you? Even better.”

The bell rang and he grinned.

“And now we get to go discuss homework with the boys.” He stood up and grabbed my backpack. “Want me to carry this

for you?”

“I got it,” I said slowly, but he helped me put it on. As we left the classroom, though, he caught my hand and interlocked our fingers.

The last time I held Jake’s hand was when they dragged me to a horror movie triple feature. At the time, I’d nearly broken his hand and ended up hiding under his jacket for most of the first and half of the second movie.

I hated horror movies. Thankfully, they never made me see another one.

“You’re holding my hand,” I told him.

“Good,” Jake said. “You noticed.”

He walked me all the way out the door to where my car was. I expected Coop to be there and probably Bubba—since he’d parked his bike next to my car. What I wasn’t prepared for was the rose sitting on top of my car or Coop and Bubba standing side-by-side and staring at it.

Jake squeezed my hand, but he didn’t let me go as we walked toward them. Coop and Bubba weren’t the only ones staring. There were lots of kids going past and others pointing.

Coop spotted us and held up his hands. “I didn’t do it.”

“Neither did I,” Bubba said slowly. “Wish I had.” He glanced from me to where I was holding Jake’s hand then back up again before he eyed Jake. I didn’t have to look at Jake to see the smirk. Pulling free, I lifted the rose down. It was in a weighted vase—and it was a gorgeous lavender color. The vase was still cool, so it had just been put there and it smelled great.

There was a note on the side of it and Jake took hold of the vase so I could pull the note off.

“Is it from Frenchy?” Jake asked.

“Mathieu,” I corrected him.

“Whatever. Is it from him?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t opened it yet.” Still the butterflies in my stomach were thrilled at the proposition. Someone had left me a rose.

The note inside was typed.

LAVENDER ROSES SIGNIFY MYSTERY, ENCHANTMENT, AND attraction at first sight. You enchanted me from the beginning. I hope you enjoy a little mystery. You deserve far more.

THAT WAS IT.

“No one signed it,” Jake said before he glanced at me. Maybe it was from Mathieu. That was—incredibly sweet considering it was his birthday.

I sniffed the rose and grinned. “I guess that’s the point of the mystery. I don’t know who sent it.”

“Yeah,” Jake said slowly, and then looked over at Coop and Bubba. “It was here when you got here?”

“Yep,” Coop said, and Bubba frowned. They all glanced around, but I didn’t. If Mathieu left it for me then he intended for me to just enjoy the rose itself and the mystery, so that was what I intended to do.

Particularly with Jake standing right there and Bubba watching me so carefully. “We still going to get food and breakdown our study time?” I glanced at Coop, almost apologetically. “We still have to figure out our project.”

“Yeah, but we’ll take care of it.”

“Need a ride to your car?” I offered Jake and he nodded.

Coop had to hold the rose for me while I drove. I carried it with me into the restaurant. I didn’t want it to wilt in the car. Surprisingly, Archie sat at our table, food and drinks waiting for us.

“You losers are late...” Well, at least he looked fine and sounded fine. Maybe we’d avoided the mood. He flicked a

look at the rose in my hand then at me. “Hey, Frankie, where’s the boy toy?”

And maybe we hadn’t.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BOY NEXT DOOR

For the most part, Archie made a few cutting remarks and then let it go. Jake didn't try to hold my hand at the diner, nor did Bubba bring up homecoming. Coop seemed fine, better than fine. He was as relaxed, zen as ever, and I'd never been more thankful for his presence. Because, I couldn't shake the awareness of the shift in our friendship and... I worried.

They were fine, so I went with it. Tuesday I would head over to Bubba's—he'd follow me home on the bike and I'd get a ride on his motorcycle. I was totally down for that then we'd work on calculus. Wheedling from the guys did not get them included, and I couldn't say anything, but it was because Bubba wanted to work on his auditions. Wednesday and Thursday, I had to work while Jake and Bubba had football practice in the afternoon.

When the subject of Friday came up, I pulled out my notes from class and gave Archie our assignment. "We're going out still on Friday," Archie reminded me. Before I could amend it to *if we needed to*, he pointed out, "We had to cut our dinner short Friday because we had to pick up Coop. Coop can get his own ride to the game."

Rather than object, Coop just shrugged, and I sighed. I debated arguing it but decided Archie and I could talk about it over dinner on Friday. "Fine," I agreed. "But my treat this time."

Archie snorted. "We'll figure it out. So, Frankie works Saturday—that leaves the party Saturday evening. You want

one of us to pick you up since you have to work, and you're probably going to be tired?"

"I'll be fine, I have to pick up Mathieu anyway."

"Cool," Archie said. For the strangest moment, his reaction surprised me. "Can't wait to meet him." That just added to my surprise. Then we were back to Sunday, though Jake and Bubba hadn't brought up meeting after the game on Friday and no one mentioned the movie on Sunday. But those weren't studying, so it made sense. I only half-listened to the conversation after, the debates about assignments, colleges, and essays. We agreed to meet the following Monday for college prep as well as homework.

"I like this," Archie said as we were packing up. "The five of us. Every Monday. Make it a regular thing."

"Thought we already did," Jake said. Outside, Jake followed Coop and me to the car and he opened my door. Quieter, he said, "History Buffs tonight?"

"I could go for that."

"See you then," he said, and Bubba shot me a wink as he slid on his bike. Only Archie didn't seem to be in a rush to go, because he leaned against his car.

After I slid my backpack into the car along with my rose—I wasn't leaving it behind—and got the car started so the air conditioning was running, I glanced at Coop. "Gimme a sec?"

"No problem."

Shutting the door, I crossed over to Archie. He tracked my steps and canted his head at my approach.

"Something wrong?" He raised his eyebrows and the hint of a lazy smile was closer to Archie than he'd been since we showed up.

"Was going to ask you the same thing." I studied him. "You okay?"

"Never been better," he exhaled the words, all breezy and loose. "How about you? How are you doing?"

“Fine. Busy. But fine.”

“You had a date and you’re just *fine*?” He frowned. “You need a better date.”

“Rude.”

“Eh,” he said with a shrug. “Sometimes.”

“You know,” I told him. “You don’t have to pretend everything is always great.”

“So I’ve been told.” He nodded toward my car. “You should go, you’re not supposed to lock kids or pets in hot cars.”

Rolling my eyes, I backed away hands up. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Haven’t decided if I’m going to school yet.”

“Archie...”

“Go away, Frankie. I’ll bring you your coffee tomorrow.” With that, he circled his car and dropped into the driver’s seat. I was still standing next to mine when the Ferrari peeled out.

Pulling out my phone, I sent him a text.

I know I said some harsh things on Saturday, but you seemed okay on Sunday. If I hurt your feelings, I’m sorry. If something else is wrong, I’m here.

I debated sending the message. He still hadn’t read my earlier ones. Then again, I ghosted them all summer, and I’d ignored their texts last night. Including ones asking me who was in my place...

After a brief hesitation, I hit send.

“Everything okay?” Coop asked as I put on my seatbelt.

“Just worried about Archie,” I admitted. “Does he seem off to you?”

“It’s Archie,” Coop shrugged. “He’s always a little off.”

Well, he wasn’t entirely wrong. *Still*. “You know we didn’t figure out our project in there...” I’d brought it up, but Coop

changed the subject.

“I believe we should figure it out on our own, no big group thing. Saturday didn’t exactly go well...”

“I don’t think that was our project’s fault.” It had been mine.

“But I’d rather it was just you and me. You know, like it used to be. That’d be fun right?”

“You know it used to be you, me, and Jake, right?” We met Bubba in middle school when Jake was overseas with his family. He clicked back in with us in junior high after they moved back. Archie came later, ninth grade.

“Nope, it’s been you and me since Kindergarten. Jake didn’t show up until second grade, when he decided he was going to marry you, but I told him he was too late.”

I burst out laughing as I pulled into our apartments. I’d forgotten all about that. “That’s right, ‘cause we got married during recess.” In the first month of kindergarten, Coop had been my lifeline. It helped that our moms traded off—mine would take us in the morning and Coop’s would get us in the afternoon. Then I would play at his place until my mom got home.

“Right, so—like it used to be.”

“In kindergarten.”

As I parked, Coop grinned. “Exactly. So—let’s go drop off your rose, feed your cats, and then you can come hang out at my place until your mom gets home?”

Climbing out of the car, I shrugged. “Or you can hang out with me. I have no idea when Mom is going to be home. You’ll just have to pay the cat gods with pets.”

“I can do that,” Coop said with a grin. He waited for me to get my backpack on then handed me the rose. “You want to split dinner if your mom is late?”

My mom *would* be late. I hadn’t spoken to her since before Mathieu came over the day before, and she hadn’t come home, not even late the night before.

If I kept spending money on takeout, I'd be broke.

“Why don't I see what we have in the fridge? I can cook, and it might be better than going out.” I'd had a lot of fun fixing that dessert and, yes, part of that was the company. However, Coop was right. It had been the two of us, a lot, over the years. Even when he was an idiot.

“Cool, want me to grab anything to bring over?”

“Actually... I still have dessert.” It wouldn't keep until the project was due, so I'd have to make another one. *Sounds like a good excuse to invite Mathieu over again.*

Coop's expression clouded briefly, but he passed over my rose and grinned. “Maybe not for long.”

I gave him a light shove as I hugged the rose to me. It smelled great. “I'll see you in a few. I'll leave the backdoor unlocked.”

“Got it,” he called, already jogging away.

Inside, the cats were as loud as I expected. I carried the rose into my room and set it on my desk. The accompanying note I read again, then chuckled. Leaving my backpack on the bed, I got changed into lighter clothes—tank top and sleep shorts since I wasn't going out again. Then I swung by the bathroom to clean the litter box, before running the sack out to the garbage can. I was jogging back as Coop rounded the corner, and he shook his head.

“I would've taken it out for you.”

“I'm a big girl.” The ground was hot, so I double-timed it to the door. Coop followed me inside. “Haven't checked the fridge yet. Two more minutes.”

Tiddles made his displeasure known as I scooted past him and Tabby streaked for the kitchen.

Coop's chuckle followed me as I slipped into the bathroom to wash my hands. “Awww, is Frankie being mean to the poor kitties? Frankie doesn't love you anymore, but Coop is here, and I'm your favorite.”

Laughing, I finished washing my hands and made it back to the kitchen in time to find Coop divvying up a can of food amongst the cats. “You’re a sucker.”

“Yep, but they do like me best.” He bumped me on the way past. I gave him a shove in return and he grinned. “It’s definitely my charm and personality.”

“And your talent with b.s.” I agreed as I pulled the fridge and freezer open. Our options were... “Salisbury Steak.” Oh yum. Mom remembered to pick up one of those for me.

Coop made a gagging noise. “You’re the only person I know that likes them.”

I shrugged. “They’re good and easy to fix. We’ve got—oh, Mom splurged.” I pulled out three boxes triumphantly: potato skins, chicken fingers, and mozzarella sticks. “I know I said I’d cook.”

“Nope,” Coop said with a grin. “Sold.” He moved into the living room and toed off his shoes before leaning in the doorway as I got the tray set up with all the different options. They all needed to cook in the oven for about the same length of time.

Oven on, I shoved the tray in and added about three extra minutes to the cook time for the preheat and twirled. “Touchdown.”

Coop snorted. “That’s not how that works.”

“Yeah, I know, and I still think I’m the only person in Texas who doesn’t care.”

He chuckled. “Where do you want to do this?”

I grabbed some sodas out of the fridge. “Bedroom is probably more comfortable, but we can also use the sofa—except... No table.”

He winced. “Was your mom mad?”

“She didn’t care,” I told him. He frowned as he took his soda, then pivoted to follow me back to my room.

“She didn’t care?” Disbelief soaked each word. “We broke the table.”

“She didn’t—how is your arm by the way?” I motioned to where he had the fat square Band-Aid on his right triceps.

“It’s a scratch,” he said.

He dropped his backpack on the floor. Once I sat on the bed, back to the headboard, he settled on it next to me. One of the perks of having a full-sized bed—we both fit.

“I can’t believe she didn’t care,” he said, then took a swallow of the soda before setting it aside and stretching his legs.

“Maybe it meant more to me than her.” She certainly had a lot of other things on her mind. Things I really didn’t want to think about. “So, for now at least, I don’t have to replace it, and we’re not exactly using the living room that much.”

“I am sorry Frankie.”

“I know,” I said bumping his shoulder. “It’s done.” Stretching out, I snagged my laptop and pulled it over to prop against my thighs. Opening it up, I tabbed us over into a fresh document and typed out our book title followed by lit project.

We sat there staring at the screen absolutely silent and then Coop began to snicker and a giggle tore loose in me. “Yeah, we school good,” he joked. “I still think the escape room would have been fun.”

“Too complicated,” I pointed out. “Not to mention if we try to find time to go to one now without everyone else...”

“Yeah,” Coop said with a sigh. “Okay...thinking hats on. What can we do to convey the understanding of the story via pop culture that is creative and different?”

Well, if I already had that answer, we wouldn’t be staring at a blank page. For now, I squinted at the wall. I had photos stuck in different places, a couple of posters, and a painting we’d done at one of those painting and wine places—we’d done it without the wine, but all five of us had gone and it had been a hysterical night.

The painting was of a rain drenched Paris street focused on a coffee shop. There were only supposed to be two chairs at the table, but we'd each added more. Mine had five chairs, one for each of us. When had we done that? Summer between sophomore and junior year? Bubba had gotten his license first. It had been the first time we all piled in a car and went somewhere without our parents.

So. Awesome.

"Maybe we should work on essays," Coop suggested and made a face. We'd been sitting there dead quiet for ten minutes. Laughing, I tabbed out of the document and over to Netflix. The oven timer would go off soon.

"Find us something to watch with food and we'll see if we come up with something while not thinking about it." Some of the best solutions to my problems came when I focused on other things. "And no..."

"...horror. I know. No horror. We won't ever do that to you again. I think you almost ruined Jake's football career when you nearly dislocated his arm."

Laughing, I made my way to the kitchen. I'd pulled out the plates and the condiments—marinara for the mozzarella sticks, sour cream for the potato skins, and ranch dressing for the chicken fingers—and had everything set up before the timer went off.

My stomach gurgled as I split the food evenly.

"Was that last Godzilla any good?" Coop yelled.

"I have no idea. I like the monster island one."

"They don't have that."

Laughing, I shook my head and called, "Well, then keep looking..."

"Yeah, yeah..." Oven off, food plated, I put away the oven mitts. "Hey, Frankie, your phone just went off. It's Archie. Want me to answer it?"

"Please..." I'd just picked up the plates when someone knocked on the door. Setting them back down, I glanced

through the window to the side of the door and frowned. Jake? Opening the door, I stared at Jake who held up bags from our favorite Chinese place. “Hey...”

He grinned and I swore, his gaze swept me from head to toe before he said, “Hey. I grabbed a little bit of everything. I know you like their doughnuts.”

Their... Were we having dinner tonight?

“Come on in,” I said, waving him inside and stepping back to let him in. He caught the door and nodded at me to go before closing it behind him and flipping the deadbolt. “I didn’t realize you were coming over.” I felt kind of bad, especially since he brought food.

He glanced at the food on the counter and his expression fell. My stomach knotted and all that earlier confusion from when he said he wanted to date me crawled right up wrap around my throat. “You have company?”

With a swift look at me, he checked the living room. Coop was still in my room and his voice drifted if not the actual words.

“It’s just Coop,” I told him when Jake’s expression grew even more thunderous.

He blew out a breath when I said that. “Oh.”

The word sorry stuck to my tongue, because why should I apologize for having one of my friends over? I’d thought he meant we’d watch History Buffs the way we had last time, not that he would come over.

“Come on, we were just going to look for a movie because we’re stuck on the assignment.” I rose up on my tiptoes to grab him a plate from the cupboard, then I grabbed more silverware. “Can you snag the paper towels?”

We were about to have a ton of food in my room. I would most likely have to wash my comforter before the weekend. No way we’d make it through the food without spilling something.

“Got ‘em.” He toed his shoes off next to Coop’s then followed me back to my room. Coop glanced up as we came in.

“Hey, here she is—with Jake. Hey Jake,” he greeted him with a little frown before taking his plate and handing me the phone.

I put my plate on the desk aware of Jake as he moved to stand right next to me and set out the Chinese food. “Hey Archie,” I said into the phone.

“Hey,” he replied his voice a little solemn. “Didn’t mean to bust up the party.”

“It’s not really a party, Coop and I were doing homework and grabbing something to eat. Jake just dropped by—we got our signals crossed. I think we’re going to watch a movie and eat while Coop and I figure this project out.”

“Yeah? Got enough for a fourth?”

Jake leaned a little closer. “I do but you better pick up some ice cream on the way. Gotta pay the door fee.”

I snorted and pushed his arm. “We still have opera cake, if you want to try that. No need for ice cream.”

“Not even mint chocolate chip?”

My all-time favorite ice cream beaten out only by...

“...or maybe the double chunk chocolate chip chocolate ice cream?”

Death by chocolate was the only way to go. “You’re killing me.” I looked at the greasy appetizer food then the Moo Goo Gai Pan and rice Jake had on his plate, not to mention the sweet sugar and cinnamon doughnuts I could smell in the bag he set next to me.

“But what a way to go, right?” Archie’s chuckle was much more him. “Tell you what, I’ll bring both. See you guys in fifteen.” Then the call ended.

“Archie’s coming over?” Coop asked.

“Apparently,” Jake said pulling out my desk chair and I shook my head.

“We can sit on the bed. It’s more comfortable anyway.” Though we were gonna run out of room when Archie got there. I could always go steal the couch cushions or we could go sit out there to watch a movie. Eh, we’d figure it out.

Plate in hand, I walked up onto my bed and Coop snagged my laptop so I could settle against the headboard. I scooted over close to him so there’d be room. When I patted the bed next to me, Jake gave me a droll look before he crossed over to sit.

“What movie are we watching?” He stretched his legs out. I kept mine crisscrossed and balanced my plate in the cradle as I leaned forward to unlock the screen and pull up Netflix again.

“We were trying to figure that out,” Coop said. “No...”

“Horror,” Jake finished with a roll of his eyes. “Never again. Anyone tries to make you watch horror again, I’ll save you the trouble and break their arms for you.” He rubbed my back gently, and I laughed.

“I did not break your arm.”

“No, but you damn sure tried.” The hand on my back sent goosebumps racing over my skin. Hardly the first time he’d ever touched me, but still... I focused on the screen. “So comedy or action?” They’d sooner drill their own teeth than watch a rom com. Okay, maybe that wasn’t fair, but I’d like to actually *enjoy* the romantic comedy rather than listen to their gagging and complaining.

“Action,” Coop and Jake said in one voice.

“Lemme see,” Jake said after he wiped his hands. I passed him the laptop and leaned back to start eating my chicken fingers. Coop had finished almost all of his food and he was eyeing mine.

I offered him one of the potato skins and he beamed. “You’re the best.”

“Don’t steal her food,” Jake muttered.

“You brought more.”

“Then ask for mine,” Jake said. “I dare you...what ‘bout this?” He turned the screen. I’d heard about the movie, but I hadn’t seen that one.

“No way,” Coop answered.

“It’s got kickass action.” Jake looked at me. “Trust me, it’s a thing of beauty. You’re going to love it.”

“Jake, man—they kill the dog.”

Oh. My heart fisted. “They kill the dog?”

“Yeah,” Coop said, *staring* at Jake. “They *kill* the *dog*. Frankie can’t watch that.”

I really didn’t want to watch that.

“Yeah okay, it goes like this,” Jake said. “The guy’s wife dies, and he goes through the funeral and everything else, but he’s alone. He’s devastated. He’s lost his wife and his best friend. A delivery truck shows up and brings him this puppy. His wife apparently ordered the puppy to be delivered after her death because she knew he wouldn’t do well. It takes him some time, but he starts to bond with the puppy and they’re doing okay—then these assholes show up and they jump him. They steal his car and kill the dog.”

I can almost feel the tears in my eyes as the horror wells up. “That sounds like an awful movie.”

“Yeah, but he gets the assholes, that’s the point. He goes after the people who killed his dog and it’s—just trust me, Frankie. We’ll skip forward so you don’t have to see it, but I think you’re going to love it.” The pleading on Jake’s face urged me to agree, but...

A knock carried through the quiet, and my phone buzzed all at once.

“I’ll let him in,” Coop said, hopping up to go answer the door.

“Hey,” Jake said, nudging his finger under my chin. “I get it. You don’t like it when they hurt animals.”

No. I really didn’t.

“Even when it’s fake...”

“Yeah, but it’s not fake in the story, and that’s awful.”

He chortled, but he didn’t seem to be making fun of me. “I promise. It’ll be okay. You can hold my hand if you get scared.”

I eyed him. “Even if I might break your arm?”

“Even if...”

Then Archie was in the door with ice cream pints and spoons. “What are we watching and what am I eating?”

When we told him, his expression grew fierce and he glared at Jake. “You can’t make her watch that. The dog dies.”

“We know,” Jake said. “We’re going to skip forward.”

It took us a minute to sort ourselves out. Somehow, we ended up all four on the bed, with Archie and Jake on either side of me and Coop sprawled on his stomach, head pillowed on my legs. It might have made more sense to watch in the living room, but the guys were happy here.

Still, they skipped it forward and we watched all of it.

Every awesome moment where the hero extracted revenge for his dog.

Jake was right.

I loved it.

And it was kind of nice being in a pile with them, too. At some point Archie leaned his head on my shoulder and my head was on Jake’s.

Oh, and the ice cream? I ate the whole pint.

They were definitely trying to kill me.

It was late by the time the second movie ended and I was yawning my head off. They helped me clean up, and headed

for the door, but Archie and Jake were both lingering until Coop shooed them outside.

“Lock the door, Frankie,” he told me. But Archie paused and glanced at his watch.

“Your mom isn’t here...”

“Yeah I know,” I said with a shrug. She’d probably texted or something. I’d stopped looking at my phone during the movie. “She’s probably working late.” Or on a date, but I didn’t say that.

Archie frowned.

“It’s all good. Night guys.”

It was only after my teeth were brushed and I was back in bed hugging a pillow that smelled like Jake that it hit me. Coop and I never did our homework. Neither did Jake and I, and Archie and I didn’t go over government. It was just hanging out, cuddling, and movies.

My phone buzzed and it was Jake.

Jake: *Tonight wasn’t a date, but a lot of fun. I do want to take you out—just you and me. Say yes? We’ll make time.*

Just you and me. That was what Coop said. He wanted me to himself for a while.

Bubba wanted to take me to homecoming.

Jake wanted to take me out.

And Archie? He hadn’t said.

I swallowed. Was I dating my best friends?

Oh crap.

Could you date your best friends?

Or three of them?

Wait, I was dating the three of them and Mathieu?

Nervous, I sent to Jake *Even if I’m still going out with Mathieu—well, sorta—and Bubba wants to take me to homecoming?*

Biting my lip, I waited.

Jake: *Even if. Say yes.*

Eyes closed I let out a little shiver then typed in *Yes.*

Jake sent me a big smiley face and a kiss emoji followed by: *Talk to you tomorrow. We'll make time.*

Rolling onto my back, I hugged the phone.

I was dating guys.

Plural.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAKING PLANS

Tuesday got off to a much better start than the day before. Mom was in the kitchen feeding the cats when I got up. She even had a pot of coffee made. Since she was still in her pajamas, her hair pulled back into a tidy knot, I wasn't sure if she was going to work.

"Late start today," she told me while I ate my toast. "Probably a late night tonight."

Maybe I should have left it alone, but if anything, leaving an uncomfortable subject alone with the guys had created months of tension and discomfort for all of us. "You've had a lot of those lately. Is everything all right?"

"I know," my mom said with a sigh as she poured her coffee. She dragged her steps a little. The shadows beneath her eyes said she hadn't been getting a lot of rest. "I'm sorry, Frankie. I keep thinking I've got it all done and then... How are you doing? Everything fine at school?"

"Everything's great," I told her. It was true. "Got my French project done, though I have to finish compiling the video. I'm going to do that later tonight. I think there's still some left in the fridge, if you want try it."

She shot me an almost guilty look. "I might have tried it when I got in last night—along with the leftover Chinese. Thanks for that."

"You're welcome. I have to make a second one, so if any of it survives the sampling at school, I'll leave you some in the fridge next week."

“Thanks. You have a good day.”

That about summed up our whole conversation. She wandered back to her room with her coffee and closed the door. The TV was on in there when I left to meet Coop at the car.

Bubba’s bike was parked next to where I usually parked. He would have to have left it there and then hiked over to the stadium for practice. I was looking forward to riding it later. We found Archie in the cafeteria with coffee and ended up talking about the movie from the night before until Bubba and Jake got there. It was nice. Probably the most relaxed since we got back to school, at least for me. Although, I had to admit, I worried the dating thing might affect the dynamic, the guys picked on each other like they always did in between teasing me.

Government proved duller than dirt. Archie kept sending me menus and on the pretext of studying, I flipped through them then texted back a ?.

His response was simply *Pick one.*

I snuck a look at him and raised my eyebrows and he mouthed *Friday.*

Oh.

He had said something about doing something this Friday without Coop waiting for us. I was torn, though. The menus all looked really good. So, finally, I sent back two of them with *can’t decide, either of these look awesome.*

Archie: *Deal. Want to do something after?*

I tilted my head. Bubba and Jake wanted me to meet them after the game. *Maybe. Might see Bubba and Jake after game. Want to hang out and then go see them?*

Kind of a gamble but...

Archie: *Just not at the game, right?*

I made a face and he grinned.

Archie: *I can think of something.*

Out in the hall after class, I caught his arm and said, “Hey Arch, you really okay?”

“I’m great, Frankie.” He winked. “I got plans for Friday *and* Saturday. See you at lunch?”

“Having lunch with Mathieu,” I reminded him.

“*Right*, still need to introduce me to him.”

“I’ll get right on that.” He’d meet him on Saturday for sure, though. Bubba was waiting for me at the stairs to walk to class where we had the fun of taking a pop quiz. I had a feeling we’d be seeing a lot of those in calculus. Afterward, Bubba walked me to French.

“We’re still on after school, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I promised. “I get to ride the bike.”

He grinned. “Yes, you do.” Smile fading a notch, he glanced past me. “Hey, Matt.”

“Ian,” Mathieu greeted him.

“See you at lunch,” Bubba said.

“Eating with Mathieu today,” I reminded him.

“Oh...well, come along and eat with us.”

I stared at Bubba. *No*.

“Maybe next time,” Mathieu said. “Francesca and I are going off campus.”

“Good to know.” Bubba winked at me. “See you after school, Frankie.”

“They don’t want you to go out with me alone?” Mathieu asked.

Rolling my eyes, I gave him a gentle nudge in the door. “They’re just used to our crazy schedule.”

Made it through French doing drills on vocabulary then practicing conversational by pairing up and interviewing the student next to me. I got Emile. He was a quiet kid and had a slightly higher-class ranking than I did. We despised each other in elementary school, got along fine in middle school

and junior high, but since we got to high school we'd been... neutral.

After the class was over, I'd pretty much remembered all the reasons why. Emile wasn't a bad guy, he was just—boring. Terminally boring. So boring that even his questions made me want to go to sleep.

I told Mathieu where I'd parked so he'd meet me there for lunch then headed off to AP Lit. As soon as we were in our seats, Ms. Farjardo passed out a package of paper. "What you're going to find on this sheet is Cardinal Woolsey's speech from Shakespeare's Henry the VIII. Read it carefully. Then, on the blank pages that follow, I want you write an essay analyzing how Shakespeare used allusion, figurative language, and tone to convey the Cardinal's complex response to his dismissal from court."

She checked her watch. "You will have forty minutes. Starting... now."

Staring at the speech on the first page, I had to push all thoughts of dating, boys, homework, and Mom craziness to the side. Shakespeare was not my favorite to read.

Not by a long shot.

The man pontificated and the flowery language of the time made me crazy. That and I preferred his comedies to his tragedies and his histories—though, I could probably argue his histories were pretty damn tragic.

Forty minutes and a hand cramp later, I'd just finished my second re-read of the essay when Ms. Fajardo called time. She gathered our assignments and then released us five minutes early—probably out of pity for our melted brains. Coop staggered along, one arm over my shoulder as we headed downstairs.

"Did you know she was going to do that?" he asked, then moaned like a zombie.

"Today? Not specifically, but we knew those were going to happen."

“Well, I think she killed me,” Coop admitted. “If the whole exam is like that, will you promise to visit my grave every week and bring me flowers?”

With a snort, I nudged him. “Of course, I will. I’ll even bring coffee and fill you in on all the fun you’re missing.”

“Mean. Mean.” At the cafeteria, he tugged my ponytail gently. “Have a good lunch with Frenchy.”

“He has a name, Coop.”

“I know, but he’s still French. Make sure I get all the deets on the ride home.” Then he waved as I headed for the hall toward my car. At least with the head start, I’d be there to meet him.

The heat slapped me in the face on my way out the door, so I got the car open and the engine on to get it cooling then took the time to admire Bubba’s bike. It really was a pretty bike.

Mathieu took a little longer than I expected, but then he was there—a little flushed like he’d been running. “Sorry, Francesca,” he said, catching my hand and pressing a kiss to each of my cheeks. “I had to stay a moment after class to discuss an assignment—it uses spreadsheets and interest rates, all boring, trust me.”

“No problem, hop in.”

We headed over to one of the fast food chains. Fun fact, despite coming from the land of to die for cuisine, Mathieu was a fast food addict. More, he was a salty *french* fries with lots of ketchup kind of guy. Not that I minded them, but I wasn’t a fan of ketchup on anything that wasn’t my burger, which seemed to shock him.

“I thought all Americans loved to drown their food in ketchup.”

“You gotta be careful about painting all Americans the same. We’re wildly different.”

“Perhaps. I like this getting to know you better part... So, what is your favorite food?”

“I don’t know, it kind of changes? I like trying new things. There’s always pizza? But I eat that all the time. Used to like roasts and roasted potatoes and stuff.” I’d had a chicken sandwich rather than a burger. “I think that’s why I had so much fun making the cake.”

“And here I thought it was because I helped.” The teasing note in his voice made me smile.

“You were definitely a perk.”

“Have you put your video together yet?”

“Nope, gonna try and do that tonight. Otherwise, I’ll have to do it after the weekend. I get to make another opera cake to bring in to sample”

“I’m excited. My host family was very impressed with the one you made. They also made me a birthday cake with all the frosting and trimmings. It was a good evening.”

Lunch was quiet and nice. Maybe too quiet. The weirdest part was I kind of missed the guys being there and teasing. Considering how irked I’d been with them, that was kind of weird.

“Did you get to talk to your parents at all?”

“We email and use WhatsApp to chat often.” He pulled out his phone and then showed me the text with the photo of the cake. “I sent her a picture of your cake and told her it was almost as good as hers.”

“Almost...” I laughed.

“She is my *maman*. I am not telling her anyone’s cake is better than hers.”

Made sense.

Still, it was kind of sweet.

“You should do the foreign exchange,” Mathieu told her. “Come to France next semester. We could be your host family.”

My laugh was a lot louder. “First of all, it’s expensive to do those programs, and it might be risky if I did it right at the

end of my senior year.”

“Then over the summer. You can just come visit, and I will show you around. We won’t have to go to school.”

Not committing to anything, I said, “That could be fun, too.” Going to France *would* be fun. I’d always wanted to travel, but travel was expensive, and college had to come first. College. Graduation. Get a good job. Then... then I could do the fun stuff.

I had a plan.

“Francesca,” Mathieu said as we walked back to the car. “I am going to persuade you.”

“To go to France?”

“Yes.”

“You do realize we have only known each other a week, right?” I’d just hit the unlock on my car when he leaned close and my breath caught. The kiss the other night had been just a brush...

A car horn blasted, and I jerked back. Course, he jumped, too, and we both looked at the street, but it was pretty packed with lunchtime traffic. Blowing out a breath, I tried to crush the nerves fluttering through me. “We should probably get back.”

The moment had pretty much crashed with the sudden adrenaline surge.

“Yes,” he said, brushing my cheek with his knuckles before he opened the driver’s door for me. “Next time?”

Next time, what? Next time we would get a real kiss in?

Why not? “Next time.”

Wearing a wider grin, he moved to the passenger side. Back at school, I lucked right back into my spot next to Bubba’s bike. But the bell rang as we got out of the car, so we both had to hurry.

Jake was just stepping out of study hall when I got there to check in. He waited for me then we walked to the library

together. I dug out my lit homework and the government reading I hadn't done the night before. Instead of sitting across the table, Jake sat next to me foot hooked into the rung of my chair.

"How was lunch?" the quiet question pulled me out of the Federalist papers, which really weren't riveting reading.

"It was fun," I told him. "We got burgers...talked. It was good." Taco Tuesday would have to wait until the following week

He nodded slowly. "Do you have a lot of homework?"

"Well, I have some reading. Didn't get it done last night. People kept showing up."

With a smirk, he said, "You could have kicked us out."

"Yeah, but you brought food, and Archie brought ice cream."

Jake snorted. "Well, if all it takes is food and ice cream, what time do you want me to come by tonight?"

"I'm going over to Bubba's tonight. Calculus, remember?"

"Yeah, calculus takes the two of you a few hours alone."

I wasn't going to have this argument. "He asked me first."

"Yeah," Jake said, then hooked two of my fingers and tugged my hand over to hold it. His palms were a little rough and callused. His skin was warm, and his hands seemed a lot larger than mine, too. "So..."

"So?" I was not going to be doing homework. That much was clear.

"You said yes."

All the earlier flutters at the fast food place had nothing on the jitters erupting in my system. We were going to talk about this here? In the library? Granted, we'd both been whispering, and we were in a corner away from the librarians, but still. "I did."

His slow smile sent a thread of tension all the way through me, and I damn near squirmed in my seat. All of the guys were good looking; I'd have had to be blind and dead not to notice their attractiveness. Jake had always been more rugged than the others, with Bubba being the closest to matching him physically. I'd seen them turn their charms on other girls plenty of time, but this...

“How tired are you when you get off work?”

The question was not where I thought we were going with this. So I gave a little shrug, vividly aware of the fact he was drawing circles against my palm with his thumb. “Depends. Sometimes, if we're really busy, I can be beat by the time I get out of there.”

“But you never work past ten, right?”

“Nope. Most of the time they try to get me out of there at nine.” It was a four-hour shift from five to nine every Wednesday and Thursday.

“Think your mom would mind if I came over after work tomorrow?”

Would she mind? Maybe. Course she'd have to be there to even know. “I don't know. I can ask...”

“Would you?”

“Okay.” Then with a glance around to make sure we were still alone, I looked at him. “Dumb question?”

“Sure.”

“What do you want to do that late?”

“See, the girl I like. She's really busy, and she's got these other dates planned, but I still want to see her.” Jake gave my hand a squeeze. “I don't care if we do homework or watch videos. I'll grab a pizza and bring it, then you and I can hang out.”

The jitters turned into little knots. “That's really sweet.”

“But I'm putting in my request right now. Your next full free evening... you and me. Real date.”

My next semi-free evening was Sunday. I'd been... "Are you busy Sunday?"

He grinned. "I am now."

Face heating, I went to lean back in my chair, but Jake kept ahold of my hand.

That was pretty much how we spent the rest of our study hall, holding hands while we both pretended to read. But Jake spent most of that time watching me rather than reading, and I couldn't stop the stupid grinning.

AP Euro wasn't much better. Though, we pretended to quiz each other. Jake wanted to do a scoring system so that whoever got the highest score picked our date on Sunday.

Our *date*.

A niggle of guilt wormed through me because I wasn't going to have as much time for Mathieu, but I was taking him to the party.

After class, Jake walked me out to my car, hand in hand. We breezed right past Maria and she did a double take. Mentally, I sighed. Rachel Manning spotted us, too. It would hit social media anytime now. As tempted as I was to pull my hand out of Jake's to save us both the grief, I didn't want to. It was—nice.

As with the day before, Coop and Bubba were waiting for us next to my car, with Archie. There on the top were two roses, both white in a fresh vase. Jake let out a grunt. "That's two days in a row."

"We noticed," Bubba said, turning to glance at us and just like the day before, he looked to where Jake was holding my hand and then narrowed his eyes at Jake. They'd left the roses sitting on the roof of the car with another note attached. Tugging away from Jake, I jogged the last couple of steps and reached for them. The glass was just a little warm and like the other vase, it was weighted at the bottom. The flowers showed no wilting.

"And this isn't any of you?" I glanced at the four. Bubba held up his hands.

“They were there when I got here, but then so were Coop and Archie.”

Glancing at the note, I read the four lines and then laughed.

WHITE ROSES SIGNIFY INNOCENCE AND NEW BEGINNINGS. THEY also mean I’m thinking of you. Now that I’ve typed that it sounds creepy. It’s not. I promise. I just want to see you smile.

THE ROSES SMELLED GREAT AND THE PETALS WERE STILL SOFT. But when I looked at the guys, I found no answers. “Well, I like ‘em.”

“What does it say?”

“Something for me,” I teased. “But it’s funny,” so I read it to them. Neither Jake nor Bubba laughed.

“That *is* kind of creepy, Frankie,” Bubba pointed out and I shrugged.

“They’re roses. I like ‘em.” I dropped my backpack in the backseat and Coop took the roses for me. “You’re following?” I turned to look at Bubba.

He nodded.

Archie scowled. “Is there a reason the calculus study session is closed? You know, some of us also have math homework.”

“Because we get distracted when it’s all of us, and I need to pass this math class.” Bubba’s logic was sound.

“And you want Frankie all to yourself,” Archie pointed out.

Bubba didn’t deny it, he just grinned as he straddled his bike. “Like you don’t, Mr. Friday Night?”

I opened my mouth then snapped it shut because heat rushed in, and I was pretty sure my face caught on fire. “I’ll talk to you guys later.”

Then I slid into the car and got it started. Coop snickered as I pulled out.

“What?” I asked him.

“You went from dating no one to dating *everyone*,” he said, grinning. “It’s cute.”

Everyone? “It’s... weird.”

“Yeah? What’s so weird about it?”

“We’ve been friends for years.”

“That’s not weird,” Coop pointed out. “That’s a perk. You already know that Archie can be controlling, Jake demanding and overprotective, and Bubba’s basically a golden retriever.”

“*Coop.*”

“What? It’s true. Not sure about Frenchy, but, eh. But our guys? I know our guys.” Did he not include himself in that?

How did I ask him...?

“Besides, if I know you’re out with one of them, and I’m not there, I know you’re okay. Frenchy, not so much. I like knowing you’re safe. I like you happy, too.” Then he sighed, “Course, getting time on your calendar is going to be hard, but I reserve the right to pull the best friend card and stake out some time of my own.”

Laughing, I said, “Last night didn’t work out too well for that.”

“Nope, but since they crashed my date, I plan to totally crash one of theirs. You just have to let me know when they’re going to be there. Or, you know, I can just be at your place regularly.”

I groaned. “Coop...”

“What?” he asked as I pulled into a parking spot at the apartments. “Think I didn’t want a shot at dating you, too? Don’t be silly, Frankie. I’m in.”

He was out of the car and talking to Bubba before those words totally sank in. He wanted to date me? I rescued my

roses from Coop who grinned as he hooked the backpack off my shoulder. "I'll hang onto this for you."

Though I needed to feed the cats, I almost didn't want to leave them alone. There was something odd in the air around them. And I still could get Coop's comment out of my head. He wanted a shot at dating me? Even though I hurried, it still took me a few minutes. When I got back out there, Bubba and Coop were in the middle of a fierce, if very quiet, debate? Conversation?

I slowed as I approached, trying to give them time to sort out their argument, but they broke off when Bubba spotted me. "You ready?"

"Yep." I glanced from one to the other. "You guys okay?"

"Sure," Coop said. "We just had to work out some details for the thing."

"The thing?"

"The thing," Bubba confirmed. "At the place."

"With the people," Coop tacked on.

"Yeah..." I shook my head. "Whatever." After sliding my backpack on, I accepted the helmet from Bubba. Excitement threaded through me. Bubba climbed on the bike and I slid on behind him.

"Hey, Frankie?" Coop said and Bubba straightened as we both glanced at him. "I know you're busy this weekend, but next Saturday? Go out with me?"

He was asking me out, right in front of Bubba. It was already kind of awkward with Jake and Archie seemed to be turning our study dates into date dates, too.

"You sure?"

"Am I sure that I want to take you out?" He raised his brows. "Only since kindergarten. You and me, c'mon... it'll be fun."

That was usually my line, but I wanted to say yes. "All right, a week from Saturday."

Coop's grin grew. "Looking forward to it. You two have fun studying and, Bubba, you better drive real fucking careful like."

That was a warning. Coop didn't threaten.

Not anyone.

I stared at him.

"Don't worry," was all Bubba said. "I intend to." Then he glanced back at me. "Arms around me and hang on."

The rumble of the engine revved up, so I slid my arms around Bubba, gripping his abs even as I pressed up against his back. His muscles rippled as he walked the bike back a couple of steps.

"See you later, Coop," I called. Then Bubba revved once, and we were off.

The little whoop that escaped had me grinning, and we weren't even going fast yet. What would it be like if he really opened up the engine?

I was in lust with his bike.

And hanging onto him as we rode.

THE RULES

Coop: We need to establish some rules.

Jake: Rules?

Bubba: Rulz? Are you still ticked because Frankie's at my place?

Archie: Yuk it up, Bubba. What rules?

Coop: Look, we made it clear: no guys bug her.

Jake: We were there, get to the point.

Coop: If we're all dating her, we need rules.

Bubba: ...

Jake: ...

Archie: Who said we're all dating her?

Coop: Okay Arch, we can take you

out of the chat for this.

Friday nights aren't date nights 4u

Archie: FU

Jake: He's dating her.

Archie: It's not official

Coop: ...

Jake: ...

Bubba: ...

Archie: I haven't ASKED her yet

Coop: Is Friday a date?

Archie: Yes.

Jake: Then you're dating her, asshat.

Bubba: Guys, I gotta go, she's here.

Archie: ...

Jake: ...

Coop: ...

Bubba: What? You want to make up some rules, hurry up.

Archie: Rule #1 don't text us when on date.

Jake: Rule #2 Sunday nights are mine.

Coop: Rule #3 don't step on another guy's date.

Archie: Rule #4 No competing with each other.

Coop: ...

Jake: ...

Archie: You want to fight me for her?

Coop: I don't want to fight any of you,
but I'm not backing off.

Jake: Me neither.

Archie: Agreed.

Jake: Assume Bubba says yes, he's ignoring us.

Archie: If Frankie w/me I'd ignore us 2

Coop: LOL

Jake: Ha

Archie: Rule #5 Just us, no one else.

Coop: What about Frenchy?

Jake: What about him?

Archie: temporary situation.

We deal with Sat.

Jake: Agreed

Coop: ...

Archie: Meet after practice 2morrow?

Jake: Yes

Coop: Need a ride.

Archie: You always need a ride.

Coop: Bite me.

Archie: No thanks.

Jake: I'll get u.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GUITAR HERO

The ride on Bubba's bike was fantastic. I could have sworn he took the long way to get to his place—like around the lake the long way—and I didn't care. It had been a kind of weird day. Hanging on as the breeze hit my face while the bike rumbled between our legs was like the best therapy I'd ever experienced.

Not that I'd ever gone to therapy. Curtises didn't go to therapy. We managed. We endured. We got by. By the time we pulled up to Bubba's house, his parents were actually on the way out the door.

"Frankie!" His mom greeted me and as soon as I got the helmet off. I got a quick hug. They were always so touchy-feely. Fortunately, as swiftly as the hug was done, she turned to her son. "There's leftovers in the fridge," she said. "We had tacos yesterday, all the fixings, just heat them up and there are shells in the pantry. Dad and I are going to be out late this evening... date night."

Bubba grimaced.

"C'mon, sweetheart, I'm pretty sure we don't need to traumatize the kids and, Ian," his father continued, eyeing him. "Don't keep Frankie out late." The last was said with a meaningful look at me.

Oh. God.

"Dad," Bubba said. "You and Mom have a great time." Instead of being embarrassed, he slung an arm around my shoulders. I kind of wanted to just evaporate.

Then Bubba tugged me toward the house while his parents left. Did they think we were going to...?

“Frankie, don’t freak out, okay?” Bubba gave me a little squeeze before letting me go to open the door. His phone started buzzing as he led the way inside. “We can go swimming again if you want. You know where the suits are.”

Yes, yes, I did.

I dropped my backpack on the table in the kitchen as he pulled out his phone. “Maybe we should just work on the audition? And I can take a look at your essay samples?”

He glanced at the phone then at me. “Or we can go swimming and hang out for a little while, then work on the music.”

Folding my arms, I leaned against the table and stared at him as he stared at his phone. His thumb flew as he answered a question, a frown tightening his brow. It was probably one of the guys or maybe something to do with the football team. Turning my gaze to the windows, I stared out at the pool.

It was still hotter than Hell outside. Swimming had been a blast last week, but that was before...

I swallowed.

“Frankie?” Bubba caught my arm and tugged me so I looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, but the dampness on my face gave me away. I swiped at my cheeks. “Allergies. You know, swimming sounds great. I’ll go change.”

And I fled, right up the stairs into the guest room.

Inside, I blew out a breath then instead of changing, I just sat on the end of the bed in the guest room. At the end of last year, when I’d still been holding out some vain hope to get asked to the spring formal, I found out my best friends pretty much marked me as untouchable. Nobody was supposed to ask me out. Apparently, Jake even scared off the one guy who’d almost done it—though I didn’t know if that was in sophomore or junior year. Just that he’d done it.

I went to the dance anyway. They'd all been there with their dates. We'd all acted like everything was fine. I danced. I went home. But after that I avoided them, and I spent my summer concentrating on what I needed to do to get out of here and go to college.

Now the TA in my French class, a sexy French foreign exchange student, gets interested in me and suddenly all the guys are asking me out. Well, yeah, I guess everyone after today because Coop said he was.

Jake said he wanted to maybe make out with me. Bubba planned to ask me to homecoming. The asks would be later this week—they usually happened on Friday, before the game. Homecoming was in three weeks, but planning was astronomical. Every year, it seemed to get crazier. I didn't even have a dress for homecoming.

Archie wanted to take me out, just us, anywhere I wanted to go, and Coop told me he wants to see me, too. More than one of them had said they'd hit on me before, but I'd never *noticed*. *Like I wouldn't notice they'd hit on me.*

Were they?

Were they punking me?

Was this their way of making sure I didn't date? They asked me because I said I *wanted* all of this? Had it started before I told Coop or after?

“Hey, Frankie, can you not find your suit?”

I jumped at Bubba's voice. “Yeah, I just did,” I lied and stood up. Then there were the roses on the car. Those were—awesome. But none of my guys said they'd done it, and if it was from Mathieu, the messages would be in French, right?

Right?

Gut in knots, I stripped out of my clothes and pulled on the blue suit I'd worn the week before. Bubba was already outside with our backpacks. There were cokes on the table, too. He was in the water. Maybe he had some sixth sense, 'cause he turned in the pool just as I opened the door, and he waved at me.

The hot breeze tugged at my hair. I hadn't bothered to braid it. Strands drifted across my face, so I raked my fingers through it to pull it away. The pavement was hot under my feet, but I walked over to the shallow end and stepped down into the water. The sun beat down on us, but I ignored it as I stared at Bubba.

"You said nothing was wrong," Bubba stated as he took a couple of steps toward me in the water. He was wearing blue and gray swim trunks that seemed more like a shadow in the water than actual clothing. "But something's bugging you. What is it?"

"Everyone is asking me out." The minute I said it, humiliation crawled through me. "I mean... wow, that sounded bad."

"No," Bubba said. "It didn't. Everyone asking you out is a problem?" The guarded note in his voice warned me he thought I meant him specifically.

I sat down, the water was almost shockingly cold against my hips and thighs, but I didn't care. I kind of needed that shock. "You guys have known me for years. I say I want to go out, and suddenly everyone is asking me out. Jake said—Jake said he's always been interested but I wasn't. And today Coop asked me out. You said you're asking me to homecoming."

"I am," Bubba said. "Unless you don't want me to." The disappointment in his voice tugged at me. "I get it. I know Archie and Jake both have a thing for you, and you're right, so does Coop. I'm just me."

"Bubba..."

"What? You're the only one allowed to be insecure here?" He moved closer and sighed. "Frankie...I'm not going to speak for everyone else, just for me. Okay?"

I nodded. "Fair."

"I've liked you for a long time. A really long time. I dated, yes. I went out with other girls, you're right. Sometimes they asked me, sometimes I asked them. I have...not been a saint." He grimaced. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you that part."

“You told me when you lost your virginity, Bubba. I’m pretty sure I knew that last bit.”

He winced. “Oh yeah, I forgot. Wow. I’m an ass.”

A laugh escaped, and I shook my head. “You’re not an ass. We’re friends. You were telling the guys as much as me, and you guys were all kind of comparing notes.” Another time I really hadn’t had anything to offer to the conversation. I still didn’t. I didn’t think a couple of kisses from Mathieu counted, even if they’d been nice kisses.

“What can I tell you that will make you feel better?”

I studied his expression. Bubba was a good guy. They all were in their own ways. Coop was zen, the go along to get along. Archie could be demanding and a little high maintenance, but he was also generous to a fault and he never treated any of us differently—impressive considering the wealth difference.

Jake?

Jake could be bossy and overwhelming. He never shied away from saying exactly what he thought. While the others could be subtle, Jake just went for the jugular to find out what he wanted.

But Bubba? He’d always been a sweetheart.

“Is this a game?” I hated myself for asking the question. “I mean, is it a game for all of you? You warned guys away from asking me out for who knows how long. When I say that I want to date and I want to get asked out, all of you start asking me.”

“It’s not a game for me,” he said, his expression solemn. “I like you, Frankie.” He moved over and sat on the step next to me. Before I realized what he’d intended, he twisted. One minute I was on the step, and the next I was straddling his lap. “Hi.”

I put my hands on his shoulders for balance. He looked relaxed, but the sun was hitting him just right, turning his hair this gorgeous kind of gold and reminding me of how deep his

tan was. He spent a lot of time outdoors, and a lot of that time shirtless.

“Hi,” I said.

“You’re Frankie Curtis, right?”

Wait, what? I tilted my head. Bubba’s hands rested on my hips and let me tell you what a distraction that was. His thumbs tickled the edges of the bathing suit, just barely grazing it. “Yeah?”

Breathless wasn’t usually me, but I also didn’t make a habit out of straddling Bubba’s lap. The edges of his trunks teased the inside of my thighs and I remained vividly aware of just how little we were both wearing.

“I’m Ian Rhys,” he introduced himself or I should have said, he re-introduced himself. “I’m one of the guys you’ve been hanging out with for the last few years.”

“I know,” I said slowly, a kind of awkwardness invading my limbs. Was I supposed to shake his hand? “We’ve met.”

“You’re right, we have. I was Jake’s friend Bubba. He introduced me to you.” Oh, I’d almost forgotten that. “But I was under the impression you didn’t date, didn’t like guys. I like being your friend.” He flexed his hands against my hips. “I’d like to be more.”

The breath caught in my throat.

“But that’s for later. Right now, I already told you I’m going to ask you to homecoming, right?”

I nodded slowly.

“Today? Hanging out with me? It’s a kind of date. I think of it like getting to know each other. Slowly. Without any expectations or interference.”

From the guys.

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” His smile was like the sun coming out, or maybe doubling its wattage because I was getting warm despite the

cool water. Bubba shifted his legs and I was floating forward. “I like you, Frankie,” he whispered.

Oh, he definitely liked me. Heat scorched up my chest and set my cheeks on fire.

“I like you a lot. I’m not asking or expecting anything more than for you and me to hang out. I’d like you to get used to the idea of private time, you and me, let us see where this can go. And I want to take you out on a real date.”

Was he leaning into me or had I drifted to him? My hands had been on his shoulders, but I had one on his chest and the other on his nape. I swallowed. “Bubba... you mean this? Even if I’m...I mean Jake and Coop...”

“Yeah, I know.” He shrugged. “I can handle it. You can date all of us.”

My throat was suddenly parched.

“Just—I mean this—I want to have a real shot here. If you don’t feel the same way...”

I cupped his cheeks and leaned forward, pressing my lips to his. It was a short, spontaneous kiss, and I pulled back almost immediately when he froze. “I’m sorry. I—”

Whatever I was, I didn’t finish my thought because Bubba’s mouth was on mine and it wasn’t short or chaste. His lips were full and warm as they massaged mine. A groan escaped. Was that me? Bubba teased his tongue along the seam of my lips, and I opened my mouth to him. He slid a damp hand into my hair, gently fisting it.

The gentle tug seemed to light up my scalp, and I leaned into the kiss. Chest to chest with him, the bathing suit seemed to rub at my nipples and that sent a whole other spiral of tension through me. When he teased at my tongue with his, I chased his and then he sucked on my tongue. Heat unspooled and I clenched my thighs, the urge to grind against him hard to resist. He had both arms around me, and the water agitated as I managed to shift closer. The distinct hard length of his erection firmed against me.

That brought me out of it, so I pulled back, breathing hard and Bubba loosened his arms a little, but only a little. His deep blue eyes were heavy-lidded and his pupils blown. He ran that sinful tongue over his lips, and I had to bite my lip to keep from swooping back in to claim it for another kiss. Everything in me was taut and tense.

“Ian...” I managed to say, which impressed me at the moment because his name was the one thing I was sure about. I was still trying to catch my breath when his eyes widened. “What?”

“You called me Ian.” Wow. His voice was this deep, husky tenor. I clenched my ass as tight as I could to keep from bumping against his erection because it was right there and I was very vividly aware of how little clothing separated us.

“You said you were Ian.” Yeah, that sounded pretty stupid to me, too.

“I like you calling me Ian.”

Another shiver went through me, and my nipples ached. I got sex, don't get me wrong. I knew that Tab A went into Slot B. Girls actually had a few options for where Tab A could go, guys had one less, but really I didn't want to focus on inserting him anywhere.

Though, now that the thought occurred, I tried to relax my clenched muscles so I could stand up.

“I'll keep that in mind,” I told him. Despite all my attempts, I was not getting off his lap and Bubba—Ian—seemed to be in no hurry. If anything, he seemed to be staring at me. He still had a hand in my hair and the other was on my hip.

No, a finger was under the hem of my bathing suit and gradually, I dropped my gaze to see where his index and middle fingers were just under the seam touching what you could argue was forbidden skin.

Ian paused a beat, and then seemed to follow my glance. “Bad?” he asked.

Well, no, not technically. The skin there was about two millimeters from the exposed skin, so no not bad just...

“I don’t—I haven’t...”

Understanding kindled in his eyes. Thank God, because I wasn’t sure I could bring myself to utter those words. It was weird enough that we’d just kissed.

That kiss.

I was still shaking a little on the inside and my stomach remained all knotted up...and if I just rolled my hips.

Bad hips.

Do. Not. Roll.

I licked my lips and that was a mistake because he zeroed in on the motion.

“It’s okay, Frankie,” he murmured, the absence of his fingers as he slid them out from under the seam then eased his hand from my hair. “That—I could make out with you all day, but we don’t have to do a damn thing you’re not ready to do.”

Did that mean he was ready to do...? “I haven’t,” I repeated, probably unnecessarily.

“I got that,” he said, his expression sobering even as his pupils looked less drugged and more focused. “I’m not pushing. You’re...gorgeous. You’re funny and God I want to kiss you again.”

“You do?” A little flare went off inside of me. What the hell was that? I’d never... When Mathieu kissed me there’d been a flutter, a kind of sputter really. This was... well, the only word I had for it was *wow*.

“Oh yeah. But you haven’t...”

“No,” I admitted sucking in a breath and easing off his thighs. He let go of my hair as we disentangled. “I’ve...never really had the opportunity.”

“Cool.”

Of all the responses he could have used, *that* was not what I was expecting. “At the risk of sounding like an idiot—cool?”

Ian laughed, before he held up a hand as he said, “Actually, gimme a sec? I’ll explain, I promise.”

“Yeah, sure.”

He rose a little awkwardly, and no I did not just totally check out the thick line of erection clearly detailed by the way his swim trunks clung to him. Nope, I focused on the way his abs rippled.

Yeah.

That was *so* much better.

Ian shoved away from the steps and hit the water, he started slicing his way across the pool. Then he doubled-back before repeating his laps.

After about ten, I shifted a little. This was kind of a good time to get myself under control. As soon as he was angled away from me, I smoothed a hand over my bathing suit top. Pointy nipples showing would not give him the wrong idea; no it would definitely give him the right idea.

Kissing him had been the best turn-on of my life.

When he hit fifteen laps, he straightened in the pool. I’d moved over to the table and opened one of the cokes. He stared at me, chest heaving as water droplets slid over him like some hot fantasy I cooked up to try and get myself off.

“Thank you for waiting,” he said in voice nearly as husky as the one he’d sported earlier. I kept my gaze above the waistline. There was so much to admire on him, but for now, I wanted to meet his gaze. “I needed to...”

“Put the horse back in the barn?” I have no idea why I popped off with that. My mom had said it a few times when talking about guys needing to tuck it back in their pants.

Ian snorted, then laughed. “Yeah, I did. Cause damn, Frankie. You’re hot. Kissing you rocked.”

Heat scorched my face all over again and his grin grew. “So that conversation we were having earlier? Yeah, I want to date you. No, I’m not going to say you have to only see me. But I’m not going out with anyone else.”

Oh.

He spread his arms. “I’m going to date you, Frankie Curtis. I want to. Will you let me?”

There was no chance in Hell I’d say no. Not to that. “I want to date you, too, Ian.”

Clapping his hands together, he looked up at me like he was praying. “Call me Ian from now on?”

“I thought you didn’t like that name.”

“I never cared. I was just always Bubba to everyone else, but you—I like how Ian sounds on your lips.”

Mouth dry, I took a sip of coke before I answered. “I can call you Ian... though the guys are probably going to make fun of us.”

He smirked. “Let them. I’ll know when the first time you called me Ian was, and I’m going to think about that kiss every single time you say my name. What they say? I don’t care.”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“Come swim with me Frankie? Come play?” He curled his fingers.

“We still have homework and stuff to do.” Not that I was in any rush, except I did enjoy listening to him play and sing.

“It’ll be there.”

He wasn’t wrong. I set the coke down and ran over to jump in the pool before my courage fled. I landed in the deep end and I went down almost to the bottom before I pushed off and surfaced. As the water cleared my eyes, Ian wrapped his arms around me.

I half-thought he was going to kiss me again, but he said, “Whatever happens with you and me? This right here? This—

the friendship? The fact you will play with me even when you're scared? I don't want to lose this part, okay, Frankie?"

I didn't want to lose that either. I didn't want to lose it with any of them.

"I missed you," I confessed. "That's why I came to your birthday party. I missed all of you."

"Then you saw us with other girls..." He made a face. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize." They really didn't. It wasn't like we'd been dating then. We hadn't even really dated yet, but... "But if you want to make it up to me, I'd love to go for another ride..." Okay, maybe I was a little mean because I paused there until his eyebrows rose. "On your motorcycle," I added.

Ian laughed, and then he lifted me up. I squealed as he tossed me. I landed farther in the water and then came up laughing. He launched toward me, and I streaked away.

He played football, but I was no slouch in the pool.

I also didn't mind when he caught me and tossed me again.

I really didn't mind when he caught me and kissed me. Nowhere near as intense as the first, our second kiss was playful, nipping and brief. Then he kissed the tip of my nose.

"You're going to get a sunburn."

"I know," I told him. "I don't care."

The third kiss—I really don't know who started it, but when it ended, Ian had to do more laps, and I headed up to shower and get back in my clothes before I did something really crazy.

When we were both showered and dressed, we ate and went over calculus homework and then his essays. Doing homework, just like we always did—except I sat in his lap for half of it and he kissed me every time I gave him a compliment.

Later, sprawled on his bed, I soaked up the sound of him playing his guitar. It was... kind of a perfect day. Every song he tried was the perfect song.

“You’re just saying that...”

“Nope,” I told him. “Hand to God, I love every single one of them.”

His eyes twinkled, and he leaned forward, the guitar between us and dropped a kiss on my mouth. My lips were swollen and tingling. Could you get bruised from kissing? I kind of wanted to find out. “You’re the best, Frankie.”

The words thrilled me in a way they never had before. “Right back atcha, Ian.”

THE RULES PART DEUX

Bubba: Leave the French guy alone.

Jake: Sleeping Beauty is awake.

Bubba: Just leave the French dude alone.

Archie: Why?

Coop: Rule #5, Bubba, scroll up.

Jake: Yeah, Frenchy has to go.

Archie: Like I said I have it covered.

Bubba: You're idiots. Leave the French guy alone.

Jake: *Why?* Oh, and Arch, grab me a quad shot espresso?

Archie: Got it. No, Bubs. No can do.

I'll put up with you idiots, at least until
she chooses. Not the French guy.

Coop: What he said... wait. You are competing?

Archie: Not specifically.

Jake: Until she chooses it's competition.

Archie: It's not official.

Coop: ...

Jake: ...

Bubba: ...

Archie: You think we all date her

for the rest of senior year?

Then what?

Coop: Then college.

Jake: We're all getting a place together.

Archie: I love you guys, but you're nuts.

Bubba: Asshats, focus. Leave French guy
alone. You're going to piss her off.

Archie: ...

Jake: ...

Coop: ...

Bubba: Fine, Rule #6 Don't hurt Frankie.

Archie: Duh. That doesn't need to be a rule.

Jake: Then it doesn't matter if it is one.

Coop: Heads up. Her mom's car isn't there.

Archie: ...

Coop: Just saying. Gone more than here.

Jake: Fuck.

Archie: In line at Starbucks, anyone else?

Coop: Yeah, my usual and Frankie's.

Jake: No shit, we're only getting coffee
cause he's stopping for Frankie.

Archie: Agreed.

Bubba: If Rule #6 passes
then leave Mat alone.

Archie: Who is Mat?

Coop: French dude.

Jake: Frenchy.

Archie: I don't care about him.

Coop: Bubba... why do you want us
to leave him alone?

Bubba: Cause it'll hurt Frankie.

Archie: temporary situation.
Sat. Party. He's gone.
We take care of Frankie.

Jake: Agreed. She wants to date.
We date.

Bubba: Count me out on Mat.
Not hurting Frankie.

Archie: Whatever. She'll be fine.

Jake: It's for the best.

Bubba: Keep telling yourself that.

Later

Archie: Why is she calling you Ian?

Coop: What happened last night?

Jake: Dude—wtf?

Bubba: Rule #7, mind your own business.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JUST A MINUTE

Wednesday turned out to be both weird and wonderful. Weird and wonderful Wednesdays. Maybe I should get a t-shirt made with that on the front. The weird came in a few places. When I got up that morning, there was a note from Mom on the fridge along with a couple of twenties.

She had to take a quick trip out of town, her flight was super early that morning, she probably wouldn't be back until early on Friday morning, and then she'd likely go straight to work.

Definitely weird.

But not the weirdest.

Coop showed up as I fed the cats, and he'd brought donuts. There was a little place around the corner, and he'd gone to grab them. In addition to the chocolate covered donuts, donut holes, and even a few with sprinkles, he'd even brought me apple fritters. They were fresh, too. Sweet and sticky and perfect. I wanted to devour both right there, but we had to get to school.

The scent of them taunted me the whole way there.

Ian—I had a hard time even thinking of him as Bubba anymore, because Bubba was my friend, but Ian was the guy I made out with—leaned against his bike waiting for us when I pulled in. He snagged my backpack out of the back for me and helped me get it on. He definitely qualified as one of the

wonderful parts. I half-worried he was going to kiss me right there then I stressed a little when he didn't.

Dating, however, was not an excuse to have a nutty. He did sling an arm around my shoulders, and I wrapped mine around his waist as we headed inside with Coop and his stacks of donuts.

Archie had the coffee, and Jake waited for us. He patted the seat next to him and caught my backpack for me as I slid it off. Ian grabbed the chair on my other side. It was laid back and nice, the guys were teasing, and I was hyper aware every time Ian brushed his leg against mine. Just before the bell when Archie and I had to leave to head to government, I bumped my hip to Ian's as we stood and then called him Ian.

Amateur mistake. One none of the others missed.

Thus added the weird wrinkle of Archie poking me for an answer all the way through government. Since when was Bubba Ian? For his part, Ian said he didn't mind. But he also wouldn't tell me if the guys were giving him a hard time. He just told me he could handle it.

He walked me most of the way to French and blew me a quiet, almost subtle kiss before heading on. Five minutes into French and I realized I had a problem. I liked Mat. He was—a sweet guy. Fun and funny. I owed him for helping me with that project. I was so glad we'd had that time together.

But I didn't want to date him. I wanted... I wanted Ian. I wanted Jake. Archie. Coop. I wanted to date them and four was more than enough. Maybe he'd been onto something when he kept calling them my boyfriends. I'd already asked him to the party on Saturday, but afterward—I'd break up.

Though, was it breaking up if you'd only gone out a couple of times? Maybe just let him know I only wanted to be friends. That sounded far more reasonable.

Had a first date and decided I didn't want to date the same guy in one week. So weird.

Coop was annoying as hell for about five minutes on the Ian thing, then he stopped. Like I said, he went along to get

along. Arguably, I had a great time playing dumb. Then the guys all decided on lunch off campus. The Wing Store it was. My mom texted about halfway through lunch to make sure I got the note and to let me know she might extend her trip through the weekend.

I sent her an acknowledgement. Other than seeing she read the message I got no other acknowledgement. Archie leaned over to see what had me staring at my phone. When he frowned, I locked the phone and changed the subject.

Thankfully, the weird didn't extend into the rest of my afternoon. Jake and I spent study hall holding hands and adding videos to our watch later on YouTube. I had figured we would just stick to the History Buff channel, but he'd found a few other fun ones like Honest Trailers, which he swore was hilarious, and then Everything Wrong With and Everything Great About got added.

Hours of videos—we would be at it all night and neither of us could do that. Jake had just grinned. “So we just keep working our way through the list. Did your mom say tonight was okay?”

“I didn't ask,” I admitted. “When I got up this morning, she'd left me a note that said she was going to be out of town for work. Some last-minute thing and she left in the middle of the night for an early flight.”

He wore a dubious expression, but when I moved on, so did he. Mr. G raided our time in AP European History with a practice quiz. Considering how much work we hadn't been getting done in study hall this week, I don't think either of us did bad. The quiz was a sample of the multiple choice from an old AP exam. I got about seventy percent correct and Jake slid in just ahead of me at seventy-one percent.

Oh. It is on. Mr. G waved us out of the room about five minutes before the bell. The head start would be nice, even if I had to give Coop a ride home. “I'm going to walk you to your car,” Jake said, catching my hand.

“That's nowhere near the stadium. Don't you have practice?”

He shrugged. "I don't mind. Practice doesn't officially start for another twenty-five minutes." Squeezing my hand light, he winked. "Plenty of time to walk you to the car."

"You're a dork," I said, but I couldn't help smiling. Jake could be hotheaded and impulsive, but he was also sweet and thoughtful.

"Well, since this dork is bringing you pizza, any special requests?"

"Pineapple?"

He laughed. "You always want pineapple."

"And you always ask."

"Fair."

Even with the head start, we didn't hurry. Some time between lunch and now, posters announcing Homecoming Tickets would be going on sale Friday for Seniors only. Other classes would be allowed to purchase tickets beginning the following week.

"Fire and Ice."

"Yep," Jake said. "Still going with Bubba?"

"Yes," I told him. "He asked first."

"Technically, he hasn't asked yet. You could get a second ask."

I frowned, but before I could say anything, the bell rang and the hallways flooded. Jake kept me close as we headed out. As we got away from one of the thicker groupings, I said. "Don't do that, please?"

"Don't do what?" Jake glanced at me.

"Don't ask me when you know Ian is going to."

The corner of his eye twitched when I said Ian. "Okay," he said easily enough. "But, I reserve the right to ask you to dance *at* Homecoming."

"That's fair." Relieved, I wasn't prepared for the three roses sitting propped on the hood of my car. Orange ones this

time and they were gorgeous.

Ian stared at them, but the note tied to them didn't look like it had been opened.

As we descended the steps, Ian glanced at me and grinned. "Hey, Frankie, looks like your secret admirer is back."

"I see that." Okay, the first two sets of roses had been awesome, but... I didn't get it. Jake had been with me for all of the last period. Sure, he could have dropped them off during 6th but, as with the last two days, the vase was cool to the touch. Coop slammed out the door behind us, panting.

"Sorry! Had to swing by my locker."

Letting go of Jake's hand, I rescued the roses after I unlocked my car. Jake didn't drift away. In fact, he shoulder-checked Ian to catch my backpack for me.

"You guys are going to be late," I told them.

"We're fine," they said almost in unison as Coop snorted.

"They will be once we're on the way home. What do those say?"

"One sec," I opened the car and got it started so the hot air would get out of the interior the a/c could start working.

Ian offered to hold them for me so I could free the note. Jake pressed right up to my shoulder as I opened it.

WITH THEIR BLAZING ENERGY, ORANGE ROSES ARE THE WILD child of the rose family. Sometimes we have to make a break from expectations and do something completely different. Be fearless. Do something wild and unexpected...

"WHO IS THIS DUDE?" JAKE ASKED, AND HE DIDN'T SOUND happy about it.

"I don't know," I admitted, but I was curious. At the same time... "Whoever he is, he's sweet." The flowers were nice. No one did that for me and, I kind of like the idea someone left

the roses just for me. “Hopefully, he’s leaving them for the right person, because if he’s working up for his ask... I wouldn’t want to spoil it for him.”

More than a little curious, I glanced at Ian, but he shook his head. “Not me, though if this is guy is thinking of asking you to Homecoming, I hope he doesn’t mind disappointment.” Instead of looking at me, he glanced over at Coop. My best friend just shrugged.

“We good then? We got the flowers. You two football players have practice to get to, and Frankie needs to get to work.”

“He’s not wrong,” I admitted. Their disgruntled expressions were cute. “Coop, do you mind holding these for me?”

“Nope,” he said, stretching an arm across the top of the car. I passed them over after I pocketed the note.

When I turned, Ian was right behind me.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. “If I don’t stop by Mason’s tonight.” Then he dipped his head and brushed his lips against mine. It was barely there before it was gone again, yet it sent a thrill right through me. I didn’t have to imagine what he tasted like, all I had to do was lick my lips. “Have a good night, Frankie.”

“You, too.” I’d thought it was hot before, but then I caught Jake’s quiet stare and raised eyebrows. The heat flushing through me seemed to hit boiling point.

“I’ll see you after work.” Jake said thoughtfully. “Text me when you’re done?”

“I will.” Was my face burning? I wasn’t really sure what the etiquette was here. Ian knew about Jake and Jake knew about Ian. Maybe Ian told everyone we made out, but then again, maybe he hadn’t. I hadn’t said anything. “And on that note, I gotta go.”

So, I wasn’t too proud to admit I hopped into the semi-cool car and buckled in. Thankfully, Coop was right there. He studied me as I pulled out of my spot, violently aware of Jake

and Ian standing there talking. I both did and didn't want to know what they were saying.

Coop didn't ask.

Not a word.

At least not until I parked. "Jake's coming over after work tonight?"

"Yep," I told him as we exited the car, I grabbed my backpack and then my roses. "We made plans."

"Plans." Coop squinted at me.

"Yes," I paused to meet his stare. "Plans."

"Text me when you get home?"

I locked my car and, with my roses in hand, I started backing toward the sidewalk. "I have to go feed the cats and get ready and get out of here."

"I know...it's cool. I'll see you later." He waved a hand, but as soon as I hit the steps leading to my backdoor, he called, "Text me when you get home, so I know you're in safe?"

If I texted him, he'd probably show up. I didn't mind that mostly, but Jake wanted the time, and just like I wouldn't let them intrude on Ian's. "Okay, but don't come over unless we invite you, okay?"

Coop grimaced. "Okay. Have a good night, Frankie!"

I waved and then rushed. As it was, I ended up sliding into work about ninety seconds late. Fortunately, my boss just waved me to get on with it. The rose thing was a constant in the back of my mind all the way through my shift. It was, at least, until Ian showed up at six-forty with Jake and they grabbed a table on my side.

They were both hot and sweaty, but seemingly in a better mood than they had been earlier. I didn't really have a lot of time to chat, because half the football team showed up along with more kids from the school, including Maria and Sharon, both of whom wedged in at the table with Jake and Ian when I returned with their food.

“There you are,” Maria said. “Can we get a big and thick each, strawberry for me and vanilla for Sharon?”

“Yep,” I said as I put the burgers and fries in front of Jake. He tried to catch my eye, but all I asked was, “Do you guys need anything else?”

“Thanks, and sorry about the girls. We didn’t invite them,” Ian told me firmly, and Sharon shifted on the seat next to him.

“Damn, Bubba, that’s cold.”

“He’s not wrong,” Jake said flatly. “We didn’t ask you to sit down, but you’re here now.”

“And all the other tables are full,” Maria said, nudging Jake with her arm. “Don’t be a dick.”

“I’ll get your shakes. It’ll be a couple for the burgers.”

“You’re busy,” Sharon said with a quick smile. “It’s fine.”

I was busy, and Rachel Manning sailed in the doors with a couple of her friends. My life was about to be complete. The tables were full, so Rachel headed for the counter. I glanced over my shoulder and told her it would be a minute as I slid the check in to get the burgers ready for Maria and Sharon, then picked up more food to run out.

I still had shakes to make. I paused to greet them and get their orders and Rachel eyed me. “So, you and the French guy?”

“Not on the menu,” I answered. “Shakes and burgers, pretty much what we serve every day.”

“Really?” She leaned forward, elbows on the counter. “Are you really that oblivious? That guy is crazy about you.”

She was a customer. I had to keep it upbeat. “He’s a nice guy. What would you like?”

“You make me so sad, Frankie. Big and Thick, chocolate shake.” Her girls ordered the same things and I smiled.

“It’ll be a few minutes, but I’ll get your shakes out soon.”

Then I was digging out the ice cream and getting the shakes started. Sharon and Maria had gotten Ian and Jake to talk to them. Jake was even laughing when I brought the shakes over to deliver them.

He sobered up like he'd been doing something wrong when I swung by. "Burgers should be up in a couple. You guys need anything else?"

"No, we're fine...wish you were getting a break," Ian said, eyeing the door. We had customers waiting.

"It happens," I said. "Sometimes it's just better to be busy." I left their tallied check for them and got moving.

Except for bringing the girls their food, I really didn't get back over there before they finally gave up the table and headed out. Jake lurked by the register, but my boss was out giving us a hand so I wouldn't get anywhere near it.

The next time I got a chance to look, he was gone.

Instead of nine, it was a quarter to ten when I finally had time to finish rolling my silver and getting out of there. It had been a good night. I'd made decent tips, at least from those who didn't stiff me.

When I came out of Mason's, Jake leaned against his SUV, which was parked next to my car even though I hadn't texted him yet.

"Hey," he said at my approach. "You look tired."

"I am tired," I admitted. "I was going to text when I got in the car."

"Yeah, I kind of wondered if you hadn't because of Maria."

I lifted my shoulders. "You and Maria aren't dating anymore, right?" Not that I really had a leg to stand on. I was dating other guys, even if Jake and I hadn't made it on a date yet.

"Right," he said. "We didn't expect them to just sit down and then *not* leave."

“Well, it took a while to get them their food,” I said almost as an apology.

“You still up for company tonight?” He was letting me off the hook.

“Can you stay out this late?” Maybe that was a stupid question, but...

“Mom knows I was planning to hang out with you. She’s cool with it.” He held up his phone. “And she knows how to reach me.”

“Then, yeah...though if I pass out on you, I’m sorry in advance.”

“No sweat. Go home, I’ll go grab the pizza.” He hit something on his phone. “Had the order all ready to go.”

“Okay.” I made it a step, but he caught my hand and tugged me back.

“Frankie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m *not* dating Maria,” he said firmly. Then pressed a kiss to my forehead before he squeezed my hand. “The only person I’m dating is you.”

“Okay,” I sounded like I was stuck on repeat. “You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“I know. Wanted to give you one anyway.” He walked me to the driver’s side door and opened it. “Straight home. I’ll be right behind you. Ten minutes?”

That would be barely enough time to shower. “See you soon.”

It took him more like fifteen, which was great. I needed the shower desperately to wash off the smell of burgers and sweat. My feet were killing me, and I drank about a liter of water because, on top of everything else, I was starving. I hadn’t even had enough time to eat before I left for work much less get anything at work.

When he knocked on the backdoor, I fought yawning tooth and toenail and accepted the pizza boxes. “One sec,” he said then jogged back to the parking lot. A minute later, he returned carrying a coffee table.

“What the...?”

“I’m the reason it got broken,” he said as I scooted out of the way. He carried it in and set it in the living room. “It’s not an exact match but pretty close. So, voila!”

“Thanks, Jake,” I set the pizza boxes down and then flopped on the sofa.

“Glad to help. You really do look tired.”

“Keep telling me how bad I look. It’s really doing it for me,” I found a tease for him and he chuckled. I’d towel dried my hair and combed it straight. I was in pajama bottoms and a tank top, no bra. Maybe I should have put one back on, but it wasn’t like I fell out of the top, and I’d gone braless before.

“Crap...”

“What?” He asked as he flipped open the boxes.

“I need to text Coop and tell him I’m home.” My phone was in the other room.

“I got it.” He pulled out his phone and sent it off. “Done. I also told him not to come over cause you’re tired. That cool?”

Well, a little presumptuous of him to do it in the first place, but at least he’d asked. “I kind of told him to not come over unless we invited him, since—you know—you said you wanted some time.”

His sudden smile sent a shiver through me. Jake leaned forward and brushed a kiss against my mouth, it was almost a careless gesture, yet it still sent a burst of warmth through me. “Thank you.”

“For what?” It took everything I had not to reach up and touch my lips because they buzzed a little. Instead, I reached for pizza.

“For being you,” he said, easing off his shoes and then pulling the pizza up to rest on his lap. He patted the sofa next to him. “And I don’t bite.”

“Yes, you do,” I said and at his askance look, I pointed at my arm. “You bit me in third grade.”

Jake stared at me for a minute then he laughed. “You bit me first.”

“You pulled my hair.”

“Yeah,” he grimaced. “I did do that.”

I scooted over anyway and pointed at the remotes on the side table. He pulled up YouTube on the television and, since I was logged in, he scrolled it to the watch later and then handed it to me. “You pick.”

Pizza in one hand and the remote in the other, I looked at our list and yawned before stretching my legs out to rest my feet on the new coffee table. I picked a video at random and started it. We ate and we watched. I killed about four pieces of pizza before my stomach stopped gnawing on my backbone.

When I leaned back, Jake wrapped an arm around my shoulders and glanced sideways at me. “This okay?”

“It’s nice.” I almost rested my head against his shoulder, but my hair was wet, so I tried to straighten.

“It’s fine,” he said nudging my head back.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” he said with a smile. It was colder in the apartment with the air conditioning on, and the longer I sat there, the more tired I became. I think even my hair was tired at this point. Jake rubbed my arm lightly. He was a lot warmer and I curled my legs up and shifted to be closer to him.

“Jake?” I was half-asleep.

“Hmm?”

“This isn’t a great date for you.” I smothered another yawn.

“I get to spend time with you.” He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “I like it. Besides, we’re still getting together on Sunday, right?”

“Umm-hmm.” We were on our third? No, our fourth video, and I’d seen this one already, but I thought Jake would enjoy it. He’d mocked the movie when we saw it a couple of years before. The rumble of his laughter when it started told me I’d made the right call. It was twenty-some odd minutes. I could rest my eyes.

For a minute.

Another yawn pulled at my jaw, and my eyes drifted closed.

Just a minute.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SLEEPOVER

*W*armth wrapped all around me, I wanted to burrow into it unwilling to open my eyes. I tugged the blanket a little tighter even as I tried to stretch. Rubbing my nose against the pillow, I sighed. It still smelled like Jake. Tiddles purred from somewhere near my desk and I could have sworn Tabby leapt off me. A yawn pulled at my jaw, but when I cracked my eyelids, it was still mostly dark.

Cool, more sleep. One of the cats must have still been on the blanket, I squirmed to get more comfortable, and the hand on my stomach slid up to cup my breast. That was...

Wait.

What?

My eyes jerked open. The room was still dark, and I was definitely in my bed, and there was definitely someone else curled up against my back. I lifted my head from—an arm, not a pillow—and twisted.

“Jake?”

A grunt was his only answer. Then a very firm squeeze of his hand against my breast sent a thrill through me. Wrapping the arm I’d been laying on around me, he pressed his nose against my hair and nuzzled a kiss to my nape. The prickle of his stubble sent another wave of sensation washing through me. Squirming, I tried to turn over.

“It’s the middle of the night,” came his sluggish voice. He rolled from his side to his back and he took me with him. It

was definitely still dark. I could barely make out that he was there by the light sneaking in around the edges of blinds. But the outdoor light was yellowy and dim.

He'd kept an arm around my shoulders, but the hand on my breast had slipped away when he rolled.

"Jake," I tried again, the racing of my heart chasing sleep away. What time was it?

Lifting his head, he grumbled then adjusted me—literally tugged me closer to his chest while one of my legs slid over his. "It's like two in the morning, Frankie. Go back to sleep." He punctuated his sentence with a yawn. It flexed his chest and the rub against my tank top left my nipples strained and pointed.

Okay, now more than just shock had me awake.

"You're sleeping in my bed." *Way to go, Captain Obvious. That was a stellar observation.*

My eyes burned, and I rubbed the heel of my hand against one before I set it back against his chest. I had nowhere else to put it as long as I was plastered to his side. I'd found a way to work my right arm under his pillow somehow and there was something nice about the weight of his head on the pillow and then my arm.

With a groan, Jake turned his head and pressed a kiss to the top of my head while trailing his fingers lightly against my upper arm. "You fell asleep—well, actually, we kind of both did. But sleeping sitting up sucks, so I carried you in here." Another yawn. "Then I kind of didn't want to go... If you want me to leave, I'll get dressed."

It would have been hard to miss the note of complaint in his voice. Easing up a little, I squinted at him in the dark. The steady beat of his heart under my palm was awkward and at the same time familiar. It was hardly the first time we'd had a sleepover, though typically we planned it. The guys hadn't slept on my bed or me on theirs in a few years. We had when we were kids, but the sleepovers had grown limited to big

parties and usually at Archie's where there was room in the guesthouse for all of us to spread out.

This was... different.

"Frankie?" he sounded more awake. "I'll go. It's fine..."

"No," I said slowly, more reluctant to kick him out than to let him stay. "Mom's out of town." It wasn't like we'd get in trouble.

"Cool," he yawned the last of the word and urged me back down with his hand against my back. This time I curled up to him, trying to ignore the heat of his leg against mine, and the way his heart thudded against my ear even if I rested on his shoulder. He stroked his hand over my shoulder and down my arm in light, easy gestures.

I wasn't really sure I could go back to sleep, even if I'd been exhausted earlier. Awareness swept through me at each breath he exhaled. The firmness of the muscle under my hand made me want to trace the rigid lines. He was wearing a shirt, but only boxers I was pretty sure. I'd seen Jake shirtless plenty of times. He was cut.

"Frankie," he murmured in a drowsy voice. "You okay?"

"Not sure I can sleep like this." It was kind of embarrassing to admit. He felt good. *Real* good. Even tired, I kind of didn't want to miss it.

"Mmm...fix it..." The bed bounced a little as he rolled over, tumbling me onto my back, but before I could adjust, he had an arm around my middle. Then I was on my side, my back flush to his chest with one of his legs tucked between mine and both of his arms around me, one hand flat against my breast bone, just above said breasts and the other on my abdomen. The tank top rucked a little which let his fingers rest against my skin.

It was so much better.

And so much worse.

Then Jake nuzzled a kiss behind my ear. "Go to sleep. I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

Weirdly, even when I thought the last thing I'd be able to do was sleep, I must have because the next time I opened my eyes hints of daylight edged the window, but it was still mostly dark in the room and my alarm hadn't gone off. Jake's arm rested around my middle, his grip having loosened, but he hadn't moved away. I'd rolled a little more to my front and he draped my back like the best heated blanket ever.

Jake is sleeping in my bed.

A little thrill accompanied that thought. Running my fingers lightly over his hand, I traced the lines of it and then lined my hand up against the back of his. I must have woken him, because he caught my hand in his and then pressed his lips against the back of my shoulder.

"Morning," he rumbled, the prickle of his stubble scraping at me with each word. "Not time to get up yet."

"I don't know what time it is," I admitted, I pulled his hand up, holding it to my chest. It curved his biceps right across my breast and I considered changing the position of his hand, but I didn't really want to move it.

With a groan, he squeezed my hand and let me go before he rolled onto his back. Turning fully on my stomach, I lifted on my elbows to get a better view as he reached lifted his phone off the side table. The sudden light from the screen had me squinting, but also gave me my first real good look at a rumpled Jake, face covered in new growth, and his hair in disarray. This was Jake. Not the smooth football player who always took care with his appearance to look good at school.

The rugged, unpolished side was even more attractive, if that were possible, and my stomach tightened as I studied him.

"It's just barely six." He dropped his arm with the phone and then turned his head to look at me. My eyes were still a little dazzled from the lit screen. "Hey..."

"Hi," I whispered, suddenly shy and rather glad his screen had gone off. It gave me somewhere to hide while I got my shit together.

Jake rolled to his side and then he was just right there, close enough I could feel his breath on my cheek. He must have brushed his teeth the night before—crap, I hadn't—because he did not smell bad. At all. In fact, all I could smell was Jake. That night when I went to bed, my sheets were going to smell like him, too.

The idea made me grin.

When he brushed his fingers against my cheek, then began to comb my hair away from my face, I sighed. That was nice.

“Sleep well?”

It was a weird question, but not...

“Pretty good,” I admitted. “A little weird when I realized you were still here.”

“Weird good? Or weird bad?” With lightly calloused fingertips, he traced the shell of my ear and it sent little shivers down my spine.

“Weird undecided,” I said, not quite able to keep from smiling. “This is kind of—nice.”

“Yeah?” He slid his hand into my hair and then down to my nape. “Frankie?”

“Hmm?”

“I'm going to kiss you.” A delicious promise hugged those words, and at the same time, a quiet request underscored them.

I'd still been leaning on my elbows, so when he tugged gently, I leaned toward him. Anticipation tightening my stomach and I held my breath as he drew me closer. The first touch of his lips on mine was barely there, light and feathering. Then another kiss, then another. Small, tiny nipping kisses that had me gasping and when I opened my mouth, he swept in with his tongue. Somehow, I went from being on my stomach to my side and Jake was right there, trading nuzzling kisses for deeper, longer and far wetter ones.

He fisted my hair and, when he tilted my head, I went with it. His thigh pressed right up against the apex of my legs, wedging tight as a groan escaped me. With a roll of my hips, I

ground against him as he sucked on my tongue. It was dizzying, every teasing stroke of his mouth left me hungry for more. I pressed one hand against his face, the scrape of stubble there rough against my palm.

I forgot how to breathe. Even the light sting of his stubble rasping my face couldn't make me break from the kiss. I strained against his thigh, needing more even as I ran my free hand against his shirt. I wanted... something. Air whooshed out of me as he rolled me onto my back and one of the pillows tumbled off the bed.

I could have sworn one of the cats leapt away and there was a disgruntled meow that I didn't have time to truly consider as Jake somehow deepened the kiss. There was no mistaking the heavy weight of the erection pressing against my belly. Digging my fingers into his shoulders, I widened my thighs, so he was even closer.

The hot feeling of his hand under my shirt, and then on my breast had me gasping. The contact sent a bolt of pure lust winding through my system. His fingers trapped a peaked nipple, the first touch electric.

Thoughts ping-ponging, I broke the kiss when he gave the lightest twist. It added to the tightening coil gradually setting fire to my system. Panting, I leaned back into the pillow, suddenly aware that I had my hands under his shirt, my fingers against the bare skin of his back. Jake stared down at me. It was like his gaze had weight and texture. He rolled my nipple again and my back arched. God, that felt so good.

"Like that?" The sexy rumble of his voice had me squirming, thighs tight against him, and I wanted more.

"Yes," I admitted as he pressed a kiss to my throat, and still I was straining. "Almost too much..."

"Nothing's too much with you," he murmured. He kissed down to my collarbone and, as he drifted down, I was losing my grip on him. The tank top pushed higher and the cool air was flush against my breasts and my nipples tightened more if that were possible. "You have the prettiest titties," he whispered. "So pretty."

How could he tell? It was dark, and his hands were so hot, and I was so chilled. Then his mouth closed over one nipple and I forgot what the hell I'd been asking. It was hot and wet, the pull and suck seeming to draw the tension right up to my breasts and dragging it tighter and tighter. I strained up, my hands finding purchase in his hair.

I wanted him closer, I wanted...he covered my other breast with his hand and then scraped his teeth against the tip in his mouth and a little cry broke from me. What—oh, fuck, that felt good. I'd played with myself—who hadn't? But this was so much better... He took turns, sucking on one nipple than the other. I was burning up, then he hooked his fingers into my pajama bottoms.

The spiral of my world snapped sharply into focus as he tugged them down.

“Jake,” I gasped out, catching his hand.

“I just want to see,” he whispered. “I wanna make you feel good.”

Oh, he already had, but...

“I haven't...”

Everything in him stilled, and then his face was close to mine again, his mouth hovering so near I could feel the whisper of his word as he spoke. “Ever?”

I shook my head. I couldn't quite catch my breath, and the friction of his shirt on my damp, sensitive nipples was making me a little crazy.

“Okay,” he whispered, then kissed me gently. “Okay, just touching then. See what you like, okay?”

What I liked? “Can I touch you?”

“Hell yes, you can touch me,” he murmured, sucking my lower lip out and then dragging his teeth over it. “You can touch me wherever you want.”

I swallowed. I should be objecting, right? Some distant parts of my brain waved frantically like a late commuter rushing to catch the already departing train. I should be on that

train, putting the brakes on. We'd barely kissed and now he'd already... Jake bit down lightly on my pulse point, a sucking kiss that disrupted my thoughts even as he eased his fingers beneath the waistband and began to pull my pajama bottoms down.

I could say a lot of things, but what I said was... "Okay." Then the cool air was against my legs and I was there in a rucked-up tank top and a pair of boy short panties. Jake was on his knees in the middle of my bed. Then he reached behind him and pulled his shirt forward and then off. I barely got a chance to look at him before he kissed me again.

The first brush of his fingers beneath the seam of my panties sent a bolt of shock through me, and I broke the kiss. He paused, staring at me for a minute. I couldn't look away as he began to run his finger back and forth. I was so wet it was embarrassing, but he smiled.

"You feel good," he said, then teased a circle around my clit. It must have doubled in sensitivity because I clenched my thighs on his hand. "Too good?" Laughter danced in those words and I nodded a little. "Do you want me to stop?"

Not trusting myself to speak, I shook my head and forced my thighs to relax a little. He began to move his hand again, this time the circling grew more forceful and it sent little bolts of tension out.

"Lie down," he whispered, nudging me back and then his mouth was on one of my nipples again. He dipped his fingers lower and eased one inside of me as his thumb continued its caress. Thoughts scattering, I clung to him and then ran my hands over his skin. Every part of him was hot and, the more he pushed at me, the more I strained toward the release he seemed to be chasing.

But I wanted to touch him. He was leaning over me, so I twisted a little. When he lifted his head, I slid my hand to his boxers then under them. His swift indrawn breath promised me he was as turned on by this as I was. The first stroke of my fingers along his cock was a delight. The skin was hot, tight, and so smooth.

Dampness met my fingers on his tip, so I bit my lip and then began to stroke him. I had a pretty solid idea of how this was supposed to work. From root where the springy hairs tickled my hands to his tip where more dampness leaked then down again.

“Fuck,” Jake said, panting. He eased a second finger into me and then rested his forehead against mine as he began to pet me in earnest. The dip of his fingers stroked in and out even as he applied more pressure to my clit. I was going to come like a bottle rocket, and I tightened my grip. “Faster,” he whispered. “Just like that but faster, babe.”

Then we were both straining, I could taste it in the way he kissed me as I stroked him, feel it in the way he began to thrust against my hand, and experienced it in how I was lifting my hips to grind against his. I was so close, then he let out a little cry and hot jet of splashed against my stomach, then another as he shuddered. His breath was hot against my ear.

He had, but I hadn't, and I both marveled at his coming apart the way he looked—thank God there was enough light creeping in now to make out the bliss on his face. Then he kissed me, hard and possessive, the brush of his chest against my nipples teased them and he gripped my hair as he began to move his fingers again, swift deliberate strokes demanding all of my attention. But when he curled his fingers and pressed down with his thumb, release burst through me. I was pretty sure I soaked his hand as my cry splintered out and I arched off the bed.

The little shocks eddied out as he teased the too sensitive clit, stopping only at my complaining noise. Then he kissed me again, those little nipping kisses, teasing my mouth open. When he finally eased his hand from between my legs, he lifted his head and smiled. “Good morning.”

It was the most ridiculous thing to say. Laughter bubbled up through me, and I wound my arms around his neck very well aware of the sweat and spunk sticking to both of us. We were so going to need a shower. I even liked having him sprawl over me, the weight was good.

“You okay?” Jake asked, lifting his head.

“I think I’m more than okay.” Still tingling from head to toe, I indulged a whim and ran my fingers through his hair. “You?”

“Oh. Yeah. That was hot...” The compliment warmed me. Still looking at me, he sucked his fingers off and something in me went all low, hot, and soft. “You taste better than I ever imagined...”

“You imagined how I would...?” *Seriously?*

He kissed me, and I could taste myself on his lips. Never in a million years would I have thought that was sexy, and at the same time, I dug my fingers into his back as I sucked on his tongue. Brushing a kiss to my cheek then down to my ear, he nibbled at the earlobe and the tickling left me squirming.

He laughed. “Frankie, I’ve been jerking off to the thought of you for a really long time. Yes, I imagined how you’d taste, how you’d feel...and I gotta say...”

I held my breath.

“...I really need to work on my imagination. You are so much better than I ever pictured.”

Heat flooded my face. Shyness hit me all over again. We were mostly naked, we’d just gotten each other off, and I still had his jizz on my stomach. Though arguably so did he.

“Hey,” he said, cupping my face. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Everything. I don’t know.”

“Good that you have a handle on that,” he said soberly. Before he could continue, however, Tiddles landed on the side of the bed right at head level. The cat stared at both of us. When we glanced at him, he yowled. “Well, everyone’s critic,” Jake told him, and I couldn’t help it, I burst out laughing.

We clung together, laughing. Eventually, we had to get up. We had to go to school, and we had to shower... As if having the same thought, Jake eased off me, but I didn’t miss the way he gazed at my breasts or how that made me feel. Course, I also wasn’t complaining because I was getting my first real

good look at him, and the sweet Adonis belt that dipped down to where his softening cock was still out and his damp...

All at once I realized. "Oh crap."

"What?" He frowned.

"Your boxers."

When he glanced down, he laughed and then leaned in to give me another kiss. "I can go commando. My clothes are clean since I changed before I came over last night."

Commando.

"You're going to run all day with nothing on under your jeans."

"Yes, I am," he said. "And you're going to know."

That sent a thrill through me.

He ran a finger along the seam of my panties. "Want to be twinsies?"

"You want me to leave my panties off, too?"

"And let me be the only one who knows you're naked under your shorts?" The lust on his face twisted me up, and I couldn't catch my breath.

"Okay," I whispered and then I was chasing his mouth as he kissed me again. Tiddles let out another yowl and Jake groaned.

"I just want to skip school and stay right here."

But we couldn't. He had football, and we both had class.

We were also running low on time. "We can't..."

"I know," he grumbled. Then Tiddles meowed loudly, joined by Tabby and Tory and I laughed. "Your cats are pushy."

"You could say I like the pushy ones."

"Good to know," he said and then finally dragged himself off the bed. "Let me get you a towel for that." He pointed at my belly.

“I’m good.” I stripped off the tank top and, even if I was turning a fine shade of scarlet, he’d already had his mouth on me so no reason to hide. I used it to wipe up my stomach as I rose. Awareness swept over me, I glanced to find Jakes staring at me, even as he ran his hand over his slowly stiffening cock. I glanced down and then up.

“You’re going to football practice, commando?” I just kind of had to know.

He grinned. “Worried about my reputation?”

No. But... His eyes dared me to keep going, but you know what—if he wanted to go commando, he could go commando. Subject change. Call me bold, but... “We both need to shower.”

“We do.”

“If you take care of that in the shower, can I watch?”

His breath caught. “You want to give me a hand?”

And actually really get to see him?

I nodded slowly, and he held out a hand to me. “Should we feed the cats first or after?”

“Probably after,” I admitted. “So we don’t—get carried away.”

The heat in his eyes promised to burn me. “I want to get carried away with you, Frankie.” He delivered the last bit with another kiss. “Just so you know.”

Damn the shyness hit the weirdest times. “Jake?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

His expression softened. “I should be thanking you. And you’re more than welcome.” Then he blew out a breath. “Let’s shower before I toss you back on that bed and spend some real time figuring out how much I like how you taste.”

Oh, that thought was going to linger.

My phone buzzed at the same time his did, and we both glanced back. Archie's name was on his screen and probably mine. He was checking in about coffee.

Archie.

Ian.

Coop.

Jake and I had just... and I glanced to find him watching me steadily. "You're dating us," he said slowly. "We didn't do anything wrong."

No. We hadn't. I crawled over to grab my phone and sent Archie a pretty please with a starry-eyed emoji.

Jake watched me do it and then laughed. He picked up his phone, showed me the screen then sent, *Well, duh. Make it a quad shot.*

Ian and Coop answered in fairly rapid succession. Then Jake dropped his phone on my bed and pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "Shower?"

I clicked the screen off and set my phone next to his—in the middle of my very ruffled bed.

We hadn't done anything wrong, and I felt great. Meeting his gaze, I grinned. "And other things."

"Oh, definitely," Jake held out a hand and I took it. "Other things are most assuredly on the menu."

THE MORNING AFTER

Coop: Yo, Jake, why are you parked at Frankie's?

Archie: He's at Frankie's?

Bubba: He was last night after she got off work.

Archie: That was last night, it's morning.

Coop: No shit. Jake—answer your texts, man.

Jake: I'm getting ready to leave for school.

Coop: ...

Bubba: ...

Archie: ...

Jake: I'm gonna grab donuts on the way.

Coop: Hold the phone. Did you go home
last night?

Archie: ...

Bubba: Wait, what?

Jake: Rule #7 guys.

Coop: Fuck rule 7, why were you at her
place all night?

Jake: 1st. FU Coop. 2nd see rule 7

Bubba: Cool it, guys. Jake, c'mon, man,
you gotta give us something.

Archie: I'm thinking he went for something.

Coop: ...

Bubba: ...

Jake: Really, Arch?

Bubba: Yeah, I'm thinking we
need a rule on that.

Jake: I think not being an asshat
should be a given.

Archie: Screw you, Jake.

Coop: Dudes, what the hell?

Bubba: Guys!

Archie: We didn't talk about sleepovers.

Jake: We're not talking about it now.

Coop: Rule #3 don't step on another guy's date.

Bubba: Rule #4 No competing with each other.

Archie: ...

Jake: I'm not fighting you Arch,
but keep this up, and I will
be hitting you.

Archie: And if I ask Frankie about it?

Coop: Whoa...

Bubba: Stop.

Jake: You do, and I will
beat your ass.

Bubba: Time out. Stop, both of you.

Archie: ...

Coop: ...

Jake: Leaving in 2.
Leave her alone
Or else.

Bubba: Rule #8 No fighting.

Jake: ...

Archie: ...

Bubba: We're not doing this to her.
Agree or you're out.

Archie: Excuse me?

Coop: No—he's right.
This would hurt her.

Archie: Fine.

Jake: Fine

Bubba: And Coop? Butt out if a car is there.

Coop: I asked a question.

Jake: OMW

Bubba: You know why you did it.

Coop: Fine. I can't believe you're fine
with it.

Bubba: Didn't say I was.

Archie: So, you don't like it.

Bubba: Didn't say that, either.

Archie: Fine, Mr. Perfect.

Bubba: See you at school.

Archie: Yeah.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SO... GOOD TALK

Walking out of the apartment with Jake was a little surreal. He'd slept right next to me—wrapped around me, really, the whole night. Then...well, make out didn't quite cover what we did or what I got to help him with in the shower. The butterflies in my stomach had a litter of kittens, and I waxed between giggling and nervous as hell.

A beat before we walked out the door, Jake gripped the handle and stared me. His intent gaze had heat flooding my face. For as long as I could remember, I'd been one of the guys. I heard about who they dated, how far they got, and more than once, how they couldn't get rid of them. Them—the girls who clung past the point when the guys wanted them there.

Now, the shoe was on the other foot. I'd suddenly become one of the girls and...

"Hey," Jake said. "What is going through head right now? You look like you can't decide whether to be sick or not."

"I'm—" Scared? Nervous? Happy? Ecstatic? *Really* happy. Too happy. Happy didn't last long. "I don't regret anything, I'm just not sure how we do this."

"Do what? Go to school? Get our homework done? Get our applications ready to submit?" A hint of teasing softened his expression. He'd managed to shave using my razor. Fortunately, I had extras. "Frankie, we do what we've done every other day. We just be us."

“Be us.” Us had been changing a lot. Bubba was Ian now and he kissed me at school. Archie was planning dates. Coop wanted to take me out and...

“Okay,” I said blowing out a breath. “Just promise me one thing?”

“Name it.”

“If I become one of those girls that you can’t get rid of, tell me, not the guys.”

He frowned. “Frankie...you’re not going to be one of those girls.”

“You say that now, but you’re all asking me out because I got mad and said that I wanted to date. And I...I really like it, and I really like you guys, but I really don’t want to mess up our friendship. I was...” Admitting this next part was hard. “I was really lonely this summer.”

Cupping my face, he leaned in. “You’re Frankie. You’re one of us, not one of them. We’re changing, sure, but I like where we’re going. You have my word, I’m never going to talk to them like you’re of those girls. Ever. Now, will you promise me something?”

I nodded. “What?”

“You get scared like this, tell me. You need something, tell me. You’re not alone. You were never alone. We hated that you weren’t around the last few months, but I’m here whenever you need me. Deal?”

That sounded great. Spending the summer either working or researching and holed up here while Mom did—whatever it was Mom had to do—I’d made it work. I could do it. I’d learned how to take care of myself a long time ago.

“Deal.”

Didn’t mean I wanted to do it on my own *all the time*.

“Now, I’m going to get donuts. Told the guys I’d grab them. Apple fritters for you, right?”

I grinned. “Yes, please.”

When he dipped his head, I was already leaning in. He brushed his lips slowly across mine, lingering as if he were breathing me in. I know I was savoring him as his lips parted, then I was gripping his shoulder as the kiss deepened. This had happened in the shower, too. My hand on him stroking as he kissed me. He'd wanted to do more, but I wasn't quite ready for that.

I was drunk enough on what we'd already done. Dropping my heels, I pulled back and blew out a breath. "Hi."

"Hey," he said, grinning. "Feel better?"

"Much."

"Good." He winked, and then opened the door for me.

We held hands on the way to where he'd parked next to my car and Coop waited for us. The fact Jake reached for my hand whenever we walked now had my stomach doing little flip-flops. It was just nice. Kind of like when they always slung their arms around my shoulders. I'd never told them how nice it was to get those almost hugs.

"Morning, Coop," I greeted him before extracting my hand from Jake's cause I needed to get my keys back out and suddenly the fact I didn't have any panties on flooded my mind. It wasn't obvious, no one could see. But I knew, and Jake did and...probably better to *not* think about what neither of us were wearing.

"Morning," he said, but he wasn't quite looking at me. He stared at Jake, and it wasn't quite a friendly stare.

"Coop."

"Jake."

A glance at Jake proved he hadn't missed the coolness in Coop's manner, but his bland stare didn't give me any other clues. Which meant...this was about me. "I'll see you at school, Jake?"

"Yep, see you in a bit with apple fritters."

He leaned over and gave me a quick kiss this time, then he turned and unlocked his SUV, leaving us to get into my car.

Coop continued to stare at Jake as I dropped my backpack into the backseat. Only after Jake pulled away did Coop glance my way.

I could really tell what he was thinking, not by his expression. “You ready?” Maybe playing dumb wasn’t a strategy, but I clung to Jake’s theory that we hadn’t done anything wrong with both hands and I wasn’t letting go. We were all friends, and Coop and I needed to talk.

Maybe sooner rather than later.

“Yeah,” he answered slowly and slid off his backpack. Once we were in the car, though, Coop didn’t say anything. I gave him a beat as I got out of the apartments and onto the road.

Finally, the silence having fanned the butterflies in my stomach to tsunami force, I asked, “What’s wrong?”

His phone buzzed again. It had begun buzzing about a minute after we got into the car. It continued like it suffered from some kind of tic, going off repeatedly. He hadn’t even pulled it out of his pocket. Instead, he leaned one arm against the closed window and braced his fist just below his lower lip.

“Jake spent the night?” The question came out a little low and almost...hurt?

“We fell asleep watching videos,” I said with a shrug that I most certainly didn’t feel. This was dangerous ground, and I already regretted asking him what was wrong.

Except we should be able to talk about this stuff.

“I was really tired after work.”

“That’s what Jake said when he texted. Also said he wasn’t going to hang out long so you could get some sleep.” Everything about Coop’s tone was guarded.

“He probably did,” I said, glancing at Coop as we pulled up to a light. “But I was tired, and it was late. We fell asleep. It’s not the first time he’s spent the night.”

“We were twelve the last time he stayed over there, Frank.” Coop didn’t approve.

“Okay.”

“And your mom wasn’t home—again.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Thanks.” Thankfully, the light turned green.

“You have a hickey.”

I did? How had I not noticed it? Then again, I’d been kind of floating before and after the shower. It had been so weird to be together like that and get ready. I had to get my hair dry and my curls tamed.

“Are you annoyed that I have it or that I didn’t tell you all about it?” Okay, if we were pushing boundaries, I needed to push some, too.

“I don’t know,” Coop admitted. “I don’t know what I feel right now.”

All the fight went out of me. “Coop...”

“It’s fine, Frankie...I just wasn’t prepared to see Jake’s car there, and then you guys come out, and he’s always holding your hand.”

“He asked me out and so has Ian.”

“And then there’s that,” Coop said. “Bubba has been Bubba forever and now you’re calling him Ian.”

“He likes Ian. It *is* his name.”

“He’s never asked any of us to call him Ian.” Fist clenched, he banged it against the door. “Sorry, not mad at you.”

We were almost to the school parking lot. “You sure about that?”

There was a motorcycle in the rearview, and the tsunami in my gut threatened to crash down. Ian was right behind us.

Coop didn’t answer me until I’d turned into the lot and headed for my spot. “I asked you out, too.”

“I know,” I told him. “We just haven’t really talked about it.”

“Are you—and Jake?” Coop frowned.

“We haven’t even gone on a real date.” Yes, it was the chicken answer, but I wasn’t talking about what Jake and I did. That was...private. It was ours.

“And you and Bubba?”

Did Tuesday count as a date? “We have kind of?” I slid into my parking spot.

“Then there’s Frenchy...”

Oh, we were back to that. “His name is Mathieu.”

“Yeah, I don’t care what his name is.” As I put the car into park, Coop covered my hand with his.

“I’m not trying to be an ass, I promise.”

“I know,” I told him. “You’re just drawn that way.”

He laughed and it was his first real smile of the morning. “I meant it. I want to take you out.”

“Even if...?”

“Even if you’re dating the other guys.”

Ian knocked on my window, but Coop didn’t let go of my hand. I held up my other hand with a single finger up, asking for a minute then I looked at Coop. “Are you sure?”

“Do you not want to go out with me?” He straightened a little. “I mean, I get it if...”

“Coop, stop. It’s not that. But literally a week ago, I was planning my first date ever and it was cooking in my kitchen. Now...”

“Now you let us know you’re available, and you’re finally figuring out how much we all like you?”

I nodded slowly. “But we’ve been friends forever. If this... I don’t want to mess that up.” I hadn’t lied in what I told Jake. I had *missed* all of them so much.

“We’ll make it work, Frankie. Make some time for me, too? Maybe Monday after homework planning and the application strategy session?”

“Okay,” I said. “But you already asked me out for next Saturday already.”

“Really?”

I laughed. “Yes, Really.”

“Well, cool. So Monday first date and Saturday second? You and me?”

“You and me.”

That seemed to be the reassurance he needed. Coop leaned over and kissed me lightly, right on the lips, before backing off. “I’m holding you to that.”

I gave him a light shove. “I have no doubt.”

As soon as I turned off the car, Ian opened my door for me. He glanced at me first and his gaze dipped to my throat for a beat then he looked at Coop. “You two all right?”

“We’re fine, just being us,” I told him. Ian studied me for a beat and the hurricane force butterflies raced through my system. Two days ago, I made out with Ian and, damn, I’d never been kissed like that. A couple of hours ago, I’d made out and then some with Jake.

We didn’t do anything wrong...

“Goofy?” came Ian’s response and I grinned.

“More or less.”

“Me more, her definitely less,” Coop retorted. Then Ian backed up so I could get out of the car. I barely got the door closed when Ian backed me right up to the door then kissed me. It was far more than a light brush. He teased his tongue along the seam of my lips and I opened up for him. He tasted of toothpaste and a hint of coffee. It was intense enough that when he sucked my lower lip between his teeth, I had to brace my hand on his shoulder.

When he lifted his head, I exhaled a shaky breath. What equilibrium I’d gained between leaving the apartment and getting to school rested on precarious ground.

“You know,” Coop said almost conversationally. “That was pretty hot, but probably not the best idea to do that here.”

Heat flooded my face and Ian lifted his gaze to glare past me right at Coop. But when I gave Ian a light push so I could wiggle out from between him and the car, he backed off. I just barely caught Coop’s nod to the side and when I looked, I really wished I hadn’t.

Rachel Manning was making her way toward another set of doors with Cheryl and a couple of other girls I didn’t recognize. But Rachel looked right at us. No doubt she’d seen.

Oh crap.

My heart pounded as I grabbed my backpack.

“It’s fine,” Ian said. “I don’t care who sees.”

Coop just shook his head. Clearly, he had a different opinion. Ian waited until I locked the car, then he looped an arm over my shoulders. “So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

Just like that, we were back to normal.

Until we reached the cafeteria, where Archie glared at Jake across the table and Jake wore his *fuck off, I don’t give a damn* expression. Maybe coffee with everyone this morning was just a bad idea.

As soon as Jake spotted me, his expression changed. He grinned.

“Oh,” Coop muttered under his breath. “This is going to be fun.”

We strolled across the cafeteria, Ian’s arm over my shoulders like it belonged there and the feeling of being watched crawled over me. Jake kicked out the chair next to him and held up the bag with the fritters. Even as Archie patted the chair next to him and held up his coffee, Coop—the asshole—snickered.

Ian sighed then slid his arm off me as we reached the table. I was not picking sides, so I circled the table and sat in the chair that was roughly between them. Coop snickered again, but when he went to grab my fritters, Jake snatched them and

passed them over. After shaking his head, Archie actually shifted chairs before handing me my coffee.

“Thanks, guys.” My stomach growled in appreciation as the first wave of fritter scent hit me. I took a quick swallow of coffee as Coop and Ian sat. Coop was right across from me, and he stretched out his feet. When he nudged my foot with his, I glanced up. He nodded to Archie and Jake, who had returned to glaring at each other. Well, Archie glared.

“Hey, Arch,” I said pulling his attention off Jake. Not sure for how long, but I’d take it. “Did you finish the Federalist papers?” Yes, lame, but it was the first thing I thought of.

“Pfft.” Archie said. “Yes, not that he’ll care. It’s reference material. I know it’s not on any test.”

“You’re positive about that?” I took a bite of my fritter and waited. Archie opened his mouth, then closed it. Suddenly, he narrowed his eyes before he snorted.

“You’re messing with me.”

“Probably,” I said then grinned, but it worked. He laughed and then tapped my nose lightly.

“Bad Frankie.”

All at once the ballooning tension popped and everyone laughed. The glaring stopped, the silence broke, and we were back to our normal morning routine of teasing, bitching, and debating what we were going to do for lunch.

I really didn’t care, just told them to pick. As I sipped my coffee though, I met Rachel’s gaze across the cafeteria. She was right in the middle of a group of her friends, and she seemed to be studying me. Instead of looking away when caught staring, though, she smirked then glanced at the girl next to her who hadn’t stopped talking the whole time.

Apprehension shivered through me. Maybe Coop was right. Maybe kissing at school was a bad idea.

Especially if Jake, Coop, *and* Ian were going to kiss me.

Was Archie going to try and kiss me on Friday? I tried to study him without studying him and then I had to sip the

coffee. Was I really sitting here fantasizing about what it would be like if Archie kissed me? Was I that desperate for attention?

“Yo, Frankie,” Archie nudging my chair jerked me back to the present. The guys were all in the process of getting up. So were most of the people in the cafeteria. Crap, the bell had to have rung. I finished the last bite of my fritter and licked my fingers hurriedly before I slung the backpack over one shoulder.

“Coming,” I said then waved to the guys. “See you later.”

After a rocky start, the day turned out to be all right. Archie gave me the normal amount of crap during Econ—a class that I think was invented to prove that I was nowhere near as smart as I thought I was—while also sending me little notes about post-dinner things to do.

Honestly, my favorite was *get coffee and take a walk at the lake*. When I sent back a heart to that one, he sent a thumbs up. Silly? Maybe. But I liked the path at the lake. I liked the lake area, because it was green and there were trees and the water. I liked feeding the ducks, too.

Ian caught me on the way to Calculus and he had his arm around my shoulders. When he pressed a kiss to the side my head, I glanced up at him. “You sure?”

“Yep,” he said. We’d talk about it later. But then Ian walked me to French the same way and I avoided his kiss. I still needed to “break up” with Mathieu, but I wasn’t going to flaunt something else in front of him.

It was rude.

French was a blast and Mathieu engaged us all in French Jeopardy. I don’t think anyone in that class laughed as hard as we did.

Between French and Lit, I hit the bathroom and checked my neck. Yep, there was a hickey there, right above my collarbone. The way the shirt sat covered it some of the way but not all. I let my hair down, which I rarely did at school, and tugged it over one shoulder.

Better.

Coop commented on the hair as soon as I sat down. “Did you lose your hair band?”

“Nope,” I told him. “Trying something different.”

He eyed me for a moment, and then nodded. “Cool.”

That was that. I rode in the front passenger seat on the way to lunch while Jake drove. Lunch was Blaze for more pizza, and Jake sprung for mine before I could get my wallet out. When I gave him a look, he just smiled and waved me toward the table. I was sandwiched between Ian and Jake this time and they both had a thigh pressed against mine. It was really kind of nice.

On the way back, I made Coop sit in the front so I could sit in the back with Archie and Ian. Jake made a face, but then shook his head. Study Hall, though—that was a whole new wrinkle.

Jake had our chairs right next to each other and an arm braced along the back of my chair. “How you doing?”

“I’m good,” I promised him. “But I really have to do homework this time.”

He traced his thumb against the side of my hand. “I wish the library had private rooms.”

Just the suggestion had me clenching my thighs together, and I frowned at him. “Not at school.”

“But...”

“Not. At. School.”

He pouted and it was adorable, but his eyes were laughing. “Fine, I’ll wait. Can I come over tonight?”

If he did... all the ideas rolling through my head left me more than a little warm. “I have to make my dessert for tomorrow’s French class and finish the video. So, if you come over...”

“You don’t want me to come over because I’ll distract you,” Jake said slowly, and his smile grew.

“Well, yes.”

“Even if I promise I’ll be good?”

I rolled my eyes then tapped his nose much as Archie had done to me earlier. “You’re not being good now.”

Then I looked at the chapter I had open. I really needed to finish it and get these notes done. Jake leaned over and whispered right against my ear, “Bad is better, but I can be good, Frankie. Whatever you need.”

A shiver raced over my skin and my nipples went tight. It was like I could feel him touching them all over again. *So. Not. Helpful.*

“And I have to tell you,” he said, his lips so close I could swear they brushed my skin every time he spoke. “All I can think about is what you don’t have on under your shorts.”

Heat swarmed through me. I’d made it most of the day *not* thinking about the fact that Jake had gone commando and so had I. He’d watched me pull on my shorts and whistled. There was something really damn bad about that, even if no one else could see.

Course, now all I could think about was the fact *he* was commando and his missing boxers were still at my place. He hadn’t taken them out on his way to the SUV. His backpack had already been in the car.

I bumped his leg then stared at his textbook meaningfully. “Behave and I’ll think about it.”

He pulled his arm off my chair, but he rested his hand on my thigh and played with my fingers under the table as I worked to get the reading done.

It was definitely a distraction.

By the time we made it AP Euro, I pointed him to a desk one away from mine and refused his pout. “If I don’t get this done now, I’ll be up even later tonight.” I wouldn’t have time tomorrow with the date, and I definitely wouldn’t have time on Saturday between work and the party. Then Sunday I had work

and a date with Jake. No, I had to take advantage of the work time while I had it.

I finished my reading and notes in record time, then got the outline done for the first paper we had due in lit and managed to get all of my calculus finished. That left making my French project again and finishing putting together the video.

When the bell rang, Jake helped me slide on my backpack and then held out his hand. “Thank you,” I told him as we headed out.

“You’re welcome.”

Halfway to my car, he murmured, “Going commando at work, too?”

“I think not,” I said, wishing like hell my face didn’t turn into a hot zone whenever he teased me like that. I’d like to have a little better control over my responses.

“I’m going to pretend you did,” he promised. “When Bubba and I stop by, I’m going to pretend. You’ll know it, and I’ll know.”

He was killing me.

In all the right ways.

Laughing, I followed him out the door and then paused. There was a vase with four yellow roses on my car. Coop just smirked as Ian stared at the roses with a frown and Jake scowled.

“Who the hell is this asshat?”

“He’s not an asshat,” I scolded him and tugged my hand away as I hurried to the car.

“You don’t know that he isn’t,” Jake argued.

“You don’t know he is,” I countered.

“Frankie,” Ian said, rubbing the back of his neck. “This is getting a little weird.”

“What, that someone is leaving me flowers?” I *liked* them.
“

“Someone who doesn’t sign their cards and you’re getting more and more each day. It’s a little weird,” Coop admitted.

Maybe it was. “You know, lately I’ve been getting a lot of weird.” I searched the vase and found the note tucked against the side.

WHEN IT COMES TO SENDING A JOYFUL MESSAGE, YELLOW roses are the best. In fact, they are the traditional symbol of friendship. Like your warm, sunny disposition, these roses light up a room. They’re the perfect way for me to say, thanks for being you...

TEARS UNEXPECTEDLY PRICKED MY EYES. IT WAS THE sweetest message yet, and I had no idea who was sending them. Based on the varying hostile reactions from Jake and Ian, they weren’t it. I’d kind of thought Archie had been, but this was so weird, and he’d been so irritated earlier that morning. Archie did big extravagant things, but now I wasn’t so sure. When I looked at Coop, he raised his hands.

“Seriously, not it. Wish I’d thought of it. You really like them,” he said slowly. That only served to make Ian and Jake scowl harder.

“I’m saying it right now, I don’t like this. If someone wants to make a move they should at least let you know who they are.” Jake reached for the note, but I tucked it against my chest. It was typed. He wasn’t going to learn anything from it.

“Maybe they aren’t making a move, maybe they’re just being nice to me.” I sniffed at the roses.

“Maybe,” Ian said, but he sounded skeptical.

“Guys, no one has ever given me flowers before...”

“I did,” Coop argued. When we all stared at him, he shrugged. “I picked you three daisies when we went on that field trip to the arboretum.”

Oh. He had. I laughed. “I forgot about that.”

“So there, I was the first guy to ever give you flowers.” His smirk took on an almost triumphant note.

With a roll of his eyes, Jake said, “When you were five. It doesn’t count.”

“Still better than you, big man,” Coop retaliated.

“And on that note,” I said before any of them could start. “You both have football, and I have to get changed for work.”

Jake’s smile shifted when I said changed.

“See you later?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ian murmured, not asking as he pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “We’ll see you for dinner after practice.”

“Definitely,” Jake said, then he gave me a kiss on the other corner of my mouth and rested his hand against my hip. The light squeeze had me reddening again, dammit.

“Go away,” I told them and then turned to the car.

Once in the car, Coop carried my roses for me as I drove. “You really haven’t gotten flowers before?”

“Nope. Sorry I forgot about the daisies.”

“It’s no problem, they were kind of wilted and sad.” Coop turned the roses around. “Do you like roses?”

“I love them. They’re my favorite flower. I kind of thought it had to be one of you guys, the sweet cards and the fact they mean so many different things.”

“I wish like hell it was me, Frankie. I’d totally take the credit.”

“You don’t need roses to take credit with me,” I reminded him.

When we got to the apartments, he stopped me from turning the car off. “Before you go? I know our date is Monday, but I want you to remember this...” Then he kissed me. It was so gentle, the press of his lips tickled mine. Gentle, sweet and then, he nudged my mouth open a little and while he

teased me with his tongue, he didn't deepen the kiss. My heart did a little shake as he lifted his head and then he smiled.

"What?" I licked my lips.

"That was more than I what I thought it would be," he said. Then kissed me gently. "Have a good night at work. Text me when you're home?"

I nodded a little dumbly. He held on to my roses until I was out of the car, then passed them back carefully.

"Monday, Frankie," he said, walking backward. "You and me. It's going to be fun."

Inside the apartment, the emptiness hit me. I'd spent the day surrounded by my best friends, teasing, laughing, making plans and getting kissed. Then I came home to—Tiddles meowed at me and I smiled.

Well, I had my cats and I had a lot of dates.

Being with them was so much better than wondering when Mom would make it home.

I checked my phone. No texts. No calls. No surprises, really.

She wasn't a demonstrative person. If I needed her, I had to ask.

Shaking off that feeling, I glanced down at the cats swarming me. "Yes, yes, let me change. Then I'll feed you beasts."

In my room, the roses joined the others and they looked spectacular. I glanced down at the note then at the roses. I had no idea who sent those but... I really did love them.

My ruffled bed reminded me of the morning. I smoothed it out, then carefully picked up Jake's boxers and slid them into my laundry. I'd take care of them later. For now, I had to change and get to work.

A thrill skated through me as I changed. I'd told Jake I wasn't going commando at work, but you know what...

I kind of like feeling just a bit naughty, and I liked that he planned to think of me that way anyway.

On the way to the kitchen to feed the cats, I paused and caught my breath. If I invited Jake over tonight, he'd think we could play more. While I wasn't opposed, I also wasn't sure that wasn't even faster than my zero to sixty that morning.

If Coop came over, we'd all have a reason to keep our hands to ourselves. Coop—Coop was worried about being left out.

“Decide after work, Frankie,” I told myself. “Right now, move your ass.”

Yeah. Good talk.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THERE'S THE RUB

If anything, work on Thursday proved a hundred times worse than Wednesday. Rachel Manning parked at the counter and nothing dislodged her. She had the seat right at the end, so I had to pass her every time I moved out to take care of the tables. Cheryl had come in with her, but unlike Rachel, she apparently had other places to go.

When Rachel pulled out her books and actually started doing homework while sipping on a shake, I was oddly grateful. It meant she wasn't giving me those weird, assessing looks anymore. Yes, she saw me kiss Ian in the parking lot. Great. Call me, paranoid, but it felt like she'd judged me. Or at least, judged something about me.

Jake and Ian showed up a little later than the day before, but this was their last practice before Friday night's game. Their arrival also signaled the rush. Football players, their girlfriends, and families among others poured in the doors. A lot of take out orders, full stations on both sides, and blenders that never turned off. Marsha, our manager, didn't wait to be called out. She all but apparated as soon as the jingling on the door took on an almost rhythmic tone.

When I brought Jake and Ian their shakes, they both cast me apologetic looks. "We should never have told the team about this place," Ian said, the curve of his lips tugging at me.

"It's almost cute that you think this is your fault," I told him, then glanced between the two. "It's a gonna be a few before the burgers are ready. Lots of orders going in."

“Take your time,” Jake said, and he ran his gaze over me just like he promised. Terrible boy. Yes, he was picturing me commando. The heat creeping up my neck was almost as bad as the hickey I’d made sure the work shirt hid.

“I plan on it,” I said and then took a deliberate step before I glanced back. “Oh, and Jake? That thing you asked me about earlier? I decided on yes.”

“About after work?”

“Nope. The other one.”

Confusion clouded his eyes for a moment, so I left him to stew on it. I was two steps away when he muttered, “Oh. Hell...”

Maybe that was a little bit mean, but if he was going to tease me, I planned to return the favor. A little niggle of guilt for leaving him on the spot with Ian, but I needed the boost for the shift.

Zabra cast a look at me as we met by the shake machines. “You want to run food or make shakes?”

“Run food.” Making shakes got tiring.

She chuckled. “Next time you do the shakes.”

“Deal.” I left her with my list and turned the window. Every order came with its check, so I knew where they went. I started hustling out all the burgers. By the time I was done, Zabra had my shakes ready, and I got those to the tables, then did a sweep and we washed, rinsed, and repeated.

“Hey, Frankie,” Rachel snagged my attention on my way past.

Okay. Here it comes... I braced.

“Can I get you something?” Her shake was almost empty, and she’d finished her burger and fries a long time ago.

“You have time for a quick question?” She motioned to the lit textbook she had open in front of her. Of all the things I expected, I hadn’t been prepared for that one.

“Um...” I did a quick scan of the restaurant; we were slowing—but only just barely. Jake and Ian were in the middle of an intense debate that required paper and pen. There were also a couple of orders in the window. “Let me get this order in and those out, and I’ll be right back?”

“Great,” she said, with a quick smile. An actual smile, not that intense calculating and rather disturbing smile she wore that never made it all the way to her eyes.

Who was she and what had she done with Rachel? “Do you need more?” I motioned to the shake.

“I might be sick if I have anymore. Can I just get a coke? So I can still sit here?”

I wasn’t going to chase her out if she was done ordering, but sure, why not? “I’ll bring it with me.”

“Thanks.” Another grin.

Was that the *Twilight Zone* music? It took me more like seven minutes before I got back to Rachel with her coke. I cleared away her shake glass and the spot next to her at the bar.

“What’s up?”

She focused on me, not her book. “We’re working on analyzing poetry and I have to do *Remembrance*.”

“By Brontë?”

Surprise flickered over her face before she nodded. Turning her book, she faced it toward me. Yep, I remembered that poem. I skimmed it then checked with Rachel again. It was a terrifically sad poem full of anguish and longing. Not my favorite. “She wants us to break it down by paragraphs and detail what is being communicated in each section.”

That sounded rather normal for an assignment. so I nodded.

“My question is—how do you analyze eight paragraphs in depth when it’s depressing as Hell and I can’t decide whether the author wanted to kill herself or not?”

Okay, that was a loaded question. I did a quick scan of the restaurant and Ian raised his brows. I nodded then looked at Rachel. “Okay, short answer? She doesn’t want to kill herself. If you read it through, she’s devastated. It’s been time since he died, and she is trying to figure out if, in the time she’s mourned him, if the love she felt has depleted. If he would he forgive her if it had—but she’s never felt that way about anyone else, not in all those years. At the same time, she can’t wallow in that sorrow, because she still has a life and it can still be lived.”

Rachel stared at me, mouth open faintly and her eyes wondering.

“It’s depressing,” I told her. “But she’s not suicidal.” I tapped the page. “Try it again. I’ll be back.”

There was an order up, so I snagged it for Zabra, who wasn’t readily visible—probably grabbing a cigarette out back real fast—and swung the plates over to her table. After I finally reached Ian and Jake, they both grinned at me. Their food had long since been eaten and their shakes emptied. They were literally just taking up space, which normally I’d mind because turning tables meant I got more tips.

“We were thinking,” Ian said with a nod toward the clock. “You’re out of here, soon, right?”

I glanced over. It was twenty to nine. Holy crap, I was. “Yeah...” The shift had blown past me like I was sitting still—maybe because I hadn’t stopped running. “What’s up?”

“Jake said you’ve got that project for French class, which is the dessert you made for Mathieu and the video, right?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly, and Jake huffed out a sigh.

“Bubba wants to swing by, too. Archie texted—said he’d pick up stuff on his way over.” Jake wasn’t fond of the idea. I’d already thought about inviting Coop to give myself a buffer.

“Guys, that’s great...”

“Okay, I’ll let Archie know.”

“Wait,” I placed my hand over Jake’s on the phone. “I was saying that’s great, but I have all the clips. I just need to edit them together. I’ve got all the stuff I need for the dessert, too.”

“You don’t want company?” Disappointment echoed in Ian’s statement.

“More like, I need to do homework, I need to do the project, and if everyone is there, we’re going to be up super late.” I glanced at Jake. “I need to get some sleep, too, and so do you guys. Big game tomorrow.”

“Not that big,” Ian muttered.

“You’re still meeting us afterward, right?” Jake stared at me hopefully.

“With Archie,” I reminded him.

“Right. Arch.” He tapped the table.

I glanced around, we were relatively quiet, but I still had to do my job. Rachel had twisted in her seat and lifted a hand. I nodded.

“Look, I have to get back to work. But not tonight, okay? I’ll see you guys tomorrow, and we’ve got a big weekend.”

“Text when you get home?” Jake asked and Ian nodded.

“Yeah, just let us know you’re home and fine.”

“Sure,” I said, picking up their empty shake glasses. I’d left their check earlier. “You guys text me, too, okay? I want to make sure you find your way home safely.”

They both gave me an odd look, and I grinned. I’d had this job since the day I turned sixteen. I’d been working these shifts for almost two years, but I didn’t recall specifically texting them to say I was home before. We’d texted, sure, but not for one singular reason.

So fine, if they wanted me to text them, then I wanted the same courtesy. Zabra was out and Marsha motioned me over. I lifted a finger toward Rachel and said, “One sec, okay?”

In the back, Marsha beckoned me to follow. “Zabra’s taking over any new tables, so you can go ahead and finish

your sidework and get out of here.”

Oh, cool. A little early but I’d stayed later the night before. In her office, she pulled an envelope out of a locked cubby then handed it to me. “Those are all your credit tips from last night.”

“Sweet. Thank you.” I pocketed it along with tonight’s cash. I’d get tonight’s credit tips on Saturday. I could stick around and total them out, but it was just as easy to wait until she ran the register and get them later.

“You know,” Marsha said. “I’m going to miss you when you graduate.”

I made a face. “I’m sorry?”

“Not even and you shouldn’t be. I think you’re hands down the best teenager who has ever worked for me.”

My face warmed. “Thanks?”

“You’re welcome. Now, reality talk.” Marsha leaned against her desk and folded her arms. In her mid-50s, Marsha had a suggestion of gray in her light brown hair that looked more like highlights than streaks. “You’ve got a big load a school, you’re staring down graduation, college apps, time with your friends... big year. Do you need to tighten up your schedule some?”

“I already did before school started,” I reminded her, my stomach bottoming out. I needed this job. The money—I was saving every penny I could. “We worked it out for the two week nights and then weekends during the day.” It had been Marsha who insisted on Friday nights off for me, but now I was glad I had them. “Am I not keeping up or something?”

Ian and Jake distracted me a little, but I hadn’t kept any tables waiting. Even when I paused to talk to Rachel, it hadn’t caused a backlog.

“Not at all. You’re great.” Marsha put a hand on my forearm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Seriously. The best. I’m—I raised a pair of kids, Frankie. They may both be at college bankrupting me,” she said that with a laugh. “But I know how

important this year was to them. I don't want you missing out on anything."

"I'm not." In fact, I had four guys—five guys—I was dating at the moment. Or intending to date. Actually, I was just going to keep all of that to myself. "I promise. I've got plans."

"Yes," Marsha said with a sigh. "You've also got two beautiful young men keeping an eye on you. Hubba hubba."

I made a face. "Please don't do that."

With a laugh, Marsha waved me out of the office. "Go finish up and get out of here. But, remember, if you need time, *tell* me. We'll make it happen."

"Thanks, Marsha."

"Yep."

Out front, Ian and Jake's table was empty, but they were still in the parking lot, talking by Jake's SUV. I pulled out a silverware tub and walked it over to where Rachel waited. "Sorry, that took a minute."

"No problem," she said taking a sip of her coke. "So I wrote this. Would you mind giving it a look and telling me what you think?"

Yep. Definitely weird. Rachel had never been a total mean girl. For, like, five minutes we'd been almost friends. But she was blunt and sometimes painfully so. Too painfully. She always went out of her way to tell me shit I'd probably rather not know... like the untouchable thing.

Then again, if she hadn't told me... I probably wouldn't have been making out with Jake that morning.

"Sure," I said, and she nudged her notebook over so I could read it. She had really neat penmanship. I got busy rolling the silverware. At this point, I could do it in my sleep, and I wanted to get it done and read at the same time. She'd used a lot of what I told her, but the last bit about the pain being like a drug, that was pretty awesome. "I really like the last bit and, you're right, she knows she could keep going there and spending time and languishing in her heartbreak..."

Kind of like me missing the guys all summer and wallowing in that hurt. It had left me lonely and them confused.

“...exactly,” Rachel said. “Feeling the pain isn’t a bad thing but if you keep going back, it can consume you. So small tastes are better.”

“Cool.” It worked for me.

“Really?” Her eyes lit up and turned the notebook back to her. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” I meant it.

“So,” she said as she packed up. “You’re not interested in Mat cause you’re with Bubba now?”

I stared at her.

“I mean, I’m asking cause you’re holding hands with Jake, making out with Bubba, and the hot French exchange student stares at you like he could eat you up whenever he’s around. Are you just experimenting or something?”

Had I mentioned that Rachel and I were not friends? “Does it matter?” It wasn’t an outright rejection, but I didn’t want to talk about my incredibly confusing personal life with her. Not when I didn’t have a full handle on it. “They’re my friends.”

“Friends,” Rachel said slowly, then slung the strap of her bag over her shoulder before placing a twenty on her check. “Right. See you tomorrow at school?”

“Yep.”

She took a step then backed up. “You’re going to be at Archie’s party on Saturday right? You avoided the guys all summer, so I thought that was all over. But you’re friends again, so you’re going to be there?”

“I’ll be there.” I almost said I was taking Mathieu, but that would be bragging, and I still kind of needed to quietly end the thing that wasn’t really a thing. I’d barely talked to him outside of class this week. Sunday night had kind of been a one and done.

I actually finished up and clocked out by nine straight up. Jake and Ian were absent from the parking lot, but I got messages from each just as I got into my car.

JAKE: HOME. CALL ME IF YOU WANT ME TO COME BY LATER. I get it might be hard with all the guys there.

Ian: Home. Miss you. Tomorrow is big day. Sleep well.

THE FACT JAKE'S SENTENCES LEFT ME A LITTLE WARM AND second-guessing myself compounded the wistfulness Ian's text triggered. They both cared, but they showed it in different ways. I had to admit, I was a fan of both.

Back at the apartments, I sent texts to Jake and Ian that I was home and I'd see them the next day. I was already smothering a yawn as I locked the car and headed for my apartment. Coop sat on the steps leading to the backdoor. His normally relaxed expression seemed tense even if it was cast in the shadows from the outdoor lights.

"Hey..."

"Hey," he said as he stood. "Sorry, I know you weren't home yet, but Mom and Trina are fighting again, and Dad planned to swing by to show solidarity with Mom." He made a face.

Coop had a distant dad and I had no dad. I didn't know what it would be like if one wanted to come by and show solidarity with Mom, but in my experience, that never went well for Coop. They didn't fight so much as depress the hell out of him.

"C'mon," I said, bumping him as I continued up the stairs. "You can hide with me."

"You need me to text Jake?"

"Nope," I said, unlocking the door. The cats gave us all of about thirty seconds before they realized Coop was there and

immediately began their scolding yowls for attention. “Jake went home.”

“Oh.” Coop frowned and then looked around the kitchen. “I thought...”

“Yeah, that I might text, and he might come over. But I decided I wanted some alone time tonight to get some stuff done.”

“Oh,” he repeated. “I can go...”

“Coop,” I told him as I headed through the kitchen. “I need to shower, then change, then finish putting together a video and make the dessert. You can hang out. It’s fine.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I’ll be out in fifteen. I think there’s leftover pizza in the fridge.”

“Blegh,” he called.

I’d just stepped under the water in the shower and had to grin. The last time I’d been in here it had been with Jake. The knock at the door pulled me from that lovely memory and I frowned. The door cracked but didn’t open all the way. “I’m going to order something. Your fridge has exactly one slice of pizza.”

Oh. Right. Jake had some for breakfast that morning.

“Okay,” I called. “I can go half in on it.”

“That’s fine—what do you want? Pizza? Chinese? Subs?”

I kind of wanted to splurge. It would be unhealthy but I didn’t care. “Order from Boomer Sax? Get me a Monte Cristo?”

“Living large. I like it. You got it.” Then the door closed, and I grinned. He didn’t even try to peek. Then again, it wouldn’t have been the first time he saw me almost naked. We’d been around each other way too long, though—it had been a couple of years.

Coop had Tabby in his lap when I made it back to the kitchen, his shoes were off and tucked by the back door and he pointed to the pantry where we stored the trashcan. “I went

ahead and took the trash out, figured that way if you needed the can out while you were cooking...”

“Thank you.”

“So...need me to do anything?”

“Just hang out. You can go watch a movie if you want.” I’d gone for sleep shorts and a tank top tonight. It had been hot outside and it was about to be warm in the kitchen with all the prep. I left my wet hair down to dry for now.

“I’m good,” he said. “This will be kind of like watching one of those cooking shows.”

I’d have snorted except the assignment *was* kind of like one of those cooking shows. “How long ‘til food?”

“Twenty minutes,” he said.

I counted out two tens and set them on the table. “For my half.”

Since he used one of the shared ride apps to get the food, he’d already paid for it.

“That’s too much,” he pointed out.

“You tipped the driver, right?”

He stuck his tongue out at me and we both grinned. “Fine, but on our date Monday, you don’t pay.”

I did not roll my eyes, but boy was I tempted. “So if you ask me out, you pay. What happens if I ask you out?”

“I’m still going to try to pay,” Coop said.

Yeah, Coop didn’t have a job. He’d had one, but he lost it when the store where he worked closed. I wasn’t really sure if he’d bothered to look for one since or if he was just cruising. His dad had money, that much I did know. Dad was big on pay offs as signs of affection, not that I was going to bring that up.

By the time the food arrived, I had the layers going. It was much faster having done it before. Coop kept up a running dialogue and cracking me up, which wasn’t helping me get

everything the way it was supposed to be. The kitchen smelled of chocolate and sugar.

“Can you pause to eat?”

“Five minutes.” It took more like ten, but I had almost all of the layers ready to build. Coop had the boxes of food open, so I took the first bite of the Monte Cristo and groaned, because all at once, how hungry I was hit. I pretty much devoured the first whole half of the sandwich without slowing for more than a shallow breath in between.

Coop watched me with amusement in his eyes and when I paused, he held up his hands and then grinned. “It’s kind of awesome that you actually enjoy food.”

“Yeah, most people do.” I hoped they did.

“I suppose I shouldn’t say other girls then, right? The ones who eat like birds and pretend they never have more than a rabbit and wait until they are in private to eat?”

I eyed him. “*Who* have you been hanging out with?”

He shot me an impatient look and I shrugged. “Anyway...” He’d ordered potato skins for himself and a club sandwich. When I reached out for one of the skins, he nudged it toward me.

After I managed a bite and he hadn’t said anything more, I raised my eyebrows. “Anyway?”

At the prompt, he shrugged. “I’m not a football player.”

What? “Neither am I.”

“No, I mean. I’m not a football player. I’m not rich. I’m... just a guy who lives in the apartments.”

I paused mid-bite to study him. “Coop, what are you talking about?”

“The dating thing. I know you have homework and your dessert to make. But you spend a lot of time with Bubba and Jake and now Jake spent the night and... you’re going out with Archie tomorrow. It’s probably gonna be some five course place.”

“God, I hope not.” The idea sent unease shooting through me.

“Frankie... I don’t have a lot to offer. I came over tonight because my mom and my sister were making me crazy. I hide out here with you when they do that.”

“And I hide out with you when my mom is—well, Mom.”

“Except you haven’t been hiding out with me much anymore.” He sighed and put the sandwich down. “Cause she’s never here.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is. She works a lot.”

“But you deserve better. You deserve the nice things those guys can offer you.”

“Those guys, they’re our friends. And, Coop, you’re a good guy, too. You married me in kindergarten. You promised me forever between the slide and the swing set and, now that you’ve finally asked me out on a date, you don’t think you’re worth it?”

The corners of his mouth tipped upward. “Maybe?”

Picking up one of the french fries from my plate, I offered it to him. He took the bite, catching my hand and holding it still. “You’re my best friend.”

He blinked.

“You are. The guys are my best friends, too, but you were my best friend first and you’ve *always* been here.” Jake had come and gone. Ian showed up later. None of us knew Archie before ninth grade. “That’s what you offer me.”

“So I’m an old shoe.” He made a face.

“What?”

“Old shoes—you know they’re broken in and comfortable. The new shoes are shiny and cool, but the old shoe... you keep wearing it anyway.”

Blowing out a breath, I leaned back to stare at the ceiling. Then straightened. “Coop, you’re not an—” One minute I was in my chair; the next I was in his lap and his mouth was on

mine. This wasn't the kiss from the parking lot. This was teeth and tongue and his hands were on my waist, thumbs just under my shirt and I had to keep my sticky fingers out of his hair as he devoured my mouth like he was starved for me.

Each time the kiss slowed, I half-expected him to stop and then he deepened it again, until we were both gasping for breaths in between wet, fierce kisses. It wasn't slow or gentle, not even a little. It was hot, demanding and I panted when he finally eased back. His gray-green eyes seemed swallowed under his pupils and heat scalded my cheeks.

He licked his lips as he studied me. "Okay. I feel better now."

A laugh worked its way up and I stared at him as I giggled. "Are you sure?"

Cocking his head, he seemed to consider it. "You know, you're right. We should definitely check that. Always good to verify the source." Then he claimed my mouth mid-laugh. I had to clutch at his shoulders. When his hand slid down to cup my ass and lift me up, I ended up straddling his lap. He roamed his hands up and down my back, dipping to cup my ass but always retreating. The apex of my thighs was settled square over his erection and I'd never been more vibrantly aware of it.

My nipples ached and, when I broke the kiss, I indulged on teasing kisses and nips along the stubble of his jaw to his throat. The bite of the bristle just added a tinder to the fire he'd stoked. It would be so easy to...

At his ear, I paused, stilling and trying to catch my breath. Coop didn't pull away. If anything, he just kept rubbing my back. It was a slow, petting motion. Relaxing my amped up system even as his fingers teased the bare skin above and below the tank top.

"Okay," Coop said, his voice rough and a little wrecked. "I can confirm that I felt a lot better."

"That's past tense," I answered, breath coming in shallow breaths.

“Well,” he said, with a tilt of his head as I straightened. “Now I’m pretty uncomfortable but not in a bad way.”

The deadpan delivery made me laugh. Straightening, I studied him. “I still have to finish the dessert.”

“Uh huh.”

“And...” I glanced down, the stiffness pressing against the inside of my thigh more noticeable by the second that our lips weren’t fused together. “You going to be okay?”

“Not a word that applies.” He stroked two fingers along the line of my hip to my thigh and then back up. “But I’ll survive.”

With care, I eased off his lap. And I was human, I looked. He was definitely thick, and it was very visible along the line of his shorts. Face warm, I met his surprised if pleased gaze. “Sorry.”

“You can look.” He deliberately dipped his gaze to my chest, and I was aware of the roughness of the tank against my very peaked nipples. “I definitely am.”

Then our gazes locked and we both started laughing. I stumbled back and leaned against the fridge. “Okay—” I said holding up my hand. “Let’s not do the ogle thing out loud.”

“Got it. I’ll ogle you quietly.” He planted his chin against his hand and his elbow on the table. “Please—put a little swing in that step as you get all domestic. It’s definitely a newfound kink of mine.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed off the fridge. “Yeah, that’s not as sexy.”

He snickered. “Maybe not for you, but I’m enjoying it.”

When I flipped him off, he laughed harder and I grinned. The lines of tension in his face had eased and more, so had the doubt in his face. After I had the dessert constructed, I said, “Coop—I like you for you. I always have.”

“It’s cause I’m your favorite, right?”

I grinned. “Totally.”

He blinked for a moment then whipped out his phone. “Could you say that again?”

We hung out while I put the video together. He sat next to me on the sofa, his legs stretching out and his feet on the new coffee table, our thighs fused together. With an arm around my shoulder, he watched avidly as I pieced the clips together.

“You’re really good at this,” he said.

“You don’t even know what I’m saying.” I teased.

“Maybe not, but I know what sexy sounds like.” He pointed to where I discussed the ingredients. “That right there is sexy.”

Elbowing him, I laughed even if my face flushed hot. He leaned a little closer and pressed a kiss right behind my ear. It sent another shiver through me and I tilted my head to the left. Another kiss, this time just below my ear.

“I survived two years of French cause I got to hear you talk,” Coop told me. “Practicing with you was the highlight of my homework.”

Goosebumps raced over my skin and I glanced at him. “Is that why you wanted me to tutor you all the time?”

“*Oui, oui,*” he whispered almost playfully.

How much had I really not noticed? “Was I that oblivious?”

With a groan, Coop clung to me, rubbing his cheek against my bare shoulder then pressing a kiss to it. “Frankie, you were blind, deaf, and dumb when it came to what we were trying to say.”

I turned that over in my head as he nuzzled kisses along my shoulder to where the strap of my tank top rested. Little shivers kept chasing through my system, one after the other. My nipples were so tight there was no way he could miss them. Not based on where he had his face. When he kissed the curve of my throat, I groaned.

“Coop, I have to finish this.”

“I’m not talking,” he said all innocence.

Bumping him with my shoulder, I mock frowned at him. “You’re very distracting.”

“So are you when you’re speaking French, but I’m not complaining.”

“Behave,” I scolded.

He raised his eyebrows. “Tell me to behave in French.”

So close I could lick across his lips if I wanted to, I whispered, “*Tu dois te comporter.*”

With a slow sigh, he nuzzled a kiss to my mouth, then turned my chin gently to the screen. “Finish your video.”

Instead of dialing down the tension, it only seemed to ramp up. I only had a couple more clips to put in order. Then a little smoothing. Slap an intro-card on it with some canned music. Then... I saved it and began the export.

“Done?” Coop hadn’t moved away, not even an inch. My stomach went tight and my thighs clenched. He still sounded like Coop and at the same time, his voice was lower, huskier and it was doing really crazy things to my system.

“Just waiting for it to finish compiling...”

“Awesome.” With care, he lifted the laptop off my bare legs and set it on the coffee table. Turning halfway on the sofa, he stared at me and I found myself trapped in his gaze. With light fingers, he trailed a caress down my arm. “How do you say *I want to kiss you* in French?”

“*J’ai besoin de t’embrasser.*” It wasn’t the exact translation. He said *want* and I used *need*. Both applied.

Groaning lightly, he slid his hand back up to my nape. “Now, how do you say *kiss me you fool?*”

A giggle escaped me as he traced his thumb against my throat. Turning, I faced him and slid a hand along the denim of his thigh so I could get closer. “*Embrasse moi, grand fou.*”

Then his mouth closed on mine and it was my turn to groan. I already ached, wanting. The shivers turned to

shudders and I had my arms around him. Instead of his lap, I was on my back and he eased between the cradle of my thighs as his mouth devoured mine.

The addition of chocolate to the kiss just left me drunk on it as his tongue dared and teased mine. When he glided his hand along my side, I didn't waste time slipping mine under his shirt and skating them up his back.

The slow grind of his erection right against my pussy had me wishing we could get his jeans off. The sleep shorts and panties did nothing to hide how wet I was and still all I could do was gasp into his mouth even as his groans vibrated through his chest to mine. The friction against my nipples had me rubbing against him wanting more. He'd braced his hands to keep from settling his full weight on me and it was all I wanted.

"Frankie," he whispered, then his delicious weight settled on me and he had a hand under my shirt and over my breast. Back arching, I dug my fingers into his shoulders. He rotated his hips continuing his grinding against me. The roughness of the denim on my thighs and the weight seemed to render the little fabric I had on negligible.

I couldn't catch my breath because he kept kissing it out of me. He pinched the nipple and everything in me went tight and straining. I wanted...

When he abandoned my mouth to kiss down my throat, the coolness of the air teased against my sides. The tank top had rucked up and he made a beeline for my breasts.

A rush of feelings ran through me as he covered one breast. Glancing up, he studied me before he kissed the other. The hard pull of his mouth on my nipple was too much and not enough.

We needed his clothes off.

And mine.

Clothes...

Dammit.

Another hard pull and he hand moved his hand down to my hip. The lift changed the angle. Every time he ground against me, I started to see stars. “Coop...” I couldn’t string the thoughts together. A pinch against my nipple, so sensitive the little bit of pain pushed me right over and I came. He pressed his mouth against mine when I cried out and clung to him.

Then I wasn’t the only one who was wet.

Panting harshly, he shuddered atop me and buried his face in my hair. “Let me stay tonight,” he whispered. “I can do so much better than that.”

It was hard. Almost impossible. But after Jake and now this... Shivers rippled through me, and I tugged at his hair.

He lifted his head, his lips wet and swollen from kissing and his eyes glazed.

“You feel so good,” he whispered. “So good.”

I couldn’t lie, so did he. But if he stayed... “You have to go home.”

Licking his lips slowly, he nodded. “Can I lay here a little longer?”

Aware of the dampness on his jeans that said he’d come right in his pants, I nodded. “I’d like that.”

“I’ll get off...”

“I think we just did,” I said, even as I held on tight to him. “Don’t go. I like feeling you on me.”

“Yeah?” Curiosity filtered into his glazed eyes.

Waiting until he rested against me fully, I sighed. “Yes.” It was a Coop body blanket, and I didn’t know how much I needed it on top of everything else.

“You’re so beautiful, Frankie,” he told me, brushing his nose gently against mine. This close, there was nowhere to hide. The heat in my face at the compliment had to be beacon.

“Still think you’re the old shoe?” It was the right thing to say because his grin was like the sun coming out. He pressed a

kiss to my chin.

“I didn’t say you didn’t like your old shoes. We fit best of all.” He gave a little grind, and it sent another wave of lust crashing into my system. “I think we fit really well.”

I couldn’t dispute that. “You have to go,” I told him. “Now.”

He nodded slowly and then dropped a slow, gentle kiss. “I’m not forgetting this.”

“Oh, God, I hope not,” I laughed. “I know I won’t.”

It was only a little awkward when he rose, the crotch of his jeans noticeably wet and my shirt still up. He made no pretense of how he admired my bared breasts and I was torn between yanking my shirt down or grabbing him.

Shirt.

Definitely shirt.

He raked a hand through his hair before he offered me a hand before pulling me to my feet. “I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Can’t miss me. I’m the one with the car.”

He grinned and, after one more very promising kiss, he left—via the front door this time instead of the back. I leaned against the closed door after he was gone. I kind of wanted to open it and call him back, but bad idea. We’d already just—wow. I looked at the sofa.

I was never looking at it the same way again.

When I went to bed, I was needy and aching even after Coop got me off. The cats swarming up for attention couldn’t fully distract me.

It took me a long time to go to sleep, more than enough time to imagine if I’d let Jake and Ian come over or invited Coop to stay. Tomorrow, I’d be with Archie.

Groaning, I covered my eyes. It was only the second week of senior year. I wasn’t going to make it until Christmas.

At the speed we were all going, I wouldn't even make it to homecoming.

Shit.

I sat up and Tiddles yowled as he leapt off me.

Tomorrow the asks would start.

The asks would start at school. I had a date with Archie afterward. I was supposed to meet the rest of the guys after the game and there was a party on Saturday, after which I had to break up with Mathieu.

Flopping back on the bed, Marsha's advice about not missing anything this year floated through my head. I barely had any time now. If I had more—that would give me more time with them.

There was the rub.

I wanted time with *all* of them.

I wasn't really sure what that said about me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE ASKS

By the time morning rolled around, I was a mess. I'd barely slept. I also discovered I had two new hickeys in addition to the one Jake left me with. One was on my breast, so I could cover it up easily, but the second one was higher, above the one Jake had given me, closer to my ear.

Hair down again today. My stomach did a little flip-flop. The morning round of texting had already begun. Archie had sent me three in rapid succession.

Archie: *Today's a big day. Just don't forget we're going out tonight.*

Archie: *I would also like to make it clear that I want to ask you to homecoming, but since Bubba asked first, I'm being noble. But I want to take you to senior prom. You and me, if you're willing.*

I forgot how to breathe. Prom was months away.

Archie: *Yes, I know prom is months away, but after homecoming, there aren't any other dances. Say yes? Please?*

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I exhaled.

Yes, I texted. I'll go to prom with you.

Then, because it was Archie, I added, *But you may need to remind me. We're going to be exhausted by March.*

A calendar appointment invite from Archie showed up almost at once and I laughed.

Archie & Frankie do the Prom

I accepted it and added it to the calendar. So, not only did I need a homecoming dress, I'd need one for prom, too. Maybe I could find one that I could use for both.

Archie: *So dinner, then coffee and a walk around the lake, that's the plan?*

That's the plan, I sent him. *Now I gotta get dressed because school.*

Archie: *You realize it's killing me not 2 ask if you're naked texting me right now.*

Then I won't tell you yes. I don't want you to die.

Archie: ...

Archie: ...

Archie: *Pictures or it didn't happen.*

I laughed.

Dream on, I sent. *See you at school.*

It took me a couple of minutes to find a shirt that would definitely cover Jake's hickey and I'd let my hair cover Coop's. By the time I laced up my shoes, I was running a little late. The cats had been fed.

"I'll get the litter box right after school, guys, I promise." Hopefully, Archie wouldn't mind waiting a couple of extra minutes. Backpack in the chair, I'd just opened the fridge when there was a knock at the kitchen door.

Coop had apparently come to get me. I opened the door to his grin. "Hey, I thought you might need a hand with dessert."

"Thank you." But before I could open the fridge, he slid inside and then I was against the fridge and he kissed me. I'd never been so glad to have brushed my teeth before. Spearmint for the win, though Coop had definitely had some coffee.

When he lifted his head, I stared at his wet lips and then had to lick mine. "Good morning."

“It definitely is now,” he said, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “And I kind of had to make sure my mind wasn’t playing tricks on me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m not saying you aren’t the best wet dream ever, but I really didn’t want it to be a dream.”

Lifting my hair up, I turned to show him the hickey. “Definitely not a dream.”

His grin widened and he traced a finger against the side of my throat. When I let my hair down, he dropped his hand. Meeting his gaze, I nudged him back and then got the fridge open.

As I lifted the dessert out, his eyes grew large. “What do they call that again?”

“Opera cake.”

“What are the chances there will be any left after your French class?”

“Want me to try and steal you a slice?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’d like you to steal me the whole thing.”

“Sorry. The next time I have to make a complicated and fancy dessert...”

“My birthday’s coming...”

I knew that.

“And I was thinking, I know you’ve kind of got set nights for the other guys, but the Saturday night the week of my birthday?”

“What day does your birthday fall on?”

He made a face. “Thursday.”

“I’ll take it off.”

His expression shifted. “What?”

“Marsha told me last night that if I needed to take time... she didn’t want me to miss anything. That’s your eighteenth. I

don't want to miss it."

Balancing the cake, he said, "You sure? I know you literally work that beautiful ass of yours off all the time, and you've never even called out sick."

"I'm sure," I told him. "I made it to Ian's eighteenth. I'll be there for yours. Your birthday, you decide what we do."

He glanced at the cake then at me. "If we didn't have to go, I'd kiss you right now."

"Can I get a raincheck?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "You can."

Despite the lack of sleep, Archie's invitation and Coop's greeting definitely buoyed my morning. Jake texted as we got to the car. He was swinging by McDonald's to grab breakfast for everyone. There were still the homecoming asks, and I had no idea what Ian had planned. When we parked, Ian's bike was there, but no Ian. We must be later than I'd thought.

Despite the clouds giving us some relief from the sun's relentless scorch, the humidity had amped up leaving it gross outside.

"C'mon," Coop said as we got out of the car. "Let's go drop this off in French so we can get coffee and breakfast." We headed inside and upstairs because it was faster to get to French through the upper hallways. Madame smiled at me when we came in and there were already one table sporting several dishes. Lucky for me, I'd warned her ahead of time so there was room in her small fridge to store it. Done, I double-checked that she'd gotten my video, very deliberately not looking at Coop as I conversed with Madame in French. Now that I knew it turned him on, I had to find ways to tease but only when we weren't standing right in front of one of my teachers.

Coop caught my hand on our way out of French and interlaced our fingers. "C'mon, double time it." He was hurrying me back to the stairs.

"What's the rush?" We always got to school forty-five minutes early. We had time. Even if we'd run a little late

today, we *still* had time.

“Starving.”

Homecoming signs lined the hallways declaring the theme. They’d doubled over the course of the week and probably added more even that morning since tickets for seniors went on sale today.

Just as we reached the cafeteria, Coop let go of my hand. Standing next to our table, Ian had his guitar with him. There were a *lot* of kids already in the cafeteria and it was like all the noise in the room stopped when I got inside.

Everything in me froze. *Oh God.*

He was going to do it right here.

With the first chords he struck on the guitar, my feet glued to the floor. Jake and Archie were both sitting at the table, but I barely had time to register their presence as Ian began to sing.

“Hey there, Frankie, can I have a minute of your time?” The slow, sweet baritone rolled over me. “There’s a question I have to get off my mind. You see this pretty girl, standing in the caf, unaware of how I planned to ask...” He shifted the chords, and he was just a couple of feet away. I couldn’t move. I wasn’t even sure I was breathing. “You’re so beautiful, Frankie, one of my very best friends, and I had to be the one who extends... that is, I want to ask and singing was the only way to do the task...” He held the note and his gaze was on mine. “Tell me, Frankie, will you give me a chance? I really want to be the guy who takes you to the dance.”

On the last note, the whole cafeteria seemed to lean forward. Heat scorched my face. I was hot and cold at the same time. Hands together in front of my mouth, I let out a little laugh and whispered, “Yes.”

“What did she say?” someone yelled out.

“She said yes,” I yelled in response. There was a cheer, but I didn’t really pay attention as Ian swung his guitar to his back and gave me a hug. When he kissed my forehead, I hung onto him. “Remind me to kill you later,” I whispered in his ear.

Absolutely unrepentant, he grinned. “You wanted to be asked out and to have a story to tell.” This close, I couldn’t miss the fact his ears were a bit red. As much as I was *not* used to being the center of so much attention, I don’t think I’d ever seen Ian do anything like this.

Suddenly, I blinked, “Oh my God, you sang in public.”

“Glad you noticed,” he said, then hooked an arm around my shoulders as he guided me back to the table. Suddenly Coop was there, and it hit me. He’d known. Oh God. He’d known and worked out how to get me in the right door, and he’d been texting while we were in the classroom.

That was why Coop slowed that last step and let me go first.

“Bubba, my man. That was pretty cool.” Coop patted him on the shoulder.

“Yeah,” Jake said. “You’ve been holding out on us.” Then Jake turned his phone. “But I saved it for you Frankie.”

It was crazy. Archie handed over my coffee and gave me a long look. And I could read it in his eyes; he was already planning out how he would invite me to prom. The nerves took flight and I shook my head. What was I doing? I’d made out with Coop the night before and we both got off. I slept with Jake the night before that and we made out with a whole lot less clothes and a lot more touching. I was going to homecoming and prom with the two guys I’d made out with the least, even if I had Ian’s kisses imprinted on my brain, and I’d been fantasizing about Archie.

I hadn’t made out with Archie at all. The noise level in the cafeteria rose, but Ian’s grin remained bright as he packed away his guitar. “Surprised?”

Hiding behind my coffee, I said, “You have no idea. I thought it would be something with cookies or balloons.” Not that I really had any idea. A shout went up across the cafeteria as a girl opened a box of donuts and laughed as she said yes. “Something like that.”

Ian twisted to watch, then made a face as he faced us again. “Nah, I wanted something you could remember. We do donuts a lot.”

With a snort, Jake said, “You like fritters, not sure how to work that into an invitation.”

“Don’t get the jitters, these are just your fritters—and an invitation to homecoming...” Archie drawled then toasted me with his coffee cup. “Something like that?”

Well... “Yeah?”

“No,” Archie said with a shake of his head. “Needs more splash and whole lot more color. Ian did good. I salute you, as that will be a hard act to follow.”

Coop snickered. “Yeah, definitely, but I reserve the right to dance with you at homecoming.”

“Me, too.” Jake added.

“Why not? You need to dance at least once each with the rest of us,” Archie said.

“Heads up,” Coop said softly. “Incoming.”

Still trying to get my heart under control and the dopey grin off my face, I unwrapped my breakfast sandwich, but at Coop’s warning, I glanced up along with everyone else.

“Shit,” Jake swore, and Archie made a face.

Ian frowned, then twisted as Sharon and Maria made a beeline toward us. It was hard to miss the glare on Sharon’s face or the way she stared at me. They weren’t alone. Patty trailed a half-step behind them.

“Boys,” Maria greeted before she looked at me. “Hey, Frankie.”

“Hey,” I said, then took a bite. Yep, not sure I wanted to be a part of this conversation. Sharon slid her hand onto Ian’s shoulder, and he shifted to the side to glance at her, effectively removing his shoulder from his grasp. Without a word, he nudged his chair over, so they had more room.

Her mouth tightened and then she folded her arms.

“Anyway,” Maria said, lingering. “Wanted to come say good morning. We rarely see you guys anymore.”

“You’ll see us the game tonight,” Jake offered. “We’ll be the guys on the field.”

Coop snickered and I kicked him under the table. He grinned at me.

“You’re funny,” Patty said, her tone anything but amused as she pulled a chair over and sat next to Archie. “Hi, Archie.”

“Patty,” he said, eyeing her. The earlier amusement in his expression had vanished.

“Don’t you have something to ask me?” She tilted her head.

“Nope,” he said without batting an eyelash. When she frowned, he took a sip of coffee and then deliberately looked over to where I was eating. “When you’re done, Frankie, I need to go over the notes from Monday again.”

Washing down the mouthful and doing my best to ignore the rising tension around me, I said, “Can do. Good thing I have Gov stuff with me today.”

“Of course you do,” Patty said. “You wouldn’t be you if you weren’t prepared to do everyone’s homework. That free ride ends soon, you know.”

“Excuse you?” Of all of them, Coop was the last one I expected to suddenly sound hostile. “If you’re going to fart from your mouth, you could at least do us the courtesy of covering it. No one here needs to smell your stench.”

My mouth wasn’t the only one hanging open; Patty gaped and then glared at Archie. “Are you really going to let your friend talk to me like that?”

“Not only do I plan to let him,” Archie said in that dry, droll, and deceptive tone he engaged when he was about to slam someone. “But I encourage it. If you’re done, you can go. No one *invited* you over here.”

“If you’re not done,” Jake volunteered with a very unfriendly smirk. “You can still go. No one *wants* you here.”

“Hey,” Maria said. “We can be nice.”

“Not from where I’m sitting,” Archie told her, then looked at Patty. “*You* definitely need to *be* somewhere else while we’re still being polite.”

A part of me felt like saying the guys should dial it down. This—this happened when they were done with girls. Based on what they’d said, there’d definitely been some sex—oral or otherwise. Much as I’d already shared with Jake, at least, and now this. I’d had a front row seat to it too many times. They didn’t do the big drama, and I’d seen them be harsh, but this was cold. Uncaring. It was difficult enough because I felt for the girls. These guys were really great when they were interested, but they could shut it off just as easily.

That was part of what worried me about this whole dating thing.

Patty stood abruptly. “You’re a dick.”

“So I’ve been told,” Archie said and he’d already turned away from her. Flushed and eyes flashing, Patty glared at me. I swore she was about to cry, but she turned on her heel and marched away.

“Way to go,” Maria commented. “Do you have to be an epic asshole?”

“No,” Archie told her, not missing a beat. “I’m a dick, didn’t you hear?”

I winced and Sharon snorted. “Maybe that’s why you’re untouchable, Frankie. Because whatever you caught hanging out with these guys no one else wants.” Then she was gone just as Ian jerked around. A part of me was grateful. I really didn’t want to hear what Ian might have retaliated with. For a beat, Maria was left standing there alone.

We locked eyes and she shook her head, then raised her hands and backed off. “I’ll see you later, Frankie,” she said, ignoring the others.

“Not if she sees you first,” Jake muttered. For some reason, that made me uncomfortable. It didn’t help that with their exit, the quiet around us seemed louder for some reason.

The fact we had a lot of eyes pointed our direction didn't help, either. They'd all liked their respective girls, right up until they hadn't.

"Ignore them, Frankie," Coop said, his manner all relaxed again—like his Mr. Hyde hadn't made an appearance. "Oh, that reminds me, are we getting together after the game tonight?"

"That was the plan, I thought," Ian said tilting his head. When I glanced up, he studied me almost searchingly, and I found a smile. I was fine. I just hated it when the breakups got messy and people got hurt.

They'd shown up because it was homecoming and they all expected to be asked. The guys hadn't been gentle about their dismissive rejections. Though, to be fair, they hadn't been rude until the girls started it.

"We'll see," Archie said, his expression relaxing but there was a wariness in his eyes when I caught him looking at me. "Frankie and I have plans and we're not cutting them short."

I raised my eyebrows.

"I'd like not to cut them short," he amended. "So, we'll see."

Ian frowned. "Yeah okay... text if you're not going to make it?" The last he directed at me.

"Why don't we text if we can?" Archie suggested. "That way if you don't hear from us..."

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I shifted upward to pull it out, bumping Jake's leg with mine. Mom's name was on the screen, and I held up a finger to the guys. "I'll be right back." Then hit answer as I stood.

"Hey, Mom," I said as I walked away.

"Hey, Arch," Coop was saying. "About tomorrow night..."

"Frankie," my mom greeted me with a sigh. "You're not going to like this."

“You’re not coming home tonight.” The fact she hadn’t shown up at all or called since her “quick” trip had been kind of telling. I headed for the edge of the cafeteria, away from people so I didn’t have to listen.

“No,” she admitted. “This is taking more than I thought it would and...I feel like I need to be here.”

Not that I knew where *here* was.

“Okay. You planning on coming home sometime in the next week?”

“Of course I am,” she snapped. “I just thought you shouldn’t be looking for me this weekend. I know you have to work, but I’ll transfer money to your account in case we needed groceries.”

Yeah, because why would she know what we had? “I think we need cat food, but I can check when I get home. Maybe milk.” More because it had expired than I’d used it.

“That’s good, I’ll send over a hundred. If you spend more, just tell me.”

“On cat food?” I mean, I got that she was focused on what she was doing. But who spent a hundred on cat food?

“I meant if we needed more. Look, I know I’m not there...” She sounded distracted and then the phone was muffled. Ugh. Was the boyfriend right there? Was that why the business trip was taking so long? “Sorry, someone was talking to me. Anyway, I know I’m not there. That’s why I’m calling. Is everything all right? How was your second week as a senior?”

“It was great,” I said, staring down the hall. “Just great.”

“Glad to hear it. All right, I have to go. I’ll text you soon?”

“Yep.” Then the phone clicked, and she was gone. I stared at my phone. The morning started off so promising. There were lots of things I could have told her, but I doubted she wanted to hear any of them. Not while she had so much to *do*.

“Frankie?”

Really? I glanced up to find Rachel studying me. “Hey, Rachel.” I straightened and slid the phone into my pocket.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I lied. “I’m fine. Just heading back to the caf. You?”

“I’m okay.” She didn’t look like she believed me.

“Cool, did you get that poetry assignment figured out?”

“I did,” she said slowly, her smile reaching her hazel eyes. “Thank you again for your help.” She hesitated then stepped closer. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, maybe if I said it aloud enough it would become true. “Just distracted... really.”

“Okay. You still going to Archie’s party tomorrow?” Her hesitation disappeared a second later and she backed up a step.

“Of course she is,” Archie answered for me as he rolled up with my backpack in one hand and my coffee in the other. “Here...” He held it up and balanced the pack while I slid my arms into it. After I claimed my coffee, he wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “See you later, Rach,” he told her as he guided me away.

“The bell hasn’t rung yet,” I reminded him a couple of steps down the hallway.

“Yeah, I know, but Laura showed up at the table, and Maria looked like she was heading back, and I’m over the drama. Let the guys deal with them. You said I could look at your notes.”

I shook my head. Laura, huh? Was she fishing for a homecoming invite?

And why shouldn’t she? I had a date and that meant... “Archie, are you going to homecoming?”

“Can’t dance with you if I’m not there,” he reminded me.

“Huh... if you’re not asking Patty, who are you asking?”

“Don’t have to ask anyone,” he said, his voice low as we turned into the hall near our class. It was quiet and the lights hadn’t been turned on yet. With the cloud cover, it left us in shadows. Then he glanced at me. “Jealous of the idea of me taking someone else?”

“I don’t think so,” I said slowly, unwilling to commit to it fully. At least not until I had to deal with it. “It’s not like I haven’t had to watch you guys date before.”

“Uh huh,” he said slowly. “You *are* jealous.” He seemed enormously pleased by the idea.

Elbowing him, I glared. “I am not.”

“Hey,” he said, spreading his hands. “It’s fine. It means you like me.” The last was said with a note of wonder.

“If you didn’t think I liked you, why did you ask me to prom?” Would I ever understand boys?

“Because I didn’t want anyone else to ask you first, and I want to be the one who puts the look on your face that Bubba just did.” Archie held out his hand. “And I couldn’t wait for tonight.”

“You haven’t told me where we’re going to eat.”

“It’s a surprise. Think I can talk you into a pretty dress? You don’t have to; you can wear whatever you want.”

“Are you going like this?” I asked, motioning to his button down and shorts.

He shrugged. “I can swing by my place and change if I can talk you into dressing up.”

I didn’t have a huge wardrobe but... Mom and I were close to the same size. “I can try. I’ll look at my closet when we get home.”

“Great... now, notes?” He turned his puppy dog eyes on me and I laughed.

“Yeah, c’mon.” I led the way toward the class.

“You still bringing the French guy tomorrow night?” he asked almost conversationally as we reached our desks.

“That was my plan,” I told him, keeping my attention on my backpack. Though, I was kind of torn. Maybe I should talk to Mathieu before the party and make sure he was up for going, considering. That would be the right thing to do.

“Good,” Archie said, and I glanced at him. Surprise rippled through me, but he just smiled. “I told you, I want to meet him.”

Yeah. I should definitely talk to Mathieu ahead of time. Shaking that off, I dug out my notebook and handed it over.

“Thank you,” Archie said curling his fingers over mine. “Tonight?”

“You and me, I know.”

“Yeah, but if you want to go see everyone else, we can. I just wanted to give us some free time to do whatever we wanted.”

My stomach tightened and tingles went over my scalp as he kept holding my hand. “Sounds like a plan.”

His smile grew wider. “Excellent.” Then with a huff he flipped my notebook open and stared at the notes. “This stuff? Not so much.”

With a grin, I sipped my coffee and tried to pretend I wasn't studying Archie. This guy? The warm, funny one with the wry sense of humor and the wicked playfulness? This was the guy I liked. That cold one in the cafeteria who shut Patty down so mercilessly along with Coop and even Jake?

Yeah, those weren't my favorites.

I'd already talked to Jake about what would happen if I ever became one of those girls. He insisted it wouldn't happen, but maybe I should talk to all of the guys about it.

It was one thing to be untouchable.

I don't think I could stand it if I became invisible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

FRIDAY NIGHTS ARE FOR FUN, TOO

Ian walked me to French again. Mathieu smiled when he saw us, his expression relaxed and without a trace of discomfort or irritation. His reaction relieved me and at the same time threatened to plunge me into another vat of guilt. With a squeeze of my fingers, Ian gave Mathieu a look then promised to meet me at lunch.

When I faced Mathieu again, he still smiled. “I heard he asked you to homecoming.”

“He did,” I admitted. “Mathieu...”

“Your boyfriends are stepping up,” he commented, but his beautiful accent made the words even more lyrical. *My boyfriends*. “It is about time. If half of what I have heard is true, it is more than time.”

Heat scorched my ears. I didn’t want to think about what stories he’d heard. “About tomorrow night...”

“You wish to remain only friends, yes?”

I nodded slowly. “I had a really good time with you on Sunday.” Beyond good. Sunday changed everything. Had it really only been five days earlier?

“But you do not wish a dalliance.” Who used words like that? His eyes were kind. “And the party tomorrow evening?”

“I invited you,” I promised him. “I’d still like to take you, but it’s okay if you want to say no, considering.”

“Friends can go to parties together, yes?”

“Yes. They can.”

“Then we shall go as friends and have fun.”

That was that. By the time I slid into my desk, I felt a lot better about the whole thing. It hadn't been fair to let him think one thing. If his reaction was anything to go by, he didn't mind at all, and I trusted him at his word. We'd have a good time at the party and, hopefully, he'd get to know more people. After it was over, I'd let the guys know.

Did I want to wait until after?

Yeah. I did. After. If I told them before, there would be a chance they'd give me hell about taking him in the first place. After was just better, because all four of them in the same place when it was a party, and I would probably make a fool out of myself without something to distract me.

Decided, I focused on my classes. The incident with the girls and my mom's call had diminished some of my joy at Ian's invite. Thankfully, it had also eased some of my embarrassment. A couple of the girls in French told me they'd seen the ask and they were impressed.

Weirdly, I caught more people nodding to me or talking to me. Maybe I was imagining it, but I didn't usually *hang* out with the others. My circle of friends had narrowed over the years until those four pretty much dominated it. Cheryl caught up with me as I ducked into the bathroom between French and AP Lit.

“Oh my god,” she said, her voice an excited squeal even as I shut myself into a stall. “I got the caf this morning just in time to hear Bubba sing to you. That's so cool.”

It was. “It was...something else.” Awkward as hell to talk about in the bathroom, though. It wasn't that I hadn't heard dozens of these conversations, they'd just rarely involved me. Not really. Not since sophomore year, and even then they'd been on the decline.

“Do you have your dress picked out? The dress is important. I was thinking of going next week to get mine. Mitch asked me this morning when he picked me up for

school. He drew a huge chalk diagram with paths for me to choose and, of course, they all lead to me going with him to homecoming.”

Even as I finished in the stall and headed to wash my hands, she was still talking.

“But it’s exciting. I didn’t even know Mitch could *be* romantic. Then Bubba sang! Did you want to die? Oh, did you know he was going to do that?” I caught Cheryl’s cheerful grin in the mirror as she headed over to join me at the sinks. “Do you want to go with me to get a dress?”

Before I could answer, another stall opened at the end, letting Sharon out. Her expression was...hard to define.

“You should call me,” Cheryl continued, wiping her hands on a paper towel. “Do you have my number? I think you have it. We had that project last year, but here let me give it to you again.”

I pulled my phone out. A couple of messages had lit up the screen.

Coop: I want bbq for lunch.

Jake: You buying?

Archie: Depends. Not going to the porker place.

Ian: It’s not called porkers.

Archie: Don’t care, it’s disgusting. Also, Frankie hates it.

Jake: True, she didn’t get anything other than a soda the last time we went.

Coop: So again, I restate. BBQ. Frankie likes Ricky’s. Best pulled pork.

I cleared the screen and opened my contacts, then verified I had Cheryl’s number. “I’ll text you,” I told her.

“Great. Can’t wait. It’s going to be amazing. You and Bubba will make such a cute couple. Blonde and beautiful.”

My gaze collided with Sharon’s in the mirror as I swung to leave. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth flattened, but there

was a hint of tears in her eyes, and I hesitated.

“Gotta run,” Cheryl said then did an air kiss at my cheek. *Oka-a-ay*. That was a little strange, but at the same time, I didn’t move away.

When the door closed behind her, Sharon turned to face me. “I didn’t know you were dating.”

“It’s new.” I didn’t owe her an explanation, yet guilt gnawed at me.

“Apparently. Really new.” She smirked, and then threw a paper towel in the trash. “You know, if you’d come to the end of summer bash, you’d realize just *how* new. Enjoy Homecoming.”

With that, she sailed out the door. I slid into lit class with only seconds to spare. Coop frowned at me, but I shook my head. We couldn’t talk with class gearing up. Our journaling books officially needed to be started and I had one, I just hadn’t written a damn thing in it. Course, after this week, I had a lot I could put into consideration.

Class dragged in some ways, but my focus kept wandering. It wasn’t the material. I genuinely loved this class. What Sharon said lingered in the back of my brain, a vague, nagging little whisper. I’d skipped all the parties that summer, all except for Ian’s birthday, and he and Sharon had been very hot and very heavy at that party.

Coop had his tongue down Laura’s throat, Archie had Patty glued to him at the hip, and Jake and Maria? No doubt existed within me at all. But they weren’t hiding it, either.

It was all kind of deflating my day. Outside, the skies kept getting darker. The heavy wet slap of the air from the morning was worse when we went to lunch. Everyone crammed into Jake’s SUV. I was sandwiched between Archie and Coop this time. Ian made a face and took shotgun though Jake glanced at me in the rearview and said, “You can sit up front on the way back.”

“That’s not really fair to the guys.” They didn’t fit back here as easily as I did—not in the middle.

“I’m thinking fair to me.”

That got a laugh. Ricky’s wasn’t crowded, so we got our food fast. Even as the guys talked around me, the morning replayed in my head a little. Maria hadn’t looked as disappointed as Sharon. Sharon had been hurt. Maria had been...irritated? Maybe upset. Patty had been pissed, and I hadn’t seen Laura.

I hadn’t seen Laura in days, not since Coop told me he broke up with her, officially.

Had she just not been around, or had I been too wrapped up in myself to notice?

“Earth to Frankie,” Jake said, eyeing me. They were all staring at me.

“What?” I’d only eaten about half my food, but my appetite had fled in the middle of all that.

“You were checked out,” Coop said with a faint, almost hopeful smile. “Daydreaming?”

“Something like that.” I needed to get out of my head and stop brooding. “Making a homework list. Lots to get done and my weekend is pretty booked.”

That earned me more than one groan. Better that than bringing up the girls. They hadn’t mentioned them again beyond Archie’s comment in the hallway about being over the drama. Back at school, Jake cornered me during Study Hall.

“Something’s bothering you,” he said as soon as we scored our table in the corner of the library. “It’s because of the scene with Maria and the others this morning.”

“A little,” I sighed. “Not so much that they came over, but... you guys were kind of mean.”

“First,” Jake said, curling a lock of my hair around his finger. “They started it. Patty shouldn’t have been shitty to you.”

“She was disappointed.”

“I don’t care.” The indifference in his tone on those three words was bracing. “No one gets to be shitty to you. No one invited them over, and no one led them on.”

“Coop was dating Laura less than a week ago.”

“Again, don’t care, and Laura wasn’t there. Patty and Arch haven’t been together since the summer. Maria and I broke up before school started. Bubba and Sharon? Eh...that was always more her than him.”

Before school started was only a couple of weeks ago.

“Don’t let them get to you,” he said, tugging my hair gently. “Bubba asked you to homecoming, pretty slick on his part. You enjoyed that right?”

I had. “It...was awesome and embarrassing and wonderful.”

“There you go.” Jake looked smug. “That’s what it should be. Focus on that—and on our date Sunday.”

I groaned. Sunday seemed so far away with everything I already had planned to do and, at the same time, so close, and I was worried I’d miss something.

“I know,” Jake said, his voice low and his eyes hot. “I wish it were tonight, too.”

I gave him a little shove. “I’m going out with Archie tonight.”

“Sadly,” Jake told me, grinning. “Doesn’t mean I don’t wish it was me or that I’d get you after the game. We could have another sleepover.”

Instantly, my system caught fire and heat flooded my cheeks.

Leaning close, Jake whispered, “I love that you went commando at work for me.”

The tension in my belly went tight, and I squeezed my thighs together.

“Think I can convince you to do that on Sunday?”

“I’m surprised you don’t want me to do it at the party.” It slipped out before I could think better of it.

“No, I want it when it’s only for me,” he said. The corner of his mouth kicked a little higher. “I really wish we weren’t at school right now.”

There was no reason to ask why. Need already had me at the edge. “Then we better focus on homework so we don’t have to think about it this weekend.”

His slow grin had my tummy flip-flopping. All these years around them, laughing with them, playing and hanging out—I’d always known they were attractive, but this was something else altogether. His nostrils flared like he’d heard what I was thinking. I dragged my gaze away from him and turned to face the table. The storm outside didn’t help. It had grown darker over the last few minutes and thunder had begun to rumble.

“Hmm, maybe the storm will call the game tonight,” he mused. “Then I could meet you after your date back at your place if you want. Is your mom still out of town?”

Yes, she was, and we really needed to think about something that didn’t involve far fewer clothes and much less distance.

“Homework,” I told him and nudged him to his stuff. It really didn’t take my mind off it. I really didn’t remember much about the last couple of periods of the day, even with the discussion questions we had to tackle for Mr. G. He wanted to see how far into the reading we’d actually made it. Fortunately, Jake and I were both fast readers. Writing the essay still took most of our last hour.

Finally, the last bell rang, and my system was in knots. I couldn’t wait to see what Archie had planned and, at the same time, I was nervous of screwing anything up. There was so much going on. Too much.

Jake glanced down at me as we walked. He had his arm around my shoulders, and I was holding his hand, his fingers curled with mine. His eyes narrowed a little and he eased his arm away to brush my hair back.

Crap.

I didn't have to ask. He stared at the hickey that Coop had left, a lot higher than the one he had.

"He came over last night, didn't he?" Something a little darker threaded the low-voiced question.

Jake didn't specify which he. "For a little while," I admitted. Should I apologize? I didn't want to apologize; I wasn't keeping them a secret from each other. Jake had said he was fine with it even if I was dating the others.

His mouth tightened for a moment, then he tucked my hair back to cover it before settling his arm on my shoulders and we continued moving. Movement from the corner of my eye jerked my attention. I glanced over in time to see Maria shaking her head and turning away. Sharon, on the other hand, glared at me with no evidence of tears in her eyes this time.

I met her gaze and refused to look away even though at our current pace I'd have to turn to hold the eye contact. But Maria stalked off and Sharon hurried after her.

Great.

It was raining when we reached the doors. Not heavy, but definitely steady. Bubba and Coop were by the doors staring outside. It wasn't until we were next to them that I figured out what held their attention. Archie crouched next to my car, a little tented area covering five gorgeous blue roses waiting for me on the sidewalk.

Archie had been leaving the roses? Hope ballooned in me.

I'd kind of hoped, but he hadn't acted like he had. Slipping away from Jake, I pushed the door open and headed down to where I'd parked. Ian, Coop, and Jake were right behind me. Archie turned at our approach with an irritated expression. Standing, he held out the note.

"Who the hell is this, Frankie?"

Oh. If he was asking that, then *he* definitely hadn't been leaving the roses.

Irritation scraped through my disappointment. “You opened it?” Who did that?

He gave me a bland look. “Yes, I opened it. Who the hell is sending these?”

The rain splashed against my face, then Archie shifted to cover me with his umbrella as I took the note from him. “Why would you do that? They’re for me, not you.”

“From someone we don’t know and someone who is getting a little creepier each time.”

“They aren’t creepy.” Yet, even as I argued, Ian, Coop, and Jake exchanged looks. “They’re not,” I told them before rounding on Archie. The skepticism in his eyes defied me.

“Read that and tell me it’s not creepy.”

ONE LAVENDER ROSE FOR HOW YOU ENCHANTED ME. TWO white roses because I’m thinking of you. Three orange roses to dare you to do something different. Four white roses because I want to see you smile. The blue rose is elusive, a white rose dyed blue. They aren’t achieved naturally, but they represent the unattainable and the mysterious. They say, “I can’t have you, but I can’t stop thinking about you.” I’ll find you at the party tomorrow. Promise.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” JAKE SAID SLOWLY. “HE’LL *FIND* YOU AT the party. That means it’s not Frenchy. He’s going to the party *with* you.”

Ian frowned. “Yeah, they might be nice roses, Frankie, but Arch is right. That’s starting to sound like a stalker, and they obviously know your car.”

“Look,” I said, shifting to face them but Archie kept the umbrella over me. The other three were getting wet the longer we stood here. “I think it’s sweet and fine. If he introduces himself at the party tomorrow, it means he’s doing it where a lot of people are. That’s not creepy, that’s giving me a public place to meet them.”

“You want to meet ‘em?” Coop studied me.

“Kind of, because the roses took a lot of thought and so did these notes.” I glanced at the most recent. The roses were all so pretty. “I really thought it would be one of you guys. After Saturday and the craziness... I thought it was one of you.”

One by one, they shook their heads. That was only a little disappointing. So whomever it was had begun without any idea of the fallout between me and the guys or that I suddenly wanted to date.

“Well, I guess we’ll all find out together then.” I squatted to pick up the roses. They smelled great. The little tent over them was a propped stand. I unlocked my car and got the roses inside, then shrugged out of my backpack. “Good luck at the game tonight,” I said to Jake and Ian.

“If we play,” Jake said. “I’ll text you.” About coming over. But he didn’t add that. Leaning close, he dropped a kiss a me before he said, “Come on, Bubba. You two have fun tonight.”

“Yeah,” Ian said, pausing to brush a kiss to my lips, too. “But not too much fun.” He said the last to Archie who gave him a dry look.

“I’m not kissing you,” Archie said, and Ian laughed. “And we’ll text if we want to meet up.”

Jake narrowed his eyes, but they cut across the lot, through the rain to head to the locker rooms.

“Did you want to change?” Archie asked, focusing on me.

I glanced at the sky. Our walk around the lake was probably not going to happen, so why not get dressed up a little? “Sure, why not?”

“Awesome, I’ll be at your place in twenty? Twenty-five?”

I grinned. “I’ll be ready.”

With one last look at the roses and then Coop, he strolled away to where he’d parked. The rain got a little heavier as we navigated out of the parking lot with the occasional lightning flash. It was looking more and more like the game wouldn’t happen tonight.

I felt bad for the guys. Canceled games could screw up the schedule, especially if they had to set a make-up later in the year or just ended up throwing the game out entirely.

The skies opened up at the apartments and, once more, my mom wasn't there in her nice spot in the carport and just once, once, I'd like to be able to use when she wasn't there. I settled for my usual spot.

Coop eyed the world then handed me the roses. "Stay put." He reached in the back and snagged the umbrella I kept back there—I'd been caught one to many times in the rain—then opened his door and snapped it open. After jogging around, he got my backpack out and held it in one hand before bumping the back door closed. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

He covered us both as much as possible, but my already damp shirt got soaked before we made it to the steps. It was impossible to share the umbrella there, so I hurried up them, still balancing the roses. Once inside, we were both laughing and drenched.

The cats yowled. I slid off my drenched sneakers and set the roses on the table in the kitchen. I'd move them later. Coop raked the damp hair out of his eyes, then grinned at me. "Hang on," I told him. "I'll grab you a towel."

My hair was dripping along with my clothes. I was going to have frizzies any second now. What I needed to do was shower, blow it out and flatiron it. Then, hopefully, the humidity wouldn't ruin it too badly.

I hurried up to my bathroom and grabbed a towel. Back in the kitchen, I handed it over to Coop but instead of taking the towel, he caught my arm and pulled me to him. Then his mouth crashed into mine and all the worry about my hair fled as he rolled his tongue against mine and dug his fingers into my hips.

Cold and wet, this shouldn't be a turn on, but I tugged at his shirt as he pushed me back against the fridge. He slid his thigh between my legs and pressed the kiss deeper. With warm hands, he squeezed the chilled skin of my breast and then he

tweaked the nipple. My hips bucked and I was torn between sucking on his tongue or grinding on his thigh.

His mouth was hot as he broke the kiss and trailed kisses to my throat. When he began to suck on my pulse point, I groaned. I already had three hickeys to hide. “Don’t...”

Coop lifted his head and stared down at me through half-lidded eyes. “I really want to get you out of these wet clothes.” He traced his thumb around my nipple. At some point, he’d rucked up my wet shirt and tugged the bra aside. “I want to taste every part of you and come in you instead of on you.” With each word, he flexed his thigh and I couldn’t breathe.

“Coop...”

“I know,” he whispered, then leaned in to suck on my earlobe. What few good intentions I had left abandoned me. I rolled my hips trying to increase the friction. “You have a date with Archie...” He traced the shell of my ear. “Want me to get you off before? Take care of that tension.”

Hell yes, I did. “Can’t...” I shuddered as he matched my grinding with his thigh, the pressure delicious. “Have to get ready.”

“Trust me, when I’m jerking off in about fifteen minutes, it’s these gorgeous tits and that fabulous pussy of yours I’m going to be thinking about.”

Heat swept through me at the idea of him stroking himself to thought of me and all I wanted to do was see that. “You’re mean,” I whispered. “And you haven’t seen me without pants on yet.”

“No,” he whispered. “But I know just how pretty a little pussy it has to be, and I can’t wait to play.”

Fuck.

With care, he leaned away and eased his thigh free of me. After releasing my bra and tugging my shirt down, he smoothed his hands over my very erect nipples proudly displaying themselves to the world. “If you get yourself off later, think about this, okay?”

“God,” I groaned. “Coop...”

“Yeah, just like that.” Then he dropped a kiss on my mouth before cutting across the apartment to the front door. “Oh, and Frankie?”

Not trusting myself to move yet, I called, “Yeah?”

“You have about ten minutes before Archie gets here.”

Adrenaline jolted through my system. “Shit.”

Coop—the ass—was laughing as he let himself out. Grabbing my phone, I sent Archie a text that said I needed to shower, but I left the backdoor unlocked for him. After, I hurried to feed the cats and then cleaned out their litter box. I left the sacked crap in the cupboard; I’d run it down later.

In my room, I stripped out of my wet things and then opened my closet. I had a couple of dresses, including a pretty green one I’d bought to go to that wedding last spring that I hadn’t worn since.

I held it up to myself in the mirror. It had thin straps and it also did nice things for my boobs. The material wasn’t itchy, and the color looked great with my complexion. I hung it on the hook at the top of my door, pulled out a pair of green panties, because why not, and skipped a bra because I wouldn’t need it.

“Frankie?” Archie called just as I got the shower turned on.

Sticking my head out the door, I said, “Just getting in the shower. Sorry, I didn’t plan on the drenching we got getting in from the car. Just grab a coke or something? I’ll try to be quick.”

He leaned into the hallway, his hands in the pockets of his slacks, and I had to gape for a moment. He’d dressed in dark slacks, a dark shirt, and black and gray striped tie. He’d cleaned up *nice* and his hair was a little damp, but otherwise.

“Wow,” I said slowly as I got a good look at him. Suddenly, I was really happy about the dress I had picked out. “You look like a million bucks.”

He snorted, but his grin grew teasing. “More like a couple of hundred, but I’ll take it.” Then his gaze skimmed downward as he continued his slow approach. “I’m going to guess you’re not wearing your dress yet.”

A flush spread up my chest to neck and then my face. I wasn’t wearing anything. Between Ian’s gorgeous song and delightful invitation, Jake’s very explicit and sensual teasing, and Coop’s mind-blowing eroticism my system was already in overdrive and the panty-melting stare Archie rested on me had me rubbing my thighs together and bracing the door a little more firmly.

“Nope,” I told him, hoping I didn’t sound anywhere near as turned on as I felt. Maybe I should make that an ice-cold shower.

“Yeah,” he said softly and then ran his tongue over his lower lip. “I didn’t think you would be.”

“I’m going to shower now,” I told him, very intent on closing the door and climbing in and then submerging myself in some arctic chill to put out the fire raging inside of me.

“Can I watch?”

I blinked. Could he...? Something in my brain seemed to be short-circuiting. Jake had done more than watch me shower—he’d gotten in with me and then between us we’d stroked him off. It had been... awesome and now Archie wanted to watch me?

“It’s okay to say no,” he teased gently. “I still want to go out to dinner, but you’re looking a little warm there, and I’ve always been curious, cause you’re stunning.”

Fresh heat washed over my face and I groaned. They were killing me. The answer of no should have been the first syllable out of my mouth, but the idea he *wanted* to watch me? Oh, that was some heady stuff.

There was just something...amazing about being able to elicit that kind of reaction. It probably made me bolder than usual. “Close your eyes,” I told him.

He raised his eyebrows.

“Close your eyes,” I repeated.

Archie gave me a look, hands still in his pockets and then he closed his eyes. Pulling the door wider, I padded right up to him. His shirt was so silky against my nipples as I rose up on my tiptoes and then brushed my lips to his. A light kiss, then a second one. His hands came out of his pockets and he had a hand wrapped around my nape and he pressed a thumb gently against my skull to turn my head. The kiss deepened and, instead of teasing him, I’d just thrown a whole lot of fuel onto the fire.

But he surprised me when he eased back. I managed to retreat on unsteady legs. His eyes were still closed. I made it back to the bathroom and pushed the door mostly closed so it shielded me.

“Okay,” I whispered. “You can open your eyes.”

With a slow exhale and even slower smile he met my gaze. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, I thought you should have something, since I’m making you wait.”

“Take all the time you need, babe,” he told me, a dark promise in his eyes. “You are definitely worth waiting for.”

I pushed the door closed and leaned back against it. What was I doing? I met my gaze in the mirror, my lips were a little puffy and swollen. My eyes huge and my face flushed.

“Frankie.” Archie was right on the other side of the door. “Tonight... it’s all about you and me. Nothing happens that you don’t want to happen. But you should know, I’m rock hard and that’s all you.”

I let out a breath because the thought of turning off the water and opening the door was right there. If I wanted it to happen, it would happen. “Ten minutes,” I said, and my voice squeaked. “And Archie?”

“I’m right here.”

“Nothing happens unless you want it to happen, too.” This wasn’t just about me. It hadn’t been from the beginning. These

were my best friends and we were edging a line we couldn't come back from. I think Jake and I had already crossed it, even if only by an inch. Coop and I were rapidly scorching the ground the line rested on.

“Trust me, babe, I want everything with you. So shower, get dressed and then I'm going to take you out for a great night.”

Great.

“Can't wait.” Finally, I pushed myself off the door and headed for the shower.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHAT YOU DO TO ME

I took a little longer in the shower than I planned. The hot water and the quiet helped me organize the random chaos of my thoughts—particularly all the buzzing the guys had left in their wake and the nasty little whispering voice parroting Sharon’s words back at me. Dating the guys was *new*. New enough that a couple of weeks earlier... yeah. I didn’t want to focus on that part.

That was then.

That was *before*.

We weren’t in the before anymore. So I made sure everything was shaved, scrubbed, shampooed, and shiny before I shut off the water and toweled the excess moisture from my hair. Some leave in conditioner followed by a blow-dry that took way too long. Archie had to be annoyed cooling his heels, but I got my hair straightened and neat then added light cosmetics because I’d never been a fan of the heavier stuff—and I didn’t really own any. I used a bit of cover-up on the hickeys to fade them. My hair down would also help hide them, but still...

All of that done, I eyed myself and sighed. I forgot to bring a change of clothes *in* with me. Wrapping a clean towel around my torso, I tucked the end in between my boobs then opened the door. “Sorry to be taking so long,” I called as I hurried down the hall to my bedroom. “I’m almost ready.”

“No problem,” Archie said from ahead of me and I found him sprawled in the desk chair, Tabby in his lap shedding all

of her white fur over his outfit. “I found a little pussy to pet while I waited.”

A groan escaped me before I could stop it. “You’ve been petting my pussies for years. That one doesn’t work on me anymore.”

He grinned. “Not all of them, but we can fix that soon enough.”

Dammit, lust ripped through me like a lightning bolt. All my hard-won calm from the shower went up in flames. “And on that note.” I pointed him to the door. “I have to get dressed.”

“Not really...” The wry comment had me jerking my head up. “Seriously,” he continued. “You make that towel look good. It’s really working for you. Have I ever told you what truly excellent legs you have? Firm, you can see the muscle definition—they’re soft. I always like it when your legs brush up against mine.”

Heat crawled through me and I had to be blushing. I just had to be. Even my chest was hot.

He studied me, still casually petting my little purring traitor. Tiddles at least just stared at him from my pillow, seemingly indifferent and Tory was probably under the bed or hiding in the living room. She was not a fan of people in general and it took her time to warm up to anyone in the house.

“What would you say if I told you I was picturing you without the towel?” Archie asked, his voice this soothing kind of croon. Really, it shouldn’t soothe me as easily as it did.

“I’d say you have a vivid imagination,” I answered, keeping one hand firm on where the towel was tucked in. “Or you peeked earlier. Either way,” I continued determined to do this, “You asked me to dress up, so I’m going to do that. Now, out.”

A slow smile curved his lips and he lifted Tabby and set her on the bed before he stood, seemingly uncaring of the cat hair now decorating his lap. The fact it hadn’t even slowed

him down to make a fuss of my cat. Whether for the chance to tease me or just because he liked the cat didn't matter, his choice threatened to turn me into a warm puddle of goo. No going gooey around Archie, I had to be able to keep up with his wit.

The spark in his brown eyes and the faint hint of a smirk on his lips suggested he was well aware of the effect he was having on me. Still, I motioned him toward the door. But he paused in front of me instead of continuing out.

He leaned close and I went very still. There was nothing but a towel and electrified nerves around me. Pressing his lips to my ear, he whispered, "I definitely peeked. You have an amazing ass." Then he pressed a kiss to my skull just behind my ear and slipped out of the room while I was trying to remember how to breathe.

I'd never been so glad of being on birth control in my life. From the age of thirteen on, Mom and my doc recommended it to control periods and because my best friends were all guys. It seemed a little pointless before *now*.

Without even laying a finger on me, I was overheated and wound tight. Definitely needed to get dressed and out of here before I made a decision we might end up regretting, no matter how darkly tempting he was.

After fanning my face, I glanced at the purring Tabby who looked from me to the open door Archie had left via before she leapt off the bed to trot after him.

Traitor.

Get it together, Frankie. Yeah.

That was effective.

I took several, long, deep breaths and then dropped the towel and grabbed my panties. At least I'd done the cosmetics and lotion in the bathroom. I had to loosen the bodice ties before I could slip the dress on. One of the reasons I'd picked it out was I loved how the bodice made me think of a ren faire corset but the rest was just flowing and natural. I could get

away without the spaghetti straps and I debated them for a hot minute.

Date night.

He asked me to dress up.

I unbuttoned the straps and left them on the dresser as I tightened the bodice and tied it. It was snug against my chest, almost as snug as the towel had been but the skirt had a little swish, hanging a little lower in the back than the front. The shoes that went with the dress were the same shade—the only pair of shoes I’d ever owned that matched a dress perfectly and it had been dumb luck.

Slipping the shoes on, I checked my appearance in the mirror. Flushed cheeks and over bright eyes aside, I thought I’d cleaned up pretty well. *Date time.*

My nerves flared, the hurricane-force butterflies fluttering away in my gut. I transferred my wallet into a little clutch purse—not something I usually carried and fixed the strap so it would dangle from my wrist—then grabbed the lint roller on my way out the door.

Archie stood in the living room, hands in his pockets as he stared at the new coffee table.

“Jake,” I told him without his having to ask. “He brought it over Wednesday after I got off work.”

Pivoting, Archie canted his head and swept his gaze over me. “Wait,” he said as I continued forward and I hesitated a step. Reaching forward he plucked the lint roller from my hand and set it on the coffee table before he pulled out his phone. “Smile for me?”

“You’re taking my picture?” Okay, that came out sounding like I was an idiot, but I couldn’t control the smile taking over my face. He took a couple.

“You look stunning,” he said. “That dress is... wow.”

Sooner or a later, a person stopped blushing right? The dilation of the vessels and the sudden flood of oxygenated blood would calm down? Because, I even ducked my eyes this

time. *Dammit.* “Thank you.” Searching for a sense of control, I resumed my original course and said, “Lint roller please.”

He handed it back and I cleared some tape and then began rolling his shirt. I started at the shoulders then worked my way over his front. Rip, another round of tape, down his tie. Then to his pants. I’d made two sweeps over his thighs, then glanced at him with my eyebrows raised.

“Oh, by all means,” he told me. “I was enjoying that.”

I wrinkled my nose. Then stared right at him as I ran the lint roller over his crotch. Of course, my defiance backfired. There was no mistaking how hard Archie was or the obstacle his cock created that I had to bump over. But I tore off the last bit of tape and stepped back, then did a circular motion with my finger all the while determinedly ignoring the blushing.

Of course there was cat hair on his back. I focused on getting it off the shirt first and then I took care of his butt. The slacks he wore fit him nicely and, while I’d never really paid attention to it before, Archie had a nice ass. This close, I also couldn’t miss his cologne. It was something a little spicy and it smelled like him, too. Yeah, don’t ask me what that smell was specifically because it smelled like Archie. They each had their own unique scent.

Comfortable. Familiar. Enticing.

“Are you checking out my ass while you are so efficiently stroking it with that thing?” The question jolted me out of the petting motion I’d been pursuing, and I groaned.

“Yes,” I admitted. “You have a very nice ass.”

“Not as nice as yours, babe. Am I pussy free?”

I poked him. “Yes, I’ve gotten all the cat hair off.”

Amused, he slid an arm around me and held his phone up in selfie mode. “One for the road?”

I grinned and he pulled me closer, heads tilted together then snapped a picture. He did a couple then he pressed his lips to my cheek for a third.

“Frankie,” he beckoned for my attention and I turned then his mouth closed over mine and I forgot about the selfies as he kissed me. This was slower than our hallway kiss, teasing rubs of our lips together, mouths open and then slowly he cupped his hand against my jaw and tilted my head. The lint roller landed on the floor along with the ripped off and used tape.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I held on as he teased my tongue delving deep and he tasted like coffee, sugar, and something minty. Oh, God. He’d been sucking on a breath mint. The tautness in my system went soft and the butterflies turned into sparkles or some shit. Something thumped, but I floated as I leaned into the kiss.

Kissing Archie was—it was like kissing a live wire. It electrified my senses and sent tingles zinging everywhere. I had to hold onto him because as unsteady as my legs had been earlier, I was leaning into the kiss. He had one arm around me, braced against my lower back like a band of steel.

I lost track of how long we stood there kissing, but finally Archie lifted his head, and we were both panting. With care, he steadied me as I slid my hands down to rest on his biceps.

His lips were shiny, and his fingers were warm when he brushed them against my jaw. “Where were we?” His voice had deepened, a rawness that hadn’t been there before.

“I have no idea.” It was like every molecule in me strained in his direction. “Dinner? Maybe?”

Chuckling, he slid his hand down to my throat. The weight of it there calmed my rabbiting heart. I took a deeper breath. “Dinner was the plan.”

“Was?”

“Still is... though I admit, I am far more interested in dessert.” Devilment in his eyes, he grinned.

Oh God. I groaned and the ballooning tension around us popped. “Archie, that’s awful.”

“Cheesy is not awful,” he countered.

“Yes, it is...” Had he really just said that?

“I happen to know you love cheese on a lot of things.”

True. “I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, his hand drifting lower across the bare portion of my upper chest and shoulders. “I really, really like this dress.”

“I’m not going to lie,” I told him honestly. “I really like this dress, too. You’re taking me out on a date. I really like that, too.”

“I am,” he said slowly. “I kind of wish it was your first one.”

“It kind of is.” At that admission, he stilled.

“What?”

“Mathieu and I had our date here,” I pointed out. “Technically a first date, but we were here. I’ve been to Ian’s place, Jake came here, Coop came here...”

“But I’m the first guy taking you out?” Satisfaction curved through his expression. “I like that.”

“Course, we actually have to leave to make that come true.”

“I’m aware,” he said. “Running through the amendments to the Constitution at the moment.”

I blinked. “What?”

Catching my hand, he pressed it to his groin and the rock-hard cock tenting his pants. “The 8th Amendment prohibits excessive fines and cruel and unusual punishment.”

He kept my hand right there, as he danced the fingers of his other hand across the expanse of bare skin above the bodice of my dress.

“The 18th prohibited the manufacturing and sale of alcohol in the United States.”

“Repealed by the 21st,” I reminded him.

“Point.” He wasn’t softening an inch. “We could be here a while.”

“Too uncomfortable to move?” Curiosity slid through me.

“No, just—kind of obvious.”

“Does it embarrass you?” The longer we stood here, the less flushed I was, though lust still burned pretty hot. If he pushed or asked, I wasn’t entirely certain I would say no at this point.

He smirked. “No, I didn’t want it to embarrass you.”

Dipping my gaze to where he cupped my hand against him, I licked my lips and he groaned.

“Not helping, Frankie.”

“Sorry,” I whispered. I really wasn’t. This was kind of awesome. “This is all because of me?”

“Has been since I got here. Didn’t hurt that I’ve been half-hard thinking about you all day.” The admission dragged my gaze up. “Thinking about taking you out, making you smile, keeping you to myself. Then...those roses.”

At his scowl, I leaned in and gave his cock a squeeze as I kissed his jaw. He hissed out a breath. “You are making me smile.”

My stomach, behaving with all the class and restraint of a toddler, chose that moment to gurgle. I hadn’t eaten in hours, and I was starving. Archie groaned, then stole another kiss, this one short, hot and biting, when he drew on my bottom lip, scraping his teeth over it I shuddered.

“Your erection doesn’t bother me,” I whispered. “It makes me feel really hot...and I’m definitely wet, if that helps.”

Playing with fire should be my middle name.

At his look of pained disbelief, I shrugged. “Just wanted you to know we’re even.”

He glanced at our hands, then smirked. “Not quite.”

“I’d let you, but you can’t feel it through the dress...”

Rolling his head back, he let go of my hand and said, “Give me a taste and then we go?”

My heart stuttered. Seriously?

But the dare in those eyes was so hard to refuse. Withdrawing a step, I bent down to retrieve the lint roller and tape, then set them on the coffee table. His phone was also face down on the floor. Still holding his gaze, I turned to put one foot on the coffee table for balance and shifted my skirt. Easing my fingers under the seam of my panties, I ran two of them along my labia gathering the moisture and then pulled them out, glistening and shiny. When I offered my hand to Archie, he closed his lips over both of them, sucking my fingers into his mouth.

It sent a bolt of heat straight to my core, and I swayed. With a glide of his teeth against my skin he drew my fingers from his mouth but kept hold of my hand. “You taste amazing and that’s all for me?”

At the moment, I could honestly say yes, so I just nodded. I was wound tight and I could probably get myself off with a couple of finger strokes.

“Fuck,” Archie exhaled. “Let’s go, before I just say fuck it and order food in here while I figure out how to convince you to let me eat you out for the appetizer.”

The directness in his words lit another fuse in me. Playing with fire, one hundred percent. He grabbed his phone and tugged me toward the door. There was a huge umbrella parked in the corner. I paused to get my keys and my own phone.

There were a dozen messages from the guys on the screen.

Archie reached over and swiped the screen upward, then hit the do not disturb. Presumptuous, so I glanced at him with raised eyebrows.

“Tonight is you and me,” he reminded me. “They can wait.”

I considered it then darkened the screen and slid it into my purse. “You and me,” I promised. His smile sent another wash of warmth through me.

Thunder rumbled, a reminder of the storm. Outside, he got the umbrella opened and shielded us from the still sprinkling

rain as I locked the door. Descending the steps, I half-thought Coop would pop up, but there was no sign of him as we reached Archie's Ferrari. He opened the passenger door for me and waited until I was in and the door closed before he circled around.

Once he was in the driver's seat, he got the engine started then glanced at me. "I was going to bring you flowers tonight," he admitted. "But the rose thing has kind of robbed that of some impact, so I went with this." He picked up a small wrapped package from the well and handed it to me.

Surprise bubbled up and I stared at the wrapping paper. It was done up in red and gold. "You got me a present? You didn't have to."

"I know," he murmured, shifting a little in his seat to watch me. "I wanted to get you something. Go ahead, open it."

Curious, I slit the paper carefully along the seams of the tape and Archie groaned.

"I forgot how anal you are in opening things."

"It's not anal," I corrected him. "It's conservative. Why waste the paper because you're in too much of a hurry and you shred it?"

"Because that's half the fun?"

I laughed. Inside was a flat, squarish velvet jewelry box. He got me jewelry? Shock eddied through my surprise. I couldn't remember the last time someone gave me jewelry.

Actually, I was pretty sure no one ever had. Archie tracked my every movement as I nudged the box open to reveal the silver and gold charm bracelet. It sported two charms, an A and an F.

"Archie," he said quietly, tapping the A before motioning to the F. "Frankie."

Tears pricked my eyes. "Archie, it's..." I didn't have words for it.

Lifting the bracelet out of the box, he motioned to my wrist, so I gave him the left wrist to fasten it around. The metal

was warm and smooth, the links a little chunky but also stylish, and the letters were elegant. “It’s the start of a new adventure,” he said. “We can add charms to it as we go. You said there were a lot of things you wanted to do and to experience. The A and the F are for your first go out for real date.”

I frowned, struggling with the burn of tears in my eyes and clogging my throat. He traced two fingers against my pulse point in my wrist.

“Frankie?”

“It’s really great,” I admitted losing the battle, and he tilted his head.

“Hey.” He turned in the seat and cupped my cheek, catching an escaping tear with his thumb. “I wasn’t trying to make you cry.”

“It’s stupid but...”

“But?” he prompted, studying me intently.

“I just—I wasn’t expecting it. Not sure you noticed, but I don’t really own jewelry. No one has ever given me any before.” The guys had given me presents, don’t get me wrong. We had several years of birthdays and Christmases behind us, but this was different. It was intimate and personal.

“So I get that first, too,” he whispered, then lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm. “We need to add a little present charm to it.”

I laughed and swiped at my tears. The bracelet didn’t weigh much, but it settled on my wrist heavily. “Thank you, Archie.” Stretching over, I pressed a kiss to his mouth. He held me there for a firm, long kiss before releasing me.

His grin dragged another a similar one from me. “You’re welcome. I may bring you a gift for every date, especially if you enjoy them that much.”

Giddy and a little lightheaded, I flicked my fingers at him. “I’m not asking you to spoil me.”

“I don’t know,” he said turning to put the car in gear and then backing out of the spot. “I kind of like the idea of spoiling you.”

Leaning back in the seat, I laughed. “You’re already spoiling me by taking me out.”

“Taking you to dinner isn’t spoiling you, Frankie.” He glanced at me as he navigated through traffic. “That’s something a boyfriend does. They take their girl out. They experience new things with her.”

“Is that in the handbook or something?” I tried to not focus on the label he’d just used.

“Ancient Guy Secret. I could tell you, but then I couldn’t date you.”

“Oh, well, in that case, by all means, keep your secrets.” I grinned as I studied the damp world we passed. It was still raining with the occasional flash of lightning. The air had cooled considerably, but it wasn’t cold. That would happen later in our “autumn.” For now, it was just a relief. “It’s not like I didn’t pick up tips listening to you guys debate your girls over the last few years.”

He made a horn sound. “Ehhh. Foul ball. The use of accrued knowledge gathered through nefarious means will not be admissible.”

I snorted. “Nefarious?”

“Well, I was looking for a word that meant nope. You’ve been one of us so long, we’ve all managed to screw up in front of you and do the things guys aren’t supposed to do. But since you don’t know *all* the rules, it would be prudent if you refrained from holding our past behavior against us. Well against me, anyway. If you use it against them, I won’t complain.”

The teasing in his tone demanded I join in, so I said, “But that would really not be fair. A level playing field means you all get the same opportunities.” A thrill skated through my system.

“That means we get the same handicaps,” Archie mused. “Crap, I need to get Coop a car because I am not asking you to pick me up for dates.”

“Seriously? That’s kind of sexist, you know.”

“No, it’s very sexist, but I like being the guy who picks you up. That puts me in charge of your time, of making sure you enjoy yourself, and getting you home safely. I’m not the dude that lets you drop me off and then sends you out into the night by yourself.”

“Wow, you do realize we live in the twenty-first century, right?”

“Don’t care,” he said with a shrug. “There’s a way to do it right. I’m the guy, so I pick you up and I take care of you.”

“So what do I do? Just look pretty?” Some of my earlier giddiness dissipated.

“No, you’re freaking brilliant. You’re probably going to end up running the world someday, and I’ll be looking at the television and saying, *I remember sucking Madame President’s fingers clean of her juices before I took her out to dinner.*”

Heat flushed through me like a bomb going off, and I squeezed my thighs together. “Your mouth should be illegal.”

“Trust me, babe, I bet in some states it is. For now, you’ll just have to wait and see how much.” The dark promise licking every one of those words went right through me and I leaned my head back against the seat. How long would dinner take?

Trying to tame the chaos, I ran my fingers over the bracelet. It grounded me some, at least enough to not squirm in my seat. “Archie…”

“Hmm? We’re almost there by the way, and I changed the reservation while you were showering, so we’ll be right on time.”

“Thank you.” I still didn’t know where *here* was, but based on the evening so far, I would be teased, tantalized, and a little

tortured before it was over. “This—this thing between us? What we’re doing? The flirting?”

“Umm-hmm,” he murmured, sliding another look at me.

“If you ever decide you’re done, will you just tell me straight out? Don’t just disappear?”

“You mean like you did this summer?” I deserved his sly question and tone.

“Exactly like I did this summer. I should have talked to you guys back when Rachel told me.”

“*Rachel* told you?” He snapped. “Seriously?”

“She thought I should know.”

“What a bitch.”

“Actually, I don’t think she is as much anymore,” I admitted. “She has always kind of been overbearing but looking back, she’s never been mean to me. Just really, really blunt.”

“Yeah, well, fuck her anyway. You’re right, you should have talked to us then. Maybe we could have been doing this all summer.”

Sharon’s words in the bathroom echoed in my ears. “I didn’t know then. I didn’t know you guys would even ask.”

“I know,” he said pulling off and into the lot of a restaurant. A really nice—really *expensive*—restaurant. Instead of parking, he pulled right up under the awning for the valet to take the car. “You do now, so we look forward, yeah? Not back?”

He hadn’t really answered my question before he’d asked his own. “We have a lot to look forward to.”

“Damn straight we do.”

Inside, the restaurant was every bit as nice as it had appeared. Our waiter showed us to a table set off to the side with some privacy. The food was expensive enough that there were no prices in the menu. We had a little bit of everything, but the steak was divine, and he had the sea bass. I’d never

tried it, so he moved his chair around. We sat next to each other rather than across and we took turns trying the different dishes. He even fed me some of his fish.

It wasn't bad, but not something I thought I'd order. We talked about a lot of things. We talked about school and post-high school plans. He was still zeroed in on MIT but planned to apply to Harvard, too. When the subject of the other schools came up, we were both a little ambivalent. I really wanted Harvard.

I wanted it bad enough, I could taste it. I wasn't quite Rory Gilmore crazy for it, but damn if I didn't want to see that acceptance letter. The money—I'd figure that out later. There was a reason I saved every penny I could and had.

Dessert was chocolate mousse, and I was pretty sure I had an orgasm on the first taste.

It was that good.

“You know, if I don't get in where I want to go? Screw it, I'll take a year off and travel. There has to be some perks to having a trust fund.”

Some perks? “You'd really just take a year and go?”

“You wouldn't?”

“Not really an option for me,” I reminded him. “Whether I go to school or not, I have to have a job. Rent doesn't pay itself.”

“You could do it if you went with me,” he suggested. “Hell, I'd have asked you to go before we went on a date. I like doing things with you, Frankie. You're tough and smart and see things so differently. You always have.”

Offering him a spoonful of the mousse, I didn't miss the way his eyes heated or how he leaned toward me. The warmth rolling off him was like being seated next to a fire. “Thank you for the offer, but... I don't want to be dependent on anyone.”

“Not even for a vacation? I mean, think about it. Spring break, you and me, we could go anywhere. You have a

passport? If you don't, you just need to get one, and we can really go anywhere."

"I'm serious, Archie."

"So am I," he countered. "Look, I've been a lot of places. Yeah, I get it that I'm privileged, and I've had opportunities other people don't. But I've never done one of these trips with someone I wanted to go with before. Not since Nana passed. She and Pops used to take me on trips with them when I was little, and they were always fun. They took me for a camel ride when I was seven."

My mouth widened. To be honest, Archie never talked about his grandparents. Not really. He'd mentioned them once or twice, but no stories. "That sounds amazing."

"Oh, it was horrible and funny and that beast spit like you wouldn't believe."

I laughed. "Really?"

"Yeah, really. But we did it. Nana laughed so hard, kind of like you are right now. Then she wiped me off and said we were still going to take the ride. It was worth it. Got to see a sunset in the desert. Spectacular, if I think about it now, but I was too young to appreciate it, even if it was pretty cool."

I took a bite of the mousse, the smooth and creamy flavor melting on my tongue. It was almost as sweet as his expression.

"Taking you would be amazing for me, so think about it? For me? Maybe think of some places you'd like to see?"

"Archie, we have to concentrate on college."

"You're so damn practical, you make my soul hurt. When do you get to be a wild and crazy teenager?"

"Well, I rode on Ian's motorcycle the other day, and I walked out of my bathroom naked to kiss you. I think I can make the argument that I'm being pretty crazy right now."

Not to mention dating four wonderful guys.

Four.

Oh, the idea made my head swim every time I focused on it.

“Want to get a little crazier?” He eyed me.

“Crazy how?”

“Well, walk around the lake is out, but I have a hot tub, and you don’t have to wear a suit.”

Oh.

Damn.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TICK. TICK. TICK

“*I*f I go back to your place,” I said slowly. “We’re going to end up having sex.” It wasn’t really a question. Not right now. Every single one of them was so damn gorgeous. Jake and I had done everything but actual intercourse and making out with Coop on the sofa had been—yeah.

“That’s not a bad thing, right?” Archie linked our fingers together. “You like me, and I like you.”

“No,” I answered, my libido warring with my logic. Being in the restaurant bought me some time, yet I couldn’t stop thinking about how it felt when he kissed me. I’d imagined it, but they all kissed so differently. “Except... this is our first date.”

He made a face, and I could almost hear him say, *never stopped me before*, but he didn’t. “We’ve known each other for almost four years, Frankie.”

Technically *this* was our fourth year, but I wasn’t going to argue semantics.

“We’re not strangers. Most of the time, dating is about getting to know someone. I know you, and I hope by now you know me.”

Nudging the empty dessert bowl aside, I started to answer but paused as the waitress came by to check on us.

“We’re fine,” Archie said. “Just give us a couple of minutes then bring the check, please?”

I waited until she'd cleared away our dessert bowl and spoons then left us again. Meeting Archie's gaze, I chewed on my bottom lip. This was a little awkward, but one thing he was very right about—he was Archie. Coop was the guy who helped keep me grounded; he'd always been there. Jake was a close second to that, but he never let me keep rose-colored glasses on, we were always brutally honest. Ian? He was the guy who made me think fantasies were possible, but he always knew how to make me smile. Archie was my confessor. We confided sometimes really uncomfortable truths to each other, and we could talk about anything.

I hoped that applied here.

“I do know you. I know the good and the bad,” I told him. “I know about your first kiss, the first time you had sex, and I know the name of every girl you dated, most of whom didn't last a week, sometimes two.”

Archie didn't look away.

“I know you cry at the end of sappy movies, even if you don't want anyone else to know. And I know that for a while you had nightmares that used to wake you at two a.m. every night.”

“I would call you, and you always answered your phone,” Archie murmured quietly.

“But in—six days? I went from being the untouchable girl, lonelier than I've ever been, to dating all of you. It's intense and takes my breath away. If we have sex for real, it's going to change things, and that scares me.”

The waitress slid by the table with the check, but Archie already had his card out, so he just gave it to her. As soon as she left again, he leaned toward me. “I know you're dating the guys. I know everyone has told you they like you. Bubba jumped right in with both feet to invite you to homecoming, and Jake spent the night at your place.” He gave it a beat. “I'm not asking what you do with them...”

“They don't tell you?” I found that hard to believe. They always talked about their dates.

“We’d never talk about you like that, Frankie,” he said quietly. “Never. And I meant what I said earlier. Nothing happens unless you want it to happen. I can keep my hands to myself. I just don’t want to call it this early, even if the rain is spoiling some of our plans.”

“We could always go walking in the rain, but that would probably get cold and uncomfortable.”

“True, but again, if you want to do it, I’m game.”

Walk in the rain? Hot tub? Or go home? It was all happening so fast. Yet, it all seemed perfectly natural. I knew them, but the shift from platonic to very much not made my head spin.

I knew what I wanted, I just... “C’mon,” Archie said after the waitress returned with the check and his card. Two minutes later, we were out front waiting for the valet to bring up the car. It was still raining, and the temperature had dipped beautifully. Goosebumps raced over my skin, but I didn’t mind. Especially when Archie wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

Once we were in the car, he looked at me, “Where to?”

“Hot tub,” I said and his smile grew. “But I need to borrow a suit, and I’m not saying yes to sex yet. I just don’t want the night to end so early.”

My libido flipped off my logic, but I had to make the choices for the right reasons and not just because I wanted to feel him up.

“Split the difference?” Archie asked as we pulled out.

“How do we split the difference?”

“We both go topless.”

Laughter bubbled up through me and I leaned my head back against the seat, staring at him. “That seems really unfair to you.”

“How so?”

“I’ve seen you without your shirt before.”

“Are you saying you’re not impressed?” He threw me a playful glare before focusing his attention back on the road.

“Definitely didn’t say that. Just—I know what seeing you in very little does to me. You’ve never seen me topless.”

“I saw you bottomless,” he offered. “I’m good with both of us wearing tops and no bottoms.”

I laughed. “You’re terrible.”

“Hey, whatever makes you comfortable.”

The drive to his place took longer; he lived in an actual gated community with a security guard where the houses had actual acreage between them and privacy woods as well as fences. There were always cars in his garage—which was nearly as big as his house. I’d never asked and had zero intention of asking now, but Archie once joked his parents gave up a lot of money when they cut ties with his grandfather.

I had to wonder if he was being ironic or if there was *more* money than what they had here. The house was huge and had two wings. His parents lived in one, and he had the other. He had an actual media room and his own living and sitting room. If he didn’t need to eat, he’d never have to come out of his side of the house.

He eyed the BMW parked next to him as we got out, but then held his hand out to me. Hand in hand, we headed inside. The other difference between Archie’s life and the rest of ours—he had actual staff. A gentleman named Jeremy greeted us as we came inside.

“Good evening, Mr. Archie. I was just about to retire. Can I get you or Miss Frankie anything?” Jeremy was cool. He intimidated the hell out of me when I first met him, but he had a dry sense of humor and I only had to ask him to call me Frankie—not Francesca—once.

“Go take a load off, Jer, we’re good. See you tomorrow—oh...” Archie slowed as we passed Jeremy on our way toward his wing. “Is everything ready for the party?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Edward and Muriel are *still* out of town?”

Jeremy gave him an almost benign look. “They have not returned, Mr. Archie, that I am aware of. Though there is a less than one percent chance they have snuck in and are currently camped out in one of the guest rooms not making a sound.”

With a snort, Archie grinned. “Good to know. Sleep well.”

“Will Miss Frankie require anything for breakfast?”

“I don’t think so, Jeremy,” I assured him. “Not sure I’m staying over yet.”

“If you do, I’ll make you French Toast in the morning. As I recall, that was your favorite.”

He wasn’t wrong. I squeezed Archie’s hand. “Thank you, Jeremy.”

Upstairs, Archie led me toward his rooms, and I slowed a little. “Are we using the hot tub in your bathroom?”

“Would you agree to that suggestion?” He gave me a sly grin.

“No, absolutely not.”

“Damn,” he complained, though it lacked any heat and he winked. “No, I’m grabbing my suit and there are some suits in the guest room that will fit you. I think one of your old ones is still there from last summer.”

“Pretty sure that’s a one piece.”

“Well you can’t go topless in that.” He made a face. His room was exactly how I remembered it. The big bed that sat on a raised platform a couple of steps up from the rest of the room. A huge seventy-inch television with game systems hooked up and controllers pulled out like he’d just let them there the last time he played.

There was a desk in the corner next to a window and it was orderly, if cluttered with spare parts and a half-built drone from the looks of it. He had a bookcase stuffed with tech books and miniature robots and other half-finished pieces. He was always building something or taking it apart.

I slid my shoes off and sank my feet into the plush carpet as he let go of my hand to open another door that linked to the guest room. “Go ahead and change. You can hang your dress up if you want, and if you don’t want to put that on later, you can borrow some sweats and a t-shirt.”

Biting my lip, I pivoted to look at him. “Archie?”

He paused in the middle of loosening his tie. “Yeah?”

“Thank you for tonight.”

“Night’s not done, babe. Go change.”

In the guest room, I paused to take a deep breath. We’d only had water and iced tea at dinner, but I still felt more than a little drunk. In the dresser, I found three different suits. One was indeed my old suit, a black one piece. There were two bikinis.

One I’d seen before and I stared at it for a minute trying to place it. Yellow with black trim, it was pretty and...I dropped it back into the drawer. Patty had been wearing it at Ian’s birthday party.

Yeah.

No.

“Archie?” I called, holding the red bikini top and bottom.

He strolled through the door in his swim trunks, which hugged his trim frame and did absolutely nothing to hide the fact he was still half-hard. Where Ian and Jake were broad chested and denser muscled, Archie was trim, lean and very cut. You could tell he spent time in the gym, even if he wasn’t training for any sports.

“Problem?” He asked when my gaze finally reached his eyes. His smirk was adorable and aggravating in equal measures.

“Black one piece, mine. Patty’s bikini.” I held up the red two pieces. “Who owned this one?”

Smile fading, he studied me then the suit. “Honestly? I have no idea. I didn’t even remember that yellow one was

Patty's... you sure it was hers?"

"She wore it to Ian's birthday party." The sting remained, but I kept my gaze determinedly on him. "I don't want to wear someone else's suit. Especially not someone you had sex with."

After crossing the room to me, he plucked the yellow suit out of the drawer and walked over to the trashcan in the corner. "We talked about Patty, Frankie. I'm not asking you to do anything you don't want to do much less treat you like you're a plug and play replacement."

The bluntness eased something in me I hadn't even realized I was holding onto. Guilt flooded me. I was the one making out with our other friends... I looked at the red suit then at him. "I know you aren't."

"No, you don't." Archie held up his hands before I could respond. "It's okay. You trust me as your friend. I gotta earn some boyfriend cred, and we already know I'm starting a little more in the negative than you are."

"Except you're not dating anyone and I'm..."

"Nope," he said quietly, then closed the distance between us to cup my face. "Hey, look at me. We're not doing that. No guilt. No being mean to you. Now, I said suits were optional. I can still keep my hands to myself. Granted...that will be a true test of willpower, but I can. Or you can try this one on and understand the only thing that matters to me is that *you* are here, not what you wear or don't wear."

I made a face. "I sound like a brat."

"You sound like you don't get why we all like you and worry that I only want sex."

I grimaced. That sounded even worse.

"To qualify that statement, I absolutely want sex. I'd fuck you in a heartbeat. But fucking you isn't why I've spent four years trying to make sure I had your attention and time squared away with you. I wanted every Friday night this year not because I thought I was getting laid, Frankie. I wanted them because I want *you*."

The command in his voice sent a shudder through me. He lifted my hand up and ran his fingers along the bracelet.

“Archie and Frankie’s first date, remember?”

Tipping my head back, I said, “You’re really sexy when you’re all fierce and determined.”

“Does it get you wet?”

A giggle escaped. The conversations he and I kept having, “Very,” I admitted. His sharp inhale did wonders for my ego. “Not as wet as I’ll be in the hot tub.”

He grinned. “Good. That gives me time to up my game. While you get changed, you want me to go raid the bar? We can try some wine.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” I said, waving a finger at him. “If we drink, then I have to spend the night.”

“We have time for me to sober up and if I’m that drunk, trust me, I’ll have trouble getting up to my room much less getting it up for you.”

“So, you’re telling me wine means no sex?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it and then moved his head from side to side. “One glass each? Keep our options open?”

A groan worked its way up, but I swallowed it. The eddying shivers in my system coiled tight then unfolded again. We were both playing with fire. Then Marsha’s voice echoed in my ear about not wanting me to miss out on anything and all the things I wanted to experience

“You know what...yes, I’d like a glass of wine and to sit in the hot tub and to hang out with you.”

“Done and done.” Then he kissed me, a hard, fierce kiss where he tasted like chocolate. “Hmm... I’ll get the wine. You remember where the tub is, or do I need to come back and get you?”

“I remember.”

After he left me, I had to fight the urge to flop back on the guest bed. I laid my dress over a chair after I'd changed into the suit. The red bikini was skimpier than anything I'd ever worn. The thin triangles hid nothing, they were mostly window dressing.

It also put my breast hickey on prominent display.

Before I went downstairs, I slid back into his room and then ran up to jump on his rumpled bed. Turning my face into his pillow, I took a deep breath and sigh. Okay. Wine. Hot tub. Archie. I pulled my hair back and rolled it up and tucked it into a knot atop my head before I left the room.

I didn't have to go far to find him. He waited for me at the bottom of the stairs. It was chilly inside the house in only the bikini, but the rake of Archie's gaze over me warmed me right up.

"I wish I had my phone," he admitted as he held out the wine glass. It was a clear, almost golden color. "I want a picture of this."

The blushing returned in full force. "I don't mind as long as I don't end up on your Instagram."

"Oh, babe, no this would be all for me." He trailed his knuckles down my arm leaving shivers in his wake. "Next time, yeah?"

Outside, the rain continued to come down, but the hot tub bubbled away cheerfully, hints of steam rolling off the top. It wasn't that cold, but my nipples were twin peaks of stiffness. I tried a sip of my wine—it was so sweet—before I slid into the water. The lights were on, but they were only fairy lights strung over the awning and gave a low glow. He reached over and hit a switch to turn off the lights in the water.

The dim light transformed it, made it easier. Then he climbed in and sank in next to me with a sigh. I tried another sip of the wine before I set it on the edge and then turned back to lean against the side. The water eddied around me, lifting and soothing. I hadn't even realized how tight my muscles were until we got in.

The heat was wonderful. Archie found my hand in the water and slid his fingers between mine. “Good idea?”

“Great idea,” I sighed. “Better than a walk around the lake.”

“I liked the walk around the lake,” he told me, giving my hand a squeeze and then tugging me a little closer. “I even like mini-golf when I do it with you.”

Snickering, I tilted my head back. “You never said you didn’t like mini-golf.”

“Confession time—not my favorite thing. It’s ridiculous and goofy. But it’s fun when I go with you.”

“Archie, we were going every weekend for a while there.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “I know, and I’d go every weekend with you now, if you wanted.”

Elbowing him, I turned in the water so I could look at him. “You can’t do that. You have to tell me when you don’t like something.”

“I told you, I liked the time with you. Didn’t matter much what we were doing.”

Sometimes... “You say the damndest things.”

Dipping his head to press a kiss against my shoulder, he whispered, “I know there are things you do for us or with us that you aren’t a fan of and you do it anyway.”

“Hmm...” I sighed when he mouthed a kiss to my throat.

“You know, I keep looking at these hickeys—and I want to leave one, too.” There was something possessive in his voice, and it sent a shudder down my back.

“Covering them up is already a challenge,” I muttered.

He slid his arm around me and lifted me off the seat and turned me until I straddled his lap. “I’ll leave it somewhere you can cover easily. Promise.”

“Tempting,” I admitted as he nuzzled a kiss to my other shoulder.

“Good,” he said with a chuckle. “So come on, ‘fess up. What have you done with me that you didn’t enjoy?”

“Marathon sessions of Resident Evil.”

He leaned away in mock horror. “Oh, Frankie, say it isn’t so. We spent hours doing that.”

“I know,” I said, biting my lip. “Whole weekends, sometimes for twenty-four hours straight, all four of you slaughtering zombies.”

“Hey, you helped slaughter some.”

“I did.” Truth be told, I’d liked it in the beginning. “But I think after hour five hundred and five, I was over it.”

He rubbed his hand against my bare back above the bikini bottoms. “Damn...okay if we’re playing a game to death, tell me.”

“Or I’ll make you go mini-golfing with me.”

He laughed. “Fair deal.”

“What else?” I looped my arms around his neck as I balanced on his thighs. The hot water and Archie were a nice combination.

Keeping one arm around me, he retrieved his wine glass and took a sip before putting it back and offering me mine again. I had to loosen one arm to take it. It was colder than the water we were in and really sweet.

“You want to sit here and discuss all the things we don’t like doing that we do with each other?”

“Or things we don’t like about the other.”

“Oh no, no, no, Little Blonde Riding Hood, down that path lies danger and wolves dressed up like understanding.”

I giggled. “Seriously?”

“Um?” He raised his eyebrows and looked at me askance. “Seriously. I’d rather talk about all the things we *like* about each other.”

Licking my lips, I pretended to give it some thought. “I really like that you don’t look down on me or any of us really.”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Archie—you have money. Lots of it. You’ve traveled. You drive a Ferrari. I live in an apartment with my mom and work twenty-four to thirty hours a week so I can save up for college. We come from two different worlds, but you never look down on me or any of us. You never have.”

“Okay, so you like that I’m not an asshole. Got it.” He made a face and I grinned.

“Your turn.”

“I like that you’re Frankie. You looked at me on the first day of high school, when I didn’t know anyone and said, ‘Hi, I’m Frankie. You can sit with me if you want. My friends will be here in a minute.’” With care, he took the wine glass from my hand and set it back on the side before lifting my hand back to his shoulders and I looped both arms around his neck again. “I went from being the *new* kid to one of the guys in the space of a day because you made room for me. I got great new friends, people who didn’t care about my name or my family or my money. For some weird reason, they just liked me.”

My heart twisted.

“You, Frankie Curtis, are one of the best things to ever happen to me.”

Okay. “I can’t top that. You guys—I’ve known Coop and Jake forever, but you and Ian, you’re my guys, too. I missed you guys this summer.”

“Well don’t be a dope again,” he chastised. “I couldn’t figure out what we’d done wrong. You were so...distant at Bubba’s party, and then you just disappeared again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you—Frankie, do you understand why we made you untouchable? Why Jake popped that guy? Why I basically tried to dominate your time so the others would back off?”

“Well, you said it was because you thought I didn’t want to date.” They’d all said that. I never took any offers, so they didn’t want anyone foisting themselves on me.

“Yeah, you didn’t seem to want to date. You blew us off when we flirted, and I took you out every weekend six weekends in a row, and you didn’t seem like you were interested. At all. You were a buddy. Then... I asked out Pris—Pam—some chick with a P in her name.”

“It was Christine,” I reminded him, and he blinked.

“No P?”

“No, P is Patty, your most recent girl.”

He grimaced. “You sure it wasn’t a p? And you know what, ignore that. That’s not the point. She gave me all the signals back, so I asked her out, and she said yes. When I told you I had date, do you remember what you said?”

I frowned; the words didn’t immediately leap to mind. “No?”

“You said,” he pitched his voice low as he dropped his hands to my hips and lifted me forward until we were breast to chest. “Archie, that’s awesome. Where are you going? What are you going to do?”

I squinted one eye shut and stared at him. “And that was bad?”

“That told me you weren’t jealous. You seemed genuinely happy for me. Which meant, as much as I might like you, you didn’t like me back. Not the same way. I kinda figured maybe it was one of the other guys, but nope. We flirted, and you would laugh, play it off like it was a joke, and that was that. We didn’t just block other guys from asking you out because we thought you weren’t interested—I just didn’t like the idea of seeing you with someone else.”

The admission seemed to cost him.

“I was jealous that you would look at someone else the way I wanted you to look at me. That makes me selfish, I know...then you started seeing Frenchy...”

“Once, Archie,” I told him.

“Twice. You went to lunch and you were thinking about him and it put this giddy smile on your face. Now some dude is sending you roses. I’m... not going to lie. I hate it, but then you said you wanted to date. When we asked you out, you were *shocked*, and that was an ego check.”

I wanted to hide my face, but there was nowhere to go. We were too close.

“So you want to date the guys? Fine. I don’t have to like it. At least I know they’re not going to be too stupid with you. But I’m a possessive guy, Frankie. Now that I have your attention...you better fucking believe I plan to keep it.”

Those damn tears pricked at my eyes again. The bracelet he’d given me caught some of the lights from above, a soft, muted gold against his neck. He sighed, his body language shifting as the earlier tension eased and his expression gentled.

“I like you, Frankie. A lot. Sex or no sex. I have liked you for a long time.” Then he licked his lips. “But God I hope you say yes to sex whether it’s tonight or not.”

I laughed, because—Archie. He took my breath away. He kissed me, slow and warm, coaxing noises from me with every catch of our mouths, every touch of his tongue.

A low sigh, a gasp, and when he deepened the kiss, he flattened one hand against my shoulder blades and there was no room between us, no air. The contact of my breasts to his chest had me moaning. I swore my bones were melting and the temperature in the hot tub climbed.

He eased back from the kiss a moment, both of us panting. The rush of his breath against my lips just made me hungrier. Then he kissed me again, a little more luxuriously, wet and deep as he slid his free hand down my back and dipped it below the negligible scrap of cloth that served as the bikini bottoms.

I lost track of how long we kissed, but he shifted the angle. Sometimes slow and deep, then harder and faster as he

squeezed my ass and I rubbed against his crotch. The earlier need flamed hotter and higher.

“Tell me no,” Archie whispered, in between kisses. “Tell me no, and we’ll stop.”

I did not want to tell him no. I wanted.

There was no object to that sentence, I just wanted. Archie tasted good. He wanted me. He’d wanted me for so long, and I hadn’t known.

“I didn’t know,” I promised him each time he released my lips. “I didn’t know how you felt.”

“I know,” he soothed then sucked on my lower lip before releasing it to stare at me. “I know you didn’t. I want you so badly right now, Frankie. Tell me no and I’ll stop.”

I wasn’t afraid. I’d been terrified earlier, but he was right. We’d been friends for years, and I’d always cared about them, cared about *him*. The fact he wanted *me*, that they all did, it was heady and powerful stuff. Being held and cherished, being needed?

I was here and so was he.

“Frankie?”

But I had to bring Mathieu to the party the next day. Digging my fingers into his shoulders, I tried to catch my breath. “Yes.”

He raised his eyebrows, shock etched into his expression. “Yes, you’re going to tell me no, or yes I can take you upstairs and kiss every inch of you?”

Trepidation wiggled through me. We were crossing that line. Once I was over it there was no going back. “Do you have condoms?”

“I have condoms,” he confirmed.

“You’ll wear one?”

“Yes.”

Hope flared in his expression and that nudged me the last millimeter over.

“Then yes, Archie. I want to go upstairs and kiss every inch of you, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BOOM

*M*y lips tingled from the kiss he'd given me when I said yes. The kiss he continued to give me. Interspersing sharp bites with short licks as he devoured me. His damp hands on my face kept me focused on him, how his breath teased me and how he stroked my tongue. The rigid line of muscle along his shoulders flexed as we moved together.

When he finally let me up for air, I couldn't catch my breath. Archie smiled, stroking his thumb down my cheek and then he whispered kisses against my lips before mouthing a gentle pass to my ear. The scrape of his teeth against my earlobe had me clenching my thighs against his and digging my fingers into his shoulders.

"I have to ask you a question, babe," he whispered.

Drunk on him, I slid my fingers against his throat. The rapid beat of his pulse fluttering beneath my fingers was heady stuff. "Hmmm?"

"No details, just yes or no..." The soothing croon stroked over my senses. I loved the sound of his voice like this. "First time?"

No details? I tried to unstick the tangle of thoughts and then leaned back to look at him. The intensity in his expression made me want to kiss him again. His cleverness and intelligence all focused on me. Not my first time making out or getting off...no those went to Ian and then Jake respectively, but the rest? "Yes."

“Okay,” he whispered, gripping my nape as he sucked in a deep breath.

“Bad?” If I’d thought he seemed intense before, it had nothing on the way a muscle in his jaw ticked or how his nostrils flared.

“No,” he assured me, squeezing my nape gently. “Babe, nothing about you is bad. Just need to make sure I get my head in the right space to not lose my mind because I’ve been thinking about this for four years.”

Heat swept through me, and I leaned in to nuzzle his jaw. His pulse leapt and I had to smile against his cheek, before pressing another kiss. “Just tell me if I do something wrong.”

Rich, warm laughter rolled over me. “I’m going to make it good for you...trust me?”

He’d already made it good for me. “Yes,” I whispered. “But we have to get out of the tub to go upstairs...”

“Yeah,” he groaned. “That means I have to let you go.”

We clung together like that, and then he shifted and his mouth was on mine again. This kiss was slower, gentler, and it soothed almost as much as his croon had. The crashing tempo of my heart slowed. When he stood abruptly and carried me up with him, I had to lock my thighs to his hips.

A startled laugh escaped as he climbed out of the hot tub. I held on tighter, but not once did I slip.

“Well,” he murmured when we stood beside the hot tub. “Look at that, I didn’t have to let you go after all.” Thunder rumbled like bowling pins colliding and crashing. Lightning flashed and the misting rain changed to a sudden downpour.

I lifted my head to look out at the curtain of rain falling. Archie nipped at my jaw, pulling my attention back to him.

“What are you thinking about?” He asked as he set me down like I was something fragile. He snagged a towel from the cabinet and then began drying me off, swift and efficient, and the soft roughness of the towel on my skin had me

shifting. Especially when he lingered over my breasts then down my belly to my hips.

“That I’m really glad it rained...”

On one knee, he toweled off my legs, his hand hesitating right between my thighs and then he grinned. “Me too.” Then he pressed his lips to one of my thighs and I shuddered. He kissed the other one and, despite the chill in the damp breeze, I was burning.

When he pressed a kiss to my abdomen just above the line of the bikini, I sucked in a breath. Was he going to right here?

His dark eyes gleamed and held a smile as he rose and toweled himself off with a couple of careless rubs. Done, he tossed it aside then picked up our wine glasses. “To us?”

When we clinked them together, I drained the glass as he drained his and we never once looked away. The air seemed to vibrate even as my pulse slowed. Excited. Wound up. Soothed. One of those things was not like the other. He left the wine glasses on the table, then caught my hand and led me back inside.

Words were lost as he led me back into the house. We followed the quiet hallway to the stairs and then climbed them, hand in hand. At the top of the stairs, he paused for a moment, then kissed my collarbone and then my neck, his breath rushing over my skin. The air conditioning was glorious against my overheated body.

In his bedroom, he didn’t slow, walking us straight into his bathroom. He let go of my hand, and then stripped off his swim trunks and... all the moisture in my mouth fled. He was beautiful. His cock was long, thick, and had just a hint of a curve to it. The tip was shiny, and swollen. As he switched on the water in the shower, I bit my lip. Would it be as hot and smooth?

“C’mere,” he murmured, and I dragged my gaze up to find him watching me with an adorable smirk. When I narrowed the distance, he trailed his fingers up my arm to the strap of the bikini top. “May I?”

Gut clenching, I nodded.

With care, he tugged the bow free, letting the pair of straps fall before he slid his hand to the back and tugged the bow there. The scrap of cloth fell away and leaving my chest bare. Archie's eyes never shifted, his gaze pinning mine as he trailed his touch to my hips. Two light tugs and the bottoms were gone, too.

The nerves chose that moment to hit, but Archie tilted his head and ran his gaze over me from head to toe and then zeroed in on my eyes again. "You're gorgeous."

Heat swept over my cheeks, and then we were kissing. I had no idea who moved first, just that his mouth locked on mine. Steam filled the air around us, but I barely noticed it. His cock strained against my belly and left a little smear of dampness as he coaxed my tongue to stroke against his.

The weight of his fingers pressing against my hips kept me from grinding, even if everything in me just wanted to rub against him. His chest against my nipples was a delightful torture. A moan clawed up my throat when he pulled back.

"You're killing me," he managed, his voice thicker than normal. "Rinse off first. Chlorine tastes like crap. Then we're going to do this in a bed, where you can be comfortable, and I can play with you."

A quiver raced through me. The way he looked at me, there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to duck away to—not that I wanted to do either of those things. He kissed me again, just as slow as before.

"C'mon," he whispered. "Shower. Then we'll play. I am going to make this so good for you."

How the hell did I tell him he already had even though he hadn't really touched me yet? The hot water was a shock on my skin and a gasp slipped out before I could stop it. Archie ran his hands over me, following the sluicing water. Lingering on my breasts, he rubbed his calloused palms against them.

Back arching, I mirrored his example, caressing his shoulders, then his chest. The muscles in his arms flexed when

I glided over them and his abdomen tightened as I slid my fingers down to his groin.

“You touch me and I’m going to come right here,” he warned.

I really wanted to see that. I wanted to lick him and taste. “I want to touch you.”

“You can touch me, babe,” he said, drawing us back from the water. “I don’t think I’ll have any problem getting it up again.”

“In here or...do you want to wait for the bed so I can make it good for you, too? I’ve never kissed someone’s cock before, but I think I can figure it out.”

Releasing a ragged groan, he pinched one of my nipples. The sharp tug enough to send a sting of pain through me at the same time as it made my pussy slick and soft.

“Fuck me,” he exhaled. “That mouth on me, and I’m definitely done for...but whatever you want. This is about you...”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I told him then pressed a kiss to his pec.

“Yeah? Fuck fair.” He shut off the water and then he was crowding me right up to the tile as his mouth claimed mine. Then he dragged his lips down to press against the hollow of my throat. “Towels. Dry. Bed. Now.”

The growl did something entirely. When he lifted his head, I couldn’t see the color of his eyes for the way his pupils blotted them out. He thrust a towel in my hands, then gave my nipple another pinch. The jolt got me moving and I stared at him as we stepped out of the stall. I made two swipes with the towel, basking in the way he looked at me before he yanked the towel and pulled me to him. Then our mouths were fused, and we were moving. Somehow, we got across the room to the steps leading up to his bed and he lifted me.

The sheets were cool against my back when we landed and then Archie was leaning over me. “Tell me what you want, Frankie.” It wasn’t a request.

Licking my lips, I said, “I want everything. I want you.”

I did, I wanted it all.

“Tell me...”

He wanted specifics. *Okay.*

“I want to feel you touching me. I want to touch you. I want to feel your mouth on me. I want to taste you. I—” He cut me off with his mouth as he thrust his tongue in to duel with mine. The callouses on his palms were rough and gentle at the same time as he ran them over me. When he abandoned my mouth and locked his lips around a nipple, I arched up off the bed. Taut little kittenish licks strained me before he did a hard suck that sent a pulse straight to my pussy.

His cock brushed against my thigh, another smear of dampness. I dug my fingers into his hair, then down to his shoulders. Anywhere I could reach. Archie moved from one breast to the other until I was writhing. When he kissed down my belly, I jolted. Was he going...?

Pressing my thighs apart, he paused to look at me. I froze. The way his expression shifted, the wonder and the heat, did all kinds of wild things to my system.

His nostrils flared and his reactions captivated me as he eased my right leg up over his shoulder and then shifted his gaze to stare up at me. “You smell...amazing.”

I swore my eyes had to have turned into saucers even as the air backed up in my lungs.

“That taste you gave me earlier?” The eddies of his breath against my pussy made me ache. I wanted to lift my hips, but he had a firm grip on them and I wasn’t going anywhere. Being held still sent off little rockets of desire through my system. I had no idea how nice that could feel. I wanted to reach for him, but I had fisted the sheets. “So good. So good. Now I’m going to dine on you—this is my dessert.”

Not looking away, he licked me from entrance to clit. Transfixed, I stared at him as he nuzzled and kissed and sucked. My thoughts scattered, there was so much I wanted to

do, and it was everything I could to hold on as he thrust his tongue into me.

My head fell back, and I yanked at the sheets as he worked his way back to my clit. I swore he said something, but I couldn't hear it past the need unspooling rapidly. The moment he sucked my clit against his teeth, I arched. My legs went taut and, if not for his angle, I think I might have squeezed his head.

He didn't let up, the pressure just increased, and I came with a sob. The orgasm hit me fast, I couldn't see as I thrashed. But Archie wasn't done. He kept licking, sucking, and nipping and I came again.

Tears slipped out of my eyes, and I beat my fists on the bed. He eased off as the quaking shook me. He turned his face against the inside of my thigh and the hot pull of his mouth against the skin there. It sent a spike through me as he nuzzled there for a long moment, then he turned and did the same to my other thigh.

Shudders rocked up my sides and then he pressed a kiss my pussy, another lick and press to the sensitive flesh. The weight of him shifted and then he was kissing me, I could taste myself on him and maybe that should have been a turn off, but I clung to him. The faintly musky flavor mingled with something that was all Archie along with hints of chocolate and the wine.

Absolutely blitzed for him, I dug my fingers into his back. Pleasure collided with need as it barreled headlong into want. As good as I felt, I *wanted* more. Lifting his head, he cupped my face and stroked away the tears.

“Frankie,” he whispered. “C’mon, Frankie, open your eyes. That’s it, open your eyes.”

Dazed, I stared up at him.

“There she is. You still with me?”

I nodded slowly and he smiled.

“Good girl, sweet girl... you’re okay.” He ran his hand down my face to my throat and then over my chest. “Tell me

you're okay."

It was not an order I could refuse. "I'm okay." My voice was a croak, but he pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

"There she is," he repeated. "Sweet girl. Sexy girl. I'm going to make this good for you...we're going to go slow. Yeah? Tell me you understand."

I nodded.

"Tell me," he said, cupping my jaw as he studied me. What did he see? I had no idea. My arms were like rubber, but I got them to work and I slid a hand into his hair.

"I understand, but...I need..." I shifted against the bed and he nodded, a sudden smile lighting his face.

"God, you have no idea, babe, how much I need you, too. But slow..." He eased away. I made a complaining noise and tried to follow, but he flattened a hand against my chest, just below a breast. "Stay there, I'll be right with you, I promise..."

He leaned over the side of his bed and yanked a drawer out with a bang. I tracked his motion and caught the glint of the light on foil. *Oh... the condom.*

I smiled. "You remembered..."

"Of course I did," he said, eyeing me as he sat up, still kneeling between my legs. The foil tore and then he was rolling it on. I hadn't gotten to taste him yet. Or really play with him at all. "See something you like?"

At his tease, I grinned. "I see something I'd like to try."

"Oh," he murmured, dropping the spent foil on the nightstand before crawling up to gaze down at me. "You're going to, I promise. Anything you want, you're going to get."

A delicious shudder rocked through my system, and I lifted my knees. Still staring at me, Archie ran his fingers down to my pussy, sliding a finger through the labia and teasing the sensitive flesh. When he eased a finger into me, I lifted my hips.

“Shh,” he whispered. “Slowly.”

I groaned as he worked that finger in and out, then added another.

“It’s going to hurt a little, babe, but only a little, if I can help it.”

“I don’t care,” I admitted. “I just want to feel you.”

“I care,” he declared, then dropped a kiss to one of my breasts, then the other. “I care a lot.”

Sweat beaded along his brow as he added a second finger to the first, and I exhaled a soft moan.

“You’re so hot, Frankie. Hot and wet. So soft. I can’t wait to feel you on my cock...”

There he went again with that illegal mouth of his.

“There are so many ways I want to fuck you,” he continued and added a third finger. A light burn spread through my pussy as he stretched me. I dug my nails into his biceps, as he pinned me in place with his gaze. “I want to feel you come on my cock. I want to feel that wild fluttering you were doing as you squeeze me. I want to roll you over and fuck you from behind. I want to pin you down and eat you out until you can’t walk.”

Another thrust of his fingers and the burn turned into something more as I groaned. That hot spiraling tension had begun to coil again.

“I want you to ride me,” he continued, a devilish grin on his face. “I want to see your tits bounce as you take me.” Kissing me once, he slid his fingers out and lifted them to his lips. He licked one clean and then held the other two down to me. “Taste.”

I opened my lips, and he slid them inside. I sucked the juices off them as his eyes darkened and a half-uttered, “fuck,” escaped. As I swirled my tongue around his fingers, he groaned. “I want to feel your mouth on me, and I want to come between those puffy, swollen lips.”

The image sent another pulse through me. Could a person orgasm from dirty talk alone? Archie tugged his fingers free then he moved sitting up to adjust my hips, he gripped his cock and began to run it against my labia, his expression strained.

On my elbows, I leaned up to watch. Heat flashed over me. Not in embarrassment or shyness but wanting. “Archie...” Every stroke had him bumping against my clit but he kept going, slicking himself up until the condom was shiny as he flexed his fist around himself.

Then his hot gaze met mine. “Yes?”

Oh... I melted. Even after all that, even when I was half-crazy for it, he was thinking. “Yes,” I told him. He angled himself and began to press inside of me. Fuck, this was so much more than the burn of his fingers. The head pressed deeper and he shifted, catching my hands in his as our fingers threaded together.

Inch-by-inch, he eased forward, the strain popping a vein on the side of his neck as he gritted his teeth. “So hot... so fucking hot...”

The burn of stretching around him increased and then he shifted forward and sank into me. The pain was there, sharp, and bright and I couldn’t breathe as he pushed the oxygen from lungs. Too much, so big. So full.

One drugging kiss after another brought me back down as we lay there. I dug my fingernails into the backs of his hands, but he didn’t let go and then the burn eased. My sigh between kisses had him lifting his head. “Talk to me.”

Was he serious?

“C’mon, Frankie, open those eyes.”

Had they closed?

I pried them open and a tear slipped down my cheek. He caught the drop with his lips, then kissed the corners of my eyes. “Still hurt?”

I shook my head.

“Talk to me, use your words.”

“Why?” I groaned. I was so full, impaled on his cock and desperate for him to do something.

“I have to know you’re okay. I want to fuck you so badly right now. When I start moving, I’m going to fuck you right through this mattress, so I have to know.”

“I’m fine,” I almost yelled. God, couldn’t he feel it? Everything was so tight and unbearable and stretched. “Move. Please?”

“Oh yeah.”

He eased back and then thrust in again. The look of wonder on his face stunned me. When he spread his knees, the soft hairs on his legs rubbed against my inner thighs and he kissed me as he filled me again. Hot and heavy, he filled me up.

“Frankie,” he said, strained with hints of delight. Whenever he pulled out it was a loss and when he thrust in, I arched my back and clenched around him, there. *Just stay right there.*

The drag and pull rocked me. He kept my hands pinned as he resumed one bruising kiss after another. His hips pumped, and I lifted my legs to wrap them around his hips. The shift in the angle had him pushing deeper and sparks scraped through me with every pound of his cock. I think I screamed as the earlier tension stretched tight and I fought to match his rhythm.

He found the perfect pace. Every push—there just weren’t words for it. I lost myself in the slide of sweat and skin. The noises he made as he kissed me. The noises *I* made. The spiraling tautness shrank tighter and tighter. Trapped, pinned, and jolted by his every thrust, I held on desperately. There was a blank, physical delight in him fucking me. He’d promised we’d burn through the mattress, and I held on as he made good on his word.

The thrusts grew faster, deeper, and bliss exploded through my system as his hips stuttered. I squeezed tight and the feel of

him pulsing shot through me even as he broke the kiss and let out a shout.

We hung there forever, his hips twitching against mine as aftershocks rocked through us. Laughter swelled up and I giggled. The sound pulled Archie's attention and he lifted his head, carefully flexing his hands to ease their grip on mine. There was a pull across my shoulders, but I didn't care. When he looked down at me, he wore a wrecked expression.

"My beautiful girl," he crooned. "So fucking beautiful and sweet." The warm voice, hoarse and gentle, wrapped around my thoughts as he released my hands and then buried his face against my throat. The hotness of his breath, the frequency of his pants. "So good to me. So fucking good. Your pussy feels amazing on my cock and watching you come is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

I floated, caring for nothing but the feel of him against me and the weight of him covering me.

So good.

I don't know how long I lay there before he dragged himself up. I moaned at the loss and he pressed fingers to my cheek. "Shh, I'll be right back."

I ached a little, but the floating feeling was still there. Water came on in the bathroom, but I didn't want to move. A moment later, the bed dipped, and Archie leaned down to nuzzle another kiss against my mouth. "Frankie... open your eyes, sweetheart. C'mon, open them up."

I gazed up at him. He brushed his hand down my face and then held up water. The glass looked amazing particularly with how dry my mouth was. Pushing myself up to sit, I let out a little wince. Not terrible, but everything ached now. My arms. My hands. My legs. My pussy. A good ache, but still aching.

He held the glass steady when my hand shook, and I took a long drink aware of his watchful gaze. After I lowered it, he took a deep drink and then set the glass on the side of the bed. Nudging me back, he crawled in and pulled the blankets

around us as he spooned right up to my back. Arms around me, he pressed a kiss to my nape.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

A laugh bubbled up through me. “I’m pretty sure I should be saying that.”

His chuckle teased at me. “You’re welcome, then.” He kept running his nose against my skin. It tickled, and at the same time, it was soothing. Just like his hand on my hip and over my thigh. He’d curled an arm around my shoulders, too, keeping me close.

“This is nice,” I admitted.

“Yeah,” he said, a wondering note there. “It is.”

My eyelids were heavy, but I didn’t quite want to go to sleep. Not while I was floating. I didn’t even know what time it was. I didn’t care except...

“I don’t know if I can sleep over,” I admitted.

“No?” The disappointment in his voice tugged at me. “Jeremy promised you French toast.”

I giggled, then kissed his arm before rubbing my cheek against his biceps. “I know, but I have to work tomorrow, and I have to feed the cats.”

“Call out sick. We can go over early and feed the cats. Then we can spend the day together.”

I groaned, ‘cause that sounded really nice. “I wish I could.”

“You can,” he whispered. “You can totally do it.”

Wiggling, I shifted until he loosened his hold so I could roll over. I slid one leg between his and propped myself against his chest. This was better than nice. We hadn’t turned off the bedroom lights, but they’d dimmed at some point. Archie had reached up and loosened my hair, then ran his fingers through it.

“I can’t,” I told him. “Not this time. But...” I pressed a finger to his lips when he would have complained. “I’ll ask

Marsha for Sunday off, since you wanted us all to sleep over tomorrow night.”

He made a face.

“You don’t want me to take Sunday off?”

“No that’s fine, I like that idea, but I have to share you tomorrow night. The guys will all be here. Unless we sneak out of the pool house and come up here.”

I laughed. “Well, I don’t know about that, but I still have to work, and I still have to pick up Mathieu tomorrow.”

His expression shifted.

“Archie, I’m...”

“No,” he said, silencing me with a finger. “We can talk about anything, but not him. Not right now, and not here.”

I nipped his finger.

Then he said, “Please.”

Fine. Mathieu wasn’t important. We could talk about it tomorrow. Honestly, I just wanted to be with Archie right now.

“Okay,” I said, leaning up to press kisses to his jaw. He gathered my hair up in one fist and then pulled me until our mouths could meet. “Okay,” I whispered again between kisses. These weren’t anxious, desperate kisses, but soothing and sweet.

“Sleep for a little while,” Archie said. “I’ll drive you home a little later. I just want to lay here with you. Hold you.”

It was almost impossible to tell him no when he was in this soft, playful mood and we were wrapped together. “Set an alarm?” Otherwise, we’d both end up sleeping all night. “Then we can still wake up together.”

A compromise. Archie kissed the tip of my nose and then nudged me over before he glanced around and then groaned. “Yeah, sec.” He slipped out of the bed and padded, nude over to where he’d left his phone on the dresser. Rising up on one elbow, I watched him go and enjoyed the way the muscles pulled across his ass and legs.

He glanced over at me and smirked. “Happy with your purchase?”

“Umm-hmm.”

With a laugh, he glanced at the phone and then raised his brows.

“Something wrong?”

“No,” he said, swiping the screen. “There we go. Alarm set.” He showed me the phone. It was almost midnight.

It was way later than I thought. He slid back into the bed with me and put the phone on the nightstand.

“I set the alarm for five,” he promised, then kissed my shoulder. “Because I’m going for gold standard boyfriend points. I’ll even buy you Starbucks on the way back to your place, since you’re missing French toast.”

I grinned as he turned off the lights and then pulled me back to snuggle against his chest. Drawing a little circle around one of his nipples, I said, “We can always take a nap at my place after I feed the cats and before I go to work.”

“Deal.” Squeezing my shoulder, he pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “You still doing okay?”

I thought about it and then nodded. “Better. I still feel floaty.”

“*Good.*”

Grinning against his chest, I said, “Though it occurs to me, you’re going to have a hard time topping this date next Friday.”

His chest rumbled under my cheek. “Challenge accepted.”

Then we were both laughing before he dragged me up for another kiss. I didn’t know if I would be able to go to sleep, but curled up around Archie was a great place to be while I figured it out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CRASH

I planned to ride Friday's floaty high all day Saturday. As promised, Archie's alarm went off at five, and we both stumbled out of bed. I borrowed a t-shirt and sweatpants rather than putting my dress back on. I had to find my little clutch—I'd left it in the guest room—for my wallet, keys, and phone.

The guys had blown my phone up. There were easily a dozen different messages from each of them. Archie just smirked, and gave me a long, very thorough kiss before we headed out to his car. The space next to his car was empty, but maybe Jeremy had early morning errands. Archie made a face, but he didn't comment.

On the way back to my place, we got coffee. The cats were vocal in their displeasure at my absence. Luckily—for once I was glad to see it—my mom's car was not in its spot. She hadn't been there in days. Jake hadn't been wrong when he said we were more like roommates.

Once the cats were fed, I ran the trash out—including the bag I'd stuffed under the sink after cleaning the litter box—then sipped my coffee while I sorted my laundry. Technically, I should do it today because chances were I'd be at Archie's in the morning.

I wrestled with the idea, but Archie tugged me back to my bed and wrapped around me. "Sleep," he insisted. "At least a couple more hours."

It wasn't hard to convince me. It was harder to eel out from under him when I woke up the next time. Lying there, he looked so damn sweet. With morning stubble and disheveled hair, he looked like he belonged sprawled on my pillows. Tiddles seemed to think so, because he'd claimed a spot on his chest while Tory looked up from between his legs, her wide blue eyes inquisitive.

I'd never wanted to move less than I had right then, but I forced my ass up and down the hall to the shower. I was still a little sore and achy this morning. The shower helped, and I settled for some leave-in conditioner and toweling my hair. I had time for it to dry before I went to work, and the curls would be better than trying to flatten it today.

Archie's eyes were open when I walked back into the bedroom. I'd taken panties and a bra with me. He grinned, his eyes still sleepy. "Did you know your bed smells like you?"

"Yours smells like you."

"But this is nicer," he said with a wave, then leaned up on an elbow to eye me appreciatively. "You look...wow."

"I'm not even dressed yet."

"Exactly. Don't get dressed, come back to bed instead. Be bad, Frankie, come be bad with me."

"I was bad with you," I reminded him.

"Yeah..." Another sigh. "That was *good*." The playful side of Archie was always fun. Still, if he kept looking me like that, I'd be in damp panties all day, and I wanted to cling to the floaty feeling.

Moving to the dresser, I pulled out the jeans and uniform shirt for work.

"By the way," I told him over my shoulder. "I found your hickeys. Very nice."

One on each of my thighs, just on the inside of them.

His smug smile grew. "I promised you they'd be easy to hide." Heat flash fired through me at the promise in his eyes.

Compared to Jake and Coop's presents, these would be easy to hide right up until I was in a suit that night. Speaking of suits, I buttoned the jeans and then searched through my drawers. A black one piece. A deep blue patterned one piece. Where was it? The same shopping trip I'd bought that dress on, I'd found a suit and got it on an impulse. Not that I expected to ever wear it, but it was pretty.

I found it in the bottom of the drawer, tags still on. I pulled it out and studied it. It was perfect for my boobs, the top had a straight neckline, adjustable crisscross spaghetti straps, a strappy, crisscross under-bust band and a double back hook closure. The bottoms cut high on the hips but gave full bottom coverage and when I'd tried it on, I'd actually liked the way it made my ass look.

"That's new," Archie commented, eyeing the bikini in my hand.

"Yeah, I got it last spring. Wasn't sure if I'd ever wear it." I didn't usually go for bikinis. It was a lot of skin to show. But... I wanted my own suit on tonight. And the guys would all be there. For once, I kind of wanted to show off.

"Wearing it tonight?" There was a guarded note in his voice, and I glanced over to meet his gaze. He wasn't looking at me, but at the suit and then over at the roses.

Oh.

"Not for them," I told him. "I'd be wearing it for you guys...and because I want to."

Archie sat up and raked a hand through his hair. "Do me a favor?"

"What?" I leaned against the dresser.

"Don't let any dude corner you tonight, and yeah, I know you're coming with Frenchy," he said, raising his hand as if to ward off my argument. "But just stay out where we can see you."

"And if Ian or Jake or..."

“They’re fine,” Archie said, but the faint twist of his mouth decried that statement. “I’d still rather you only disappeared at my place to make out with *me*, but I know the guys aren’t going to hurt you. I don’t know Frenchy, and I don’t know Mr. Thorns over there.”

Mister Thorns? I bit my lip. “Archie, Mathieu and I...”

He grimaced, bracing for it. “I’m taking him because I asked him before—all of this. I do like him. He’s a great guy...”

His eyes darkened.

“But,” I stressed crossing over to join him on the bed. “I also told him I wouldn’t be seeing him after tonight. I like him—a lot. But not like I like you guys and...”

“Seriously?” Relief swamped his features. He looped his arms around me and dragged me in for a kiss. When he finally let me up for air, my heart was pounding, and I had to smile at the way he searched my face.

“Seriously. But he’s still the new guy right now and...”

“You never abandon the new guy,” Archie murmured, wonder in his tone. “You never abandoned me.”

I had. I’d done it over the summer. “That’s not totally true. I wanted to tell you last night, but you didn’t want me to talk about him.”

“Yeah, next time just hit me in the head and tell me to shut the fuck up.” Archie laughed. “Fuck that’s a relief. We can call off the plan now.”

Wait... “What?”

His expression shifted, his lips compressing.

“What plan, Archie?” Irritation scraped through the fog of desire, and I pulled away a little to study him. “What were you guys going to do?”

Shoulders drooping, he caught my hands and plucked the suit out of them. “Don’t get mad.”

“Yeah, it’s a little late for that. What were you guys planning?”

“Not so much planning as we were going to set him up with a couple of girls that we know are... let’s say more into free love.”

My stomach bottomed out, and I shook my head. Tugging my hands out of his, I shoved off the bed. “You wanted to set him up, so I’d see him making out with someone else.”

“Yeah, we’re assholes. But we didn’t want you seeing him, and if he went for the bait, then he sure as shit didn’t need to be seeing you.” He pushed the covers back and slid off to follow me. “Frankie...”

“Don’t,” I told him and shook my head. “That—that’s a shitty thing to do.”

“Protect you? I think not.” He blew out a breath. “Frankie, I wasn’t going to shove some girl on his dick. I was just going to give him the opportunity.”

“Make sure I saw it?” I raised my eyebrows. “Make sure I knew that, once again, I wasn’t good enough?”

“No,” he said. “No, it’s—fuck. He’s *not* good enough.”

“You don’t even know him.” Ice shivered up my spine. “I can’t believe you guys. All of you? This is what you were all planning *after* I told you how making me untouchable felt?”

“It’s what I was planning because I’m going to choose you first no matter what,” Archie said. “Like I said, if the guy had the opportunity and he took it, it was on him...”

“It doesn’t matter if I get hurt in the process?”

He sighed. “Of course that matters... c’mon, Frankie...”

“No, I think you need to go home. I have to finish getting ready for work and this goes a lot better if I’m not crying while I do it.”

“Frankie...” But when he tried to take my arm, I pulled it away.

“Archie, just go.”

“I don’t want to leave it like this.”

“Well, we don’t always get what we want.” God knew, I didn’t want to leave it like this, but right now... The ache in the pit of my stomach expanded. My lips still tingled from where he’d kissed me, and I was painfully aware of every place on my body he’d touched. “I need a bit.”

“Frankie, I’m sorry,” he said, exhaling.

“You’re sorry, I know,” I corrected him. “You’re sorry it pisses me off, but you’re not sorry about the plan.”

The plan.

Him. Jake. Coop. God... and Ian.

So much for actually hearing me. “Please, just go.”

“Fine, but I’m not out. I still want to see you. *I’m* still crazy about you, and I meant every word I said last night. I don’t want to see you with other guys.” He scooped up the bracelet he’d given me the night before from the dresser and fastened on my wrist while I stared at him. “This? This still means something.”

He pressed his thumb against my palm, but when he leaned in, I turned my face away. That hurt almost as much as their plans.

With a sigh, he let me go and then grabbed his keys, phone, and wallet. After stuffing them in his pockets, he said, “I’ll see you tonight.”

It sounded more like a request than an order, but I just shrugged. I had no idea whether I’d be up for going to the party or not. Not after...

“I’ll come and pick you up myself,” Archie said from the doorway. “I’ll even give Frenchy a ride, but I want you there, Frankie.”

A dozen responses danced across my tongue, but I settled for, “I have to go to work. I’ll see how I feel afterward.”

I’d been looking forward to the party. I’d... yeah, I couldn’t think about this right now. Archie’s stricken

expression haunted me long after I shut the kitchen door behind him and leaned against it fighting tears. How had the night into the morning taken such a dramatic one-eighty? My phone buzzed away on the dresser when I got back to the bedroom.

When I glanced at it, messages from Jake and Coop were on the screen. It changed to show Ian's pic as the phone began to ring. Disappointment swam through me and I sent the call to voicemail.

How did they all know me so well and then plan something like that?

Just... *how?*

I swiped away the tears and got my room picked up and the bed remade. Then I stared at the roses by the window. What were they planning to do to the poor guy who'd sent me those?

I had to go to the party. I couldn't runaway this time. I promised to take Mathieu but *Mister Thorns* as Archie put it was also planning on being there. Those roses had been a delight this week.

Mind made up, I got my suit together with shorts and the hairband I'd need for that night, then I dragged my hair up and clipped it.

The messages were still waiting for me unread, but I switched over to the message with my mom.

Nothing in the last couple of days.

The trouble was, the people I usually talked to about my problems were the same people I was having the problem with.

Fuck, I need more friends.

Sniffing, I closed my eyes and forced deep breaths. I could do this. Swallowing the pain, I packed it away. Tears weren't going to get me anywhere and a miserable waitress didn't make good tips.

Eight hours of shift in front of me.

Then the party.

Another deep breath.

Tiddles meowed at me, his green eyes knowing, and I smiled at him. “I know, I like them, too, but they shouldn’t have been planning to do that.”

The cat bumped his head against my hand, and I scratched his chin.

“I’ll see you later, baby.” After the party, I’d come back and eat a gallon of ice cream. I’d pick up some from work and bring it home.

I’d more than earned it.

Work was a nightmare, but I pushed through—even when all four of them showed up for lunch. For once, I just traded with Zabra and had her take the table. I didn’t want to talk to them right now and if they couldn’t respect it, then I’d handle it a different way.

They lingered, and while none of them made a scene or tried to call me over, I could feel the weight of their stares. The one time I glanced at the table from the back, Ian was glaring at Archie and Jake. Coop, though, just shook his head, but whatever he said to them didn’t seem to be making it better.

“Everything okay?” Marsha asked me, probably because I was hiding in the back instead of out front where I usually was.

“Yes. No.” I lifted my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

The older woman gave me a gentle smile. “Come take a break—a real one.”

Guilty at being busted for hiding, I trailed after her to her office.

“Sit down. I’ll be right back.” When she returned, she had a couple of cokes and she handed me one with a straw. “Caffeine usually helps, and your eyes are red.”

They were? *Shit*. I’d been determined not to cry.

“I’m sorry, Marsha. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“I’m guessing at least some of that is sitting out there on fourteen?”

Ducking my head, I took a sip of the coke rather than answer.

“That’s what I thought. Those guys come in here often enough. I know you’re all friends, so what’s going on?” Marsha gave me a kind, but firm look. “It’s none of my business, but sometimes venting can help. I’m an ear—and a vault.”

“It’s—I’m just mad at them. It’s not something they did, but what they were planning to do.”

“Okay, what were they planning to do?”

As much as I hated to admit it, I really needed to talk to someone, and she coaxed most of it out of me—including the fact I was dating all of them. I edited some of the details—specifically, the sex-based ones. Marsha listened without comment and her expression remained sympathetic.

“Well, I’m with you. That was a pretty crappy thing to plan,” she said. “But... he told you what they were planning it. That has to count for something.”

“He only told me because I told him that Mathieu and I wouldn’t be dating after this. If I hadn’t said anything, he wouldn’t have, and then—they’d have set it up and...”

“And if the boy—because they are *all* boys—went for it, you would have been humiliated even if you weren’t planning on seeing him anymore.”

I nodded slowly. “Maybe not as much as I would have been when they *started* planning this.”

“You mean before they asked you out.” It wasn’t a question. Leaning back in her chair, Marsha tapped her fingers. “Those four don’t mind you seeing anyone else among them, just no one outside of them.”

With a shrug, I said, “I think so. But now I have to wonder—if they were willing to sabotage me to make sure I wouldn’t

see someone not them, what happens when they decide I shouldn't be seeing anyone else in the group? Does it tear apart a friendship we've had forever?"

The more I put that into words, the more I realized we were right back where I'd been at the beginning of the year. Only, now, I knew how they felt, but I was still alone.

"Sweetie," Marsha said, covering my hand. "Three things. First, you can't take responsibility for the choices of others. You value your friendships; you value them as people. This is never a bad thing. They can respect that and show their respect, or you don't need to bother with them at all. They were right—if the guy had gone for it, he didn't deserve you. If they do shit like this, *they* don't deserve you either."

My gut knotted. I'd missed them over the summer, even when I'd been fuming at them. We'd all been making plans and now...

"Second, relationships are complicated, and guys are kind of stupid."

I almost laughed at her bland delivery.

"It sounds like they meant well, but they were also selfish. It's a learning curve... Punishing them is a good idea. Not talking to them drives it home, but don't hold onto it so much it hurts you. Set boundaries, with them and with yourself. Make it clear, then... if they do it again, it's a pattern of behavior, and you'll know whether they're worth it or not. But the most important thing—value *yourself*. They don't define you. You do."

Biting my lip, I nodded. Some of the knots in my gut loosened even if I didn't feel that much better.

"Third, go ahead and take off early. Go home, take a nap, eat something and then make a decision about the party. If it were me? I'd go. I'd show them I am capable of having a good time with or without them. They want to be in your life, then they have to get their shit together."

Marsha stood up, then held out a hand. "Come here."

“What?” I asked as I rose and then suddenly found myself engulfed in a hug.

“You need a mom hug. Just so happens, I’m available.”

The hug was nice, and when I leaned my head against her shoulder, she smoothed a hand over my hair.

“You’re a sharp kid, Frankie. You’re going places. This feels impossible right now, but it gets better. Just give yourself some time to process the initial shock. Maybe it’s not as bad as you thought.”

I laughed some but the hug actually did help. My mom *never* did this. I’d gotten a hug from Ian’s mom once that was a lot like this. Finally, when I pulled back a little Marsha let me go.

“I was going to ask for tomorrow off...”

“Done,” Marsha told me. “I meant it, you go on home. We’ll finish your tables and collect your tips.”

“I don’t like leaving you in a lurch.”

“We’ll be fine,” she said sternly. “Now go on, go home. If you do decide to go to the party, knock their socks off. Make them realize what they’re missing.”

The fact I’d said I was dating all four hadn’t seemed to faze her or her advice.

“Are they still out there?” If they saw me leaving, I’d end up having to deal with them right now.

“Hang on...” She left me in the office. A minute later, she returned and said, “Yes, they are. So, this is what you’re going to do...”

What I did was leave the store through the back entrance while Marsha and Zabra ran interference out front. My car was bracketed by Jake’s SUV and Archie’s car. I made it out to my car without getting caught. On the drive home, I splurged on a burger, fries, and a shake. I hadn’t eaten breakfast. I hadn’t even thought about it.

At home, I made it up the stairs and into my apartment without being intercepted. It was still early.

The messages waited for me unread, and I stared at the red number on the corner indicating how many. There were some voicemails, too. Since I'd just seen all four of them, I knew they were fine, so it wasn't a tonsils situation, but I still looked...

One of the calls was from Mathieu.

I pressed play on his message after I finished my food.

"Francesca," he said, a hint of a smile in his voice. "I apologize for the last minute nature, but I would like to beg off going to the party tonight. Last evening, when I was at a community event, I met someone. She was very sweet and there is a chance to see her again this evening but not at the party. Please forgive me for leaving you dateless. I thought it might also be easier for you. I will see you on Monday. *Au revoir.*"

When the message ended, I fell back on the bed and laughed until I almost cried. It was ironic and sad in the same breath. Putting my phone in *do not disturb*, I curled over onto my side and stuck my head under a pillow. The cats leapt up on the bed one at a time. I didn't know how I did it, but I managed to sleep.

I woke a few hours later, eyes sore and chest aching, but a little clearer. It was almost five. I had a couple of hours before the party. The cats purred around me but leapt eagerly when I padded out to the kitchen to feed them. In the bathroom, I studied my appearance. My hair was disheveled and ruffled, but I didn't feel like showering, so I settled for straightening it.

In the bedroom, I eyed the suit from that morning and ran my fingers against the hickeys on my neck.

But the most important thing—value yourself. They don't define you. You do.

Marsha's words ran through my head.

I bought the bathing suit because I liked how I looked in it. Decision made, I stripped and changed. My borrowed clothes

from Archie sat atop the same laundry that also hid Jake's boxers.

This was about me. Not them.

Once I had the suit on, I pulled on a pair of shorts to cover the bottom. The top would be fine. The skies had cleared, and the temperatures had cooled, but it was hardly cold. Besides, Archie's pool was heated.

Shoes on, I grabbed my phone and looked at all the messages. Tabbing over to the group one we shared, I sent a message.

I'm going to Archie's now. I know it's early, but we should talk. Hopefully, I'll see you there.

Shoving my phone in my pocket with my wallet, I looked at Tiddles who stared at me blissfully from my pillow. "Good idea? Bad idea?"

The cat just gave me a bland look.

Yeah.

I didn't know, either.

Coop wasn't waiting at my car. Hopefully that meant he was already at Archie's or at least with them. A part of me considered going to check his apartment, but I discarded it. Chicken, maybe, but I wanted to talk to all four of them at the same time. Not individually.

We needed to clear this air.

I needed it cleared.

The drive to Archie's went by too fast, even if my nerves ramped the whole way there. Thankfully, I knew the gate code though Jeremy would have buzzed me in if I rang it. I pulled up the drive and parked off to the side. There would be more cars here tonight, and chances were I'd be stuck once they began arriving.

Hopefully, I'd still want to be stuck there.

Fingers crossed.

I rang the bell and Jeremy answered with a smile. “Good evening, Miss Frankie. You’re early.”

“I know, sorry to be a bother.”

“Never a bother. Mr. Archie and the boys are out on the second-floor deck,” he told me as he closed the door after letting me in. “Fair warning, they are in a bad temper and have been arguing for the last couple of hours.”

“Well, hopefully, I can fix that.”

“I wish you good luck, then. Would you like any refreshments to fortify yourself with before tangling with them?”

I laughed. “I’m good. At least right now. I might need to sneak into the liquor later.”

“Duly noted. I did not tell you that Mr. Archie’s father moved the key to the cabinet in the den to the snuff box on the mantle.”

“And I did not hear that.”

We eyed each other in understanding.

“Very good and, again, good luck.”

Worry vied with anxiety as I made my way upstairs. I avoided looking at Archie’s room as I navigated toward the solar doors that opened onto the second-floor deck. I didn’t regret it.

I refused to regret our night.

But I had to focus on right now.

When I let myself out onto the deck, I was suddenly the focus of four very intense gazes and the tension in the air hung heavier than dense humidity.

Archie bounced to his feet followed quickly by the others, and they all spoke at once.

“Frankie, fuck, we were worried...” Archie.

“Are you all right?” Ian.

“You can’t just go off grid like that... you said you wouldn’t.” Jake.

“We were assholes, and you’re right to be mad at us.” Coop.

Even though they spoke over each other, Coop’s statement earned him a glare.

I raised both hands and they quieted. “Guys, I... I need to say something, and I really need you to hear me this time.”

One by one, their expressions sank. Jake’s disappeared behind a frown while disappointment edged Ian’s and Coop’s worry shone in his eyes. Archie, though, Archie’s jaw tightened, and he folded his arms. It was a defense mechanism.

Pushing farther out onto the deck, I walked over to the rail and looked down at the back where the pool and pool house were. There were tables set up and a place for the buffet that would probably be set out when guests began to arrive. Great big half-barrels sat filled with ice and, from there, I could make out the labels of the different canned drinks.

The stereo system, I knew from experience, was wired into several outdoor speakers. There were extra chairs and loungers everywhere. Dragging my gaze away from it, I turned around to face them.

“Archie told me about your plan for Mathieu.” I pressed my tongue against the inside of my cheek. I’d wrestled with how to say this all the way there. Now? Now I just wanted to make it better for them, but Marsha was right. I had to set boundaries, and I had to value myself. “I didn’t deserve that. I *don’t* deserve that treatment from you—from *any* of you.”

“Frankie, we know,” Ian said. “Some of us even tried to tell them no. I wanted no part of it.”

“But you didn’t tell me. You didn’t warn *me*,” I said quietly, and Ian’s shoulders slumped. “You were all arranging it so I would get hurt. It doesn’t matter if I really liked him or not. It doesn’t matter if I told him we were just going to be friends after the party tonight. You were going to humiliate me in front of all the party guests—in front of all the people

you've been telling for years that I was untouchable. Because you didn't want me seeing him. Not because you think he's a bad guy." I said, pinning Jake with a look. "Or because he treated me badly." I stared at Coop. "No," I continued, meeting Ian's gaze. "You said nothing, and you..." I pinned Archie. "Decided that you don't want me seeing others, and that gave you the right to do it. Even if it hurt me."

"I'd never hurt you."

"Too late," I told him and the pain in my chest welled up. "You already did. The hilarity of it is I was already telling him I didn't want to see him like that. Because I like *you*." I sucked in a shaky breath. "I like all of you. I want—wanted to see where this went."

At the word *wanted* Jake's expression darkened.

"And he's not even coming tonight, because he met someone, and he wants to go out with her, and we weren't really dating so—you know what. Cool."

Clenching my hands, I forced my breaths to slow.

"I'm worth a hell of a lot more than you guys humiliating me again. I want to see you, but not at the expense of me. I have *always* supported you...in whatever you wanted to do. This... this plan...this just reinforces you aren't supporting me. That I'm worth what I am to you, not who I am."

Archie flinched, but he glanced away.

"And I'm not doing that. So... I'm going to the party tonight, and I'm going to see about meeting the Thorns person, and I'm going to try and have fun. With all of you or none of you. But you don't get to decide for me. If you do it again..."

Movement in my periphery caught my attention and I glanced.

Then froze.

"Frankie..." Archie's voice shifted, the concern in it inescapable.

There was a couple exiting the pool house. A man and...

“Mom?”

My mom.

Archie’s dad.

They were... kissing. Not a little peck on the cheek, but a full-on, open-mouthed kiss and Archie’s dad had his hands on Mom’s ass.

Mom’s new boyfriend was Archie’s dad? She’d been *here*?

She couldn’t get away, she couldn’t get home, because she’d been with his dad? Had they been *here* the whole time? What about Archie’s mom?

Oh. Fuck.

The pair broke apart, and I recoiled, backing away from the rail because I didn’t want them to see me. I slammed into Archie, who didn’t look surprised, but he did look pissed.

Twisting, I searched Jake’s, Coop’s, and Ian’s expressions. They’d known.

Every single one of them.

Just when I didn’t think it could get any worse.

I had to get out of there.

Frankie and the boys return in *Changes & Chocolates*.

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ABOUT HEATHER LONG

USA Today bestselling author, Heather Long, likes long walks in the park, science fiction, superheroes, Marines, and men who aren't douche bags. Her books are filled with heroes and heroines tangled in romance as hot as Texas summertime. From paranormal historical westerns to contemporary military romance, Heather might switch genres, but one thing is true in all of her stories—her characters drive the books. When she's not wrangling her menagerie of animals, she devotes her time to family and friends she considers family. She believes if you like your heroes so real you could lick the grit off their chest, and your heroines so likable, you're sure you've been friends with women just like them, you'll enjoy her worlds as much as she does.

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