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*Brazen Sisters 3*

# Stroking A Brazen Lust

Rita Sawyer

### **Brazen Sisters 3**

## **Stroking a Brazen Lust**

Francesca Brazen is working the night shift when her brother-in-law's sexy foreman checks into the lodge. She has trouble hiding her interest in him. Can she get involved with a man she doesn't know? After finding him naked in the hall, she's willing to give it a try. A no-strings affair with a guy who will be leaving town in three weeks will be the craziest thing she's ever done.

Hal Cummings checks into the lodge, wanting to do nothing more than spend the next three weeks visiting with his buddies and avoiding his stepmother. He needs a few weeks where he doesn't have to make any decisions. Not hearing his stepmother harp about him settling down and having kids is a big bonus. Meeting Frankie sends that plan straight to hell. Now all he wants to do is spend it in bed with her.

**Genre:** Contemporary

**Length:** 56,740 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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So, please, respect my hard work, and do not pirate my books.

With deep gratitude,

Rita Sawyer

# **DEDICATION**

As always I want to say thank you to my family and friends for their support.

# STROKING A BRAZEN LUST

## *Brazen Sisters 3*

**RITA SAWYER**

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## **Chapter One**

Francesca Brazen hadn't thought twice about throwing her inheritance in with her five sisters. Together they planned to turn their grandfather's old campground into a romantic getaway. If all their plans worked the way they hoped, the investment would yield a huge payoff in the long run.

Besides, it wasn't as if she had any other plans for the money. After all, Frankie and her sisters had never entertained the possibility that their grandfather would leave them each twenty-five thousand dollars. Jeez, no one even knew Gramps had had that kind of cash lying around. Of course they'd expected him to leave at least one of them the lodge. He'd always said he wanted it to stay in the family forever. Frankie thought his adding the clause to his will stipulating all decisions had to be agreed upon by all six of them was a last ditch effort on his part to have some control over them. It ensured they'd all stay involved with the lodge and each other, not that they wouldn't have.

Just to keep the place running was a real family effort. Sure, it was her older sisters, Jessie and Sam, who did the bulk of the work since the rest of them had other jobs, but they all pitched in where they could. Normally, Frankie had no problem doing whatever needed to



be done, but she hated covering the desk at night. It was so boring. Just because she refused to date any of the men who hung around town, all her sisters assumed she wouldn't mind giving up her nights to cover the check-in desk. Man, she was such a sucker too, because she always said yes. Maybe she should take a chance on the next cute guy who asked her out.

There was no shortage of handsome and even sexy guys around, but they all seemed to either treat her like a fragile piece of glass, or they wanted to show her off like they'd made some conquest. She wasn't either one, and she wanted more than that from a guy. She wanted a man to sweep her off her feet. He didn't have to be rough around the edges, but she wanted a manly man. Still, she wanted him to be able to handle himself in a sophisticated situation if she needed him to. What she wanted was a man who wanted her beyond reason. Someone who would let her be the vixen she really wanted to be. Okay, so she'd never shown anyone that side of her, but the right guy would bring it out, she thought with a smile.

"I really appreciate this." Joey grabbed her purse from under the desk.

"I know." Frankie logged into the computer and double-checked the guest list.

"We only have four guests tonight, so it should be a real quiet night." Joey headed for the door at a quick trot.

"Yeah, well, I hope we can't say that in six months. I'm hoping we'll be in full swing for the spring-summer wedding season." Frankie knew that was what they all hoped for.

"This place will be booked solid." Joey gave a quick wave as she went out the doors.

Frankie knew she was right. Their plans were moving right along. They had finalized all the sketches for the remodeling. The architect, who happened to be her brother-in-law, Victor, had finished the plans for remodeling the cabins and lodge. Jessie guaranteed them they'd be breaking ground by the end of the month. Joey had kept a close eye

on the books and given her approval on the time line. Georgie, Joey's identical twin, had been working her magic on some great marketing ideas.

Sam had cooked up some special menus, which her new husband, Trent, who happened to be Victor's brother, took full advantage of. Bobbie had designed a spectacular website. Once the lodge and cabins were done she planned on adding pictures so people would be able to see the true beauty of the buildings and their surroundings. She'd also started training them all on the new software they would use to keep track of reservations and special requests. Frankie had done her part too. She'd been working on the interior designing.

She pulled a stack of magazines and catalogs she been going over from under the counter and moved over to one of the loveseats they had set up for waiting guests. So far, they had decided they wanted each cabin to be intimate and original. Of course, there would be a wild one or two, but basically, she wanted romance and seduction to be the key elements. Just looking at a picture of the whirlpool tub that would be installed in each cabin conjured thoughts about candles and soft music.

She closed her eyes and let the scene take shape in her mind. She pictured herself soaking in the tub filled with silky oil and bubbles. She could almost smell the lavender aroma that would coat the air. The only light would come from the big fat candles placed around the room, and the moonlight from the small window on the wall across from the tub. Suddenly a shadowy figure appeared in her little daydream turning it into a full blown fantasy. He stepped into the room distracting her from her surroundings. He brought with him an intense sensation of anticipation.

He moved into the room like a man intent on achieving a certain goal. He knelt beside the tub, dipping his hand under the bubbles and ran it slowly over her slippery skin. Starting at her foot, he slowly moved his hand inch by inch up her leg to that sensitive spot right

beneath her knee. She opened her legs in an invitation for him to continue his journey.

He stilled his hand, leaned in, and pressed his mouth to hers with expert precision. His tongue slid past her lips, rubbing against hers with a tantalizing friction. Her hand rose and found the heat of his hard chest. He pulled back slowly leaving her wanting much, much more.

“Hello.” A deep voice broke her from her wicked thoughts.

Frankie jumped involuntarily. She opened her eyes and focused in on, what she would have thought was a figment of her imagination. Well over six feet tall, he had dark hair she’d love to tangle her fingers in. Brilliant hazel green eyes, broad shoulders, and a wide chest plastered with a faded black T-shirt completed the sinful picture. She wished she could strip him bare and see if he was as muscular as she thought. For God sakes, she was sitting there devouring him with her eyes.

She quickly got to her feet, straightening her skirt. “Hello. Can I help you?”

“Yeah, I have a reservation for three weeks starting tomorrow, but obviously I’m early.” He flashed her a smile that made her wonder if he had been privy to her thoughts.

“No problem. It’s getting late, and you’re here, so let me check you out. Um...I meant let me get you checked in.” She quickly dashed behind the desk, hoping he hadn’t caught her mortifying blush.

“Great.” He dropped his beat-up duffel bag to the floor.

The sound drew her eyes down. She looked at the green bag for a few seconds before sliding her attention to his scuffed up work boots. Frankie discreetly made her way back up. She took in his long legs and thick thighs. She stalled for a few seconds when she got to the zipper area of his jeans. The whiteness of the seams told her they were close to the point of bursting.

She wondered what it was about this guy that had her body tingling? *Everything!* her mind screamed as she tried to focus on the computer screen.

“Your name?” She looked over at him, wondering how many women got lost in those hazel eyes, especially if they tried counting the golden flakes.

“Hal Bernard.” He reached into his back pocket, making her wish he’d turn around so she could watch.

She recognized the name, but Victor hadn’t mentioned he was so handsome. “Victor’s construction foreman?”

“Yup, that’s me. I’m here to evaluate before we actually get started. And you are?” He held out his credit card and license.

“Francesca Brazen, but you can call me Frankie. I’m one of Victor’s sisters’ in-law.” She offered him a smile.

She took the license and checked out all the pertinent information. Height six feet four inches, weight two hundred and thirty-five pounds, all muscle from what she could see. He was born on June twenty-seventh, a Cancer. He was thirty years old, soon to be thirty-one. She handed the license back, her fingers tingling as they brushed his. Turning away, she grabbed the sheet of paper the printer had spit out.

“Sign here, please.” She handed the sheet to him with a pen.

“You forgot to run this.” He laid the credit card on the counter.

“No, I didn’t. Victor took care of all that.” She slid the card back towards him.

“All right.” He picked up the card and shoved it back in his pocket.

“You’re booked up here in the main building, in room seven, but I could switch you to a cabin if you’d like.” She made the offer knowing she’d be fidgety all night with him right down the hall.

“No thanks, the room will be fine.” His answer wasn’t what she wanted to hear, but she smiled anyway.

Frankie nodded and looked back at the computer. "Okay. Well, you can change your mind any time during your three -week stay. Just let someone know, and we'll take care of it."

He looked over at the row of keys on the wall. "Are we here all alone?"

"Why?" she asked curiously.

"I was just wondering if there are any other guests here, since I might take a quick dip in the lake." He looked toward the big double doors that led to the kitchen and back exit.

"No, we're not alone, but the rest of the guests are in cabins so, I'll lock up in about an hour." She watched him think it over.

"What do mean, lock up?" He turned his attention to the form he signed and slid it across the desk.

"The main building is closed from midnight to six a.m. , but you'll have access to a few vending machines until then. At six a.m. we offer a full breakfast in the dining room." She slid him a printed sheet, pointing to the amenities listed on the right hand side.

"So I have an hour to take a quick swim before you lock up for the night. Do you go home or stay here?" He picked up his duffel and held out his hand, presumably for his key.

"I'll be here." She dropped the key into his hand, unable to hide a smile at her thought of peeking outside to see if she could catch a glimpse of him while he was swimming.

"Would you like me to show you to your room?" she offered as the phone rang.

"No thanks. Sounds like you have work to do." He swung the duffel over his shoulder and headed down the hall.

\* \* \* \*

For the first time since he'd begun doing this six years ago, he actually felt a twinge of anticipation that she might be the one to catch

on. The credit card was real as could be, it just wasn't in his legal name. The license, however, was a total fake.

Hal stopped just outside the door and took a deep breath. The air smelled so crisp and clean here compared to in the city. He followed the path, which had small lights spread through the trees that helped him see the way. The second his feet hit the dock he reached down and popped open the button of his jeans and lowered the zipper, freeing his dick, which had gone instantly hard when he'd seen her lying there looking so inviting. He closed his eyes and let the vision of her fill his mind. Once again he relived the sensations she'd sent through him without even trying.

Something deep inside made him want to wrap the long brown ponytail draped over her shoulder around his fist and test its thickness. Even more tempting he had to fight the urge to stroke her cheek and see if her creamy skin would be as soft he thought. Her white blouse was so thin he'd been able to see the tops of her breasts barely contained by her lacy white bra. In her reclined position, which caused the tight black skirt that hugged her hips to ride high around her thighs, he'd had a great view of her legs. Hal told himself even though his sense were going haywire he should have been able to repress the feelings, yet the sensual look on her face had him moving towards her before he caught himself.

He'd stopped about a foot away and just took in her subtle beauty. She looked so sweet, young, wholesome, and totally not his type, but damn if she didn't kick start his libido. He'd looked at her left hand and noticed it was ring-free, but knew that really didn't mean anything.

Frankie had pretended his sudden appearance didn't bother her, but he'd seen the way she looked him over. Was she wondering if he was dangerous? If she could have read the lusty thoughts he'd been having about taking her right there on that tiny couch, she would have known he was. Truthfully, in his opinion, she was the dangerous one.

She'd made him think and feel things he hadn't considered in almost a year. He couldn't help but notice she was the perfect size for him. When they danced, he wouldn't be able to rest his chin on her head. She was tall enough that she'd be able to rest her chin on his shoulder and press her breasts into his chest. His wayward thoughts made his dick throb almost painfully. He hoped she hadn't noticed how it had jerked against his zipper when she'd stood there checking him out. He could tell she was interested, but he doubted that she would ever act on it.

He had a swimsuit in his bag, but he decided to take his chances, so he stripped and dove into the water hoping for a shock to calm his rampant hormones. The water was as warm as bath water. It relaxed his muscles, but did nothing for his still hard cock. He knew there was only one thing that was going to cure that particular ache.

If she gave him any sign that she'd want to help him make it all better, he'd be more than willing to take her up on it. She was probably way too innocent to make a move with a guy she'd just met. If he made a pass she'd probably faint, then go running to Victor or to one of her five sisters. Man, he hoped none of them were like her. He figured his only way to survive the next few weeks would be to work himself so hard that he'd be too exhausted to think about having little Miss Innocent in every way he possibly could.

The problem was that if they got close enough he knew he wasn't going to be able to stop himself from making a play for her.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie locked up the front entrance and headed for the back door. Once locked, the doors would only open from the inside until she unlocked them at five o'clock in the morning. She was tired and ready for bed, but she had a feeling she'd be spending the night dreaming about Hal instead of sleeping. She'd given him more than an hour to take his swim in the lake. Since she'd paced the sitting area and

watched the clock slowly ticking, she was sure of it. She forced herself not to walk back and sneak a peek. Not because she was afraid of getting caught, but because she was afraid she wouldn't be able to stop there.

She had just turned the corner when the door opened and Hal stepped in. He dropped his bag to the floor and bent over and started rummaging through it.

His back was to her. His wet skin shimmered in the light. Wide and muscular shoulders drew her eyes to where her hands suddenly wanted to be. She followed the sleek lines to his trim waist and just below where the wet boxer shorts looked like they were painted on. He yanked a T-shirt out of the bag and started drying himself off. She saw him tuck his thumbs into the elastic band and her heart started racing. *He wouldn't.*

*Turn away, turn now. At least close your eyes.* She silently begged herself.

She started to turn around when he shoved the boxers to the floor. Frankie gasped, unable to control her reaction to his nakedness. Hal turned to her and her breath stuck in throat. He stood there unabashedly naked. She was able to see he had no reasons to be worried that she'd find any faults. His chest had a light scattering of dark hair she wanted to reach out and touch. She followed the narrow path it took down his chiseled abs to his hips. It was probably the shock that had her staring at his cock. Not that she hadn't seen one before, but this was the first time she encountered a man she'd met less than an hour ago completely naked.

She told herself she should close her eyes or rush out of the room before he got the idea she was interested. The problem was that she was attracted to him in a major way. Normally she would never act on it this soon, but she wasn't the type to hide from it either. He was only semi-hard, but it made her thighs quiver thinking of having him inside her.



He started walking towards her and his semi-hard erection instantly took on an impressive fully erect length and thickness that would make any woman pray he knew how to use it. From the heated look in his eyes, Frankie guessed that not only did he know how, but that he'd like to show her. She knew that look would be permanently burned into her memory until the day she died.

"Where you looking for me?" He backed her against the wall seeming completely comfortable in his naked state.

"Um...No." She gave her head a little shake. "I was just coming to lock up for the night." She forced her eyes off his chest and up to his face.

"Good. Then we won't be interrupted." A cocky grin curved his mouth as he ran his finger down her neck to the row of tiny buttons on her blouse and flicked the first one open.

"Excuse me?" She was stunned by his quick assumption that she wanted to have sex with him.

"Go lock up, or maybe we could go have ourselves a private swim." He flicked open another button, and she surprised herself when she didn't try to stop him.

"You really think I'm just going to let you have your way with me?" she asked, just to be clear on what was happening here.

"No, I suggested we go for a swim, but maybe if you're a good girl we may just get around to having our way with each other." There was something in the way he said it that gave her pause.

"Is this something you do often?" She covered his hands with hers, stopping him from going any further.

"No." His answer came quick and for some reason she believed him.

Frankie slid out of his reach and backed around the corner. "Good, because neither do I. Lock up when you're done."

## Chapter Two

Hal cursed himself for being such a jackass. He stuffed one leg then the other into a pair of jogging pants. At first he thought she had figured out who he really was. He had stupidly decided if she wanted to tease him, he would turn the table and show her how ruthless he could be. Then he noticed her nipples poking at her shirt and caught a whiff of her scent. He realized she was excited, and he did something he rarely did. Hal threw caution to the wind and made an aggressive move.

He knew he was lucky that she hadn't run screaming or slapped him. If she went to Victor and complained, he would have a lot of explaining to do. Victor had the bad luck of being his best friend since they were in school so he might understand where he was coming from, but he wouldn't go so far as to let him get away with acting like that. Hal would never expect him to. Especially not after everything Victor had gone through to win his wife back. Making a move on one of Victor's sisters-in-law, who just found out about Victor's secret marriage to her sister wasn't a good idea. Hal wrapped his wet clothes into a ball, debating whether or not he should try to find her and apologize.

Grabbing his bag, he turned and flipped the lock on the door before heading to his room. He'd wait until morning to ask for Frankie to forgive him for his brashness. Maybe then he could talk her into allowing him to buy her breakfast. Back home, if he'd made such a blunder, he would have had flowers at her door within the hour. If that worked, then he'd make reservations for a five-star restaurant and proceed to sweep her off her feet.

Then again, if he'd been back home, this never would have happened. His socializing was mostly done on the business front. As such, he didn't get the chance to meet many women who were unaware he was filthy rich. Hal found it funny how people's perception of you changed once they learned that little detail.

Maybe that was why he avoided dating and the dozens of women his stepmother kept throwing in his path.

None of those women held a candle to Frankie. Tall and trim, yet her figure curved in all the right places. With her dark brown hair pulled back in a fancy braid, she looked regal, but he liked the loose ponytail she'd had when he first got there. The gleam in her green eyes tipped him off to the underlying edge he sensed she had. He'd like to take the time to find out more about her. If he had to guess, he would say three weeks would barely give him enough time to scratch the surface. It would be fun, though.

Hal climbed the stairs to his room, taking in all the details as he went. The place had a rustic feel that was totally at odds with the way Victor had told him his wife and sisters wanted it. This was his week to be an ordinary guy under the guise of working for Victor. Maybe he'd use that as his excuse to spend time with Frankie, if she would even let him be in the same room with her.

He let himself into his room and tossed his duffel bag onto the bed. Compared to the last hotel room he'd stayed in, this one was downright homey. No expensive looking art hung on the walls. There was a queen size bed instead of an oversized king. And the decorative items in the room were understated, not gaudy.

It wasn't just the room that was different. He'd been able to let out a more relaxed side of his personality until he met Frankie. This, of course, was exemplified by his worn-out jeans and luggage choice—a beat-up duffel bag in place of his customary expensive leather laptop case and suitcases. It was all part of the disguise he hoped would keep him under anyone's radar.

He dropped onto the bed and let his eyes drift shut. In the too quiet room, it was almost as if he could hear himself think. Hal thought he might really be able to get used to it, though it would be much easier if his thoughts weren't still focused on Frankie. He had a lot of questions, but two crucial ones kept coming back to him. Did she already have a boyfriend, or lover? And, how old was she?

The age thing was the least important of the questions, but age, his and others, had been on his mind lately. He figured it had something to do with the fact that he'd celebrated his thirtieth birthday a few months ago. Irritated by the train of his thoughts, he got to his feet and went to find those vending machines Frankie had told him about.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie was too keyed up to sleep. Normally, whoever had the nightshift would crash on the sofa in the office. Of course, once the renovations were done, they would have to hire a full-time night staff, hopefully the kid they had working part-time for them now would want the hours. Dependable and easy going, he seemed to be just what they needed. Of course, they'd work out a schedule so that a member of the family would be on call for emergencies, but if things went smoothly they would all be sleeping in their own beds at night. Okay, so maybe Jessie and Sam wouldn't be getting much sleep. Not with having new husbands and Sam having a baby on the way.

*Husbands and babies.* She wanted that for herself, but the chances on her finding it here were pretty slim in her opinion. Sometimes she wished she wasn't so damn picky, but she was holding out for Mister Right. Her sisters Sam and Jessie had just gotten lucky. She shook her head and tried to focus on the catalogs she had spread across the coffee table. Frankie loved mixing colors and texture and coming up with perfect one-of-a-kind themes. Tonight, though, nothing was popping out for her.

It was Victor's foreman's fault. Dreaming about him would have been bad enough before he touched her. Now she could kick herself for walking away from the chance of a lifetime. The first and only time a seriously hot naked man asked her to go skinny dipping and hinted for more, and what did she do? Like a nervous school girl she stiffened up and practically ran away. Would she do it differently if she got a second chance?

She wasn't exactly sure how she'd handle it, but hoped she got the chance to find out. She slapped the magazine shut and stood up. Her stocking covered feet slid as she moved silently down the hall towards the kitchen. Suddenly she was starving. The guests only had access to the vending machines, but thankfully, she had the keys to the kitchen.

She turned the corner and slammed into a hard wall of muscle. She felt herself falling backwards, but luckily, big hands latched onto her arms and kept her upright.

They also brought her body so close to his, she could smell a trace of the spicy cologne his dip in the lake hadn't managed to wash off. She looked up at him, and she felt her knees wobble as they threatened to buckle. Her hands landed on his chest, allowing her to feel his strong steady heartbeat. His eyes locked on hers with an intensity she never had focused on her before. Her body's reaction wasn't totally unexpected. Instead of feeling fear and backing away, she found herself dealing with a surge of excitement that had her wanting to lean into him.

Frankie wanted to feel their bodies filling the same space, her softness in contrast to his hard firm muscles. Her blood rushed at the thought. She couldn't believe her hormones were on such a wild rampage. Every ounce of will power she'd thought she had was quickly being replaced by a wanton lust she'd never felt before. He must have known she was turned on by his touch, because his hands slid from her arms to her back, effectively caging her in.

"Hello there, beautiful." He smiled and from the flutter of her heart, she knew she was a goner.

“Hi.” She hated the way her voice squeaked.

His hands slowly rubbed up and down her back. “I’m glad you ran into me. I wanted to apologize for before.”

“Apologize?” she parroted, waiting for her brain to catch on.

“You know, for coming on so strong,” he explained as his hands settled on her lower back, mere inches from her ass.

“Oh.” She wondered if he was waiting for her to apologize for rejecting his advances?

Did his apology mean he wasn’t going to try again? From the way he held her, she didn’t think so. Was she crazy for wishing he’d move his hands down just a little? She’d never considered herself the type to throw herself at a guy, but she was feeling wicked close right now. Damn, she knew nothing about him except the fact that he had a way of making her forget about behaving and induced the urge to do something rash.

She realized he stared at her. He was probably waiting for her to say something, so she blurted out the only thing that came to her mind. “What are you doing down here?”

Thankfully, he didn’t look offended by the question or the blunt way she asked it.

Hal angled his head toward the vending machines. “I got hungry. Can I buy you a soda or something?”

“No, but I can offer you something that tastes better than any of that.” She felt a heated blush cross her cheeks when he glanced down and smiled.

Frankie wondered if he noticed the way his looking at her breasts had her nipples standing out at attention. “Food. I meant food. I have the keys to the kitchen.”

“Lead the way.” He dropped his arms, but neither of them moved.

It took a few seconds for it to hit her that she still had her hands on his chest. She dropped them and dashed around him. “I...um...it’s this way.”

“Right behind you,” he said, and when she glanced back, he was watching her ass as they walked.

Frankie was tempted to put a little extra wiggle in her hips. She didn’t, of course. She was a lot of things, but a tease wasn’t one of them. Then again, it wouldn’t be teasing if she followed through. Flustered by her own thoughts when they reached the door, she had trouble getting the key in the lock. Hal’s big hand closed over hers and helped her slide the key home. Instead of opening the door, she leaned back into him. He took her hand in his and wrapped his arms around her.

“Frankie, I think we’re in trouble here.” His voice was a whisper, but she heard him loud and clear.

She turned her head and looked up at him. “I think I figured that out on my own.”

“Yeah, but I get the feeling you’re not as okay with it as I want you to be.”

“And how I feel is important to you?” It was sweet, but she got the feeling he was more self-indulgent than that.

“More than you know. So here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll go have a bite to eat and decide where we’re willing to take this.” He sounded so sure of himself that it was obvious to her, he was used to being the one in charge.

Did she really want to get involved, however briefly, with a guy who may turn out to be a control freak? Feeling his solid heat behind her, she knew the answer. Yes!

“Okay.” She figured she would probably regret this decision later, but she was going to do her best to enjoy herself while she could.

She gasped when he spun her around and pinned her between his body and the door. “First, I have to do this.”

His mouth closed over hers. No nibbling or teasing. It was a full force seduction. His lips plied hers apart. His tongue slipped past with ease and teased hers into an intimate dance. He pressed his hips to hers, letting her feel how their kiss affected him. She moaned, fisting

her hands in his T-shirt as she allowed his delicious assault. He pulled away abruptly, leaving her gasping for air.

“Definitely a problem,” he muttered, and she nodded in agreement.

He reached behind her and opened the door, giving her space to think. Frankie’s mind whirled as she led him through the dining room and into the kitchen. How was Victor going to feel about her messing around with his foreman? And how was she going explain their meeting to her sisters?

“So want to fill me in on those thoughts running through your head?” She looked over at him leaning against the counter.

He had his arms folded across his chest, which drew her eyes to where his T-shirt was all stretched out and wrinkled. She’d been so lost in his kiss she hadn’t realized the damage she caused. He was right. They were in trouble. Mostly because she’d never wanted to have hot wild sex with a guy she’d just met. Okay, so maybe that wasn’t a hundred percent true. She’d wanted to have her way with a few guys, but she’d never actually done it. Hal cleared his throat, reminding her that she hadn’t answered his question.

“I was wondering how your boss is going to react to you seducing his sister in -law.” She started pulling stuff out of the fridge and putting it on the table between them.

She found a tray of brownies, some leftover sandwiches, and a gallon of milk. Hal pulled two glasses off the shelf behind him. He walked over, put them on the table, and picked up a brownie. Expecting him to eat it, she started to fill their glasses, but he brought it to her lips. Frankie had a sweet tooth and wasn’t shy about letting him know it. She took a big bite, nipping the tip of his fingers.

“Frisky and beautiful. A powerful combination.” He popped the rest of the brownie into his mouth.

Frisky? She’d only heard that word used to describe kittens, but coming from him, it sounded like a sweet compliment. She picked up



her glass of milk and took a big sip, trying to ignore the way he was watching her.

“Milk does a body good.” He held his glass up and she laughed, which turned into choking as she almost snorted milk through her nose.

“Jerk,” she said grabbing a napkin.

“What? I was just stating the obvious.” His look of innocence pushed her hot button.

“So, are you going to tell me how Victor’s going to react, or is your evasion of the question a sign he’s going to freak out?”

He shrugged those broad shoulders of his. “I’m not sure how he’ll react. How about your sisters? Should I sleep with one eye open?”

Without thinking, her sarcastic side poked out its ugly little head. “Can you really do that?”

He winked and said, “You’ll have to spend a night in my bed to find out.”

“Moving a little fast, aren’t you? I thought you said we were going to talk.” Since neither of them really seemed interested in the food, she put the sandwiches and milk back in the fridge.

“Fine. You have five sisters, two brothers –in-law...any other family I should know about?” It was a reasonable question, but she heard the real question in there.

“No. How about you?” Would he be as forthcoming?

“Father and stepmother. That’s it.”

Okay, so they were both single, but she needed to know more. “How long have you been working for Victor?”

\* \* \* \*

In the past ten minutes, he’d made the firm decision to be as honest as possible with Frankie as he could. Their affair would be a quick one, and afterwards the chances they’d ever see each other

again were slim to none. But, he also didn't want her to have any regrets when it was over.

"About five years." It was true. Even when Victor had been overseas Hal had arranged a lot of his transportation needs. "Before you ask, yes, I knew he was married to your sister."

"Oh." She turned her back on him, but not before he saw the hurt in her eyes.

He took her by the shoulders and turned her around to him. "Honey, Victor and I have been friends since we were three. He tells me everything."

"I know Jessie told Sam too. I guess I'm feeling a little bit jealous that everyone had this big secret." She gave him a little smile that tore at his heart.

"How's this... We can keep whatever is happening between us a secret until you're ready to tell everyone." She tipped her head back and looked at him in disbelief.

"You're only going to be here three weeks, so keeping things just between us would let you off the hook in a big way." Her reasoning was sound, but, hell, you couldn't blame a guy for trying. "Besides I get the feeling you're a touchy feely type."

"I'm usually very hands -off in public. In private, that's a whole other story." He thought about their episode in the hallway and admitted she was right. Keeping his hands off her would be hard. "But I do see your point."

"We'll just let them find out on their own. As for us, I think it'll be fun getting to know you." She slid her hands up his chest and linked them around his neck.

"So, does this mean we're done for tonight, or can I invite you up to my room for a night cap?" He watched the indecision flash on her face.

"I never do things like this," she said, as a deep blush coated her cheeks.

“Frankie, I knew that the second I laid eyes on you. That’s why I was kicking myself for coming on so strong. I thought I might have scared you away, before I even got a chance to show you what a great guy I am.” She was close enough for him to feel her shudder.

“Hal, take me upstairs.” She didn’t have to tell him twice. He scooped her up in his arms and headed back for the hall.

“Frankie! Damn it, where are you?” A feminine voice shouted from somewhere.

She wiggled in his arms until he put her down. “Shit. Oh fuck, that’s my sister Bobbie.”

Hal watched the confident sexy woman adjust her shirt and smooth her skirt. He knew that given too much time to think, she might change her mind, so he hoped her sister didn’t stick around long. He didn’t like the thought that she may have just slipped through his arms for good. He’d have to have faith that with a little stroking, her lust would drive her back into his arms.

Frankie darted a quick look at him as footsteps echoed down the hall. He knew there could be a lot of reasons for the panic he saw in her eyes. Could it be that something as lame as her being embarrassed to be caught alone with him? Or, maybe she’s going to be in trouble for bringing him in here?

“Why don’t you go deal with her, and I’ll sneak on up to my room. We can talk in the morning?” He saw the relief in her eyes and the way her shoulders lost some of their stiffness.

“How about breakfast in town?” Her offer was delivered with a huge smile he couldn’t refuse.

He knew he’d be a fool not to take her up on her offer. “Where?”

“Meet me at the diner at nine o’clock. Victor can give you directions,” she said as she backed towards the door.

“See you then,” he said to the empty room.

### Chapter Three

Hal woke up feeling disorientated. It was a strange sensation, and one he wasn't quite comfortable with. He'd traveled extensively and never once had he felt like this. Then again, he 'd never spent most of the night having dreams about all the ways he'd like to take Frankie Brazen. He showered, and was getting ready to go downstairs to find Victor, when someone knocked on the door.

He opened it and found Victor and his brother, Trent, standing there. "I was wondering how married life would look on you two," he said, "Looks good on you, Vic. But Trent, I think you've been skipping your bi-weekly trips to the gym. I thought your wife was the pregnant one"

"My wife happens to be an excellent cook," Trent said as he rubbed his stomach.

Hal noticed it wasn't as flat as it had been the last time he'd seen him. He didn't mention it, but Trent noticed his glance.

"I'm working on adding a fitness room onto the plans. Maybe even add a hot tub." Trent quickly added with a smile.

"Jessie isn't real keen on that. She figures this is going to be a place to relax, not workout. But, the sisters have this system where everyone has to agree on any and all changes. So, if everyone else wants it then she'll probably give in." Victor looked down at Hal's old beat up duffel bag and shook his head. "I really think we could've done without the cloak and dagger this time."

"Hey, this is his time to be an ordinary Joe. Who are we to take that away from him?" Trent clasped his hand on Hal's shoulder and gave it a shake.

“Fine. Let’s head downstairs. The ladies are waiting to meet you.” Victor didn’t even wait for him to respond, he just turned and walked down the hall.

Hal’s pulse jumped at the thought of meeting Frankie’s sisters. He looked at Trent and asked, “Which ladies?”

“Mine, Victor’s, and the twins. The youngest, Bobbie, had a class, and Frankie had to go to work.” Trent explained as they followed Victor down the hall.

If she had another job, then what the hell was she doing here last night with him Hal wondered? “I thought they all worked here.”

“Oh, believe me they all do their share, but Sam and Jessie are the only two who are working here full -time right now. And by that, I mean they eat, sleep, and drink with half their mind concentrating on this place.” Victor shook his head as he said it, but there was pride ringing in his voice too.

“Which explains how you snuck under Sam’s radar.” Hal teased, knowing how over the moon Trent was about Samantha.

“Fuck off.” Trent slugged him in the arm as they reached the top of the stairs.

“No abusing the help,” Victor said from below and four feminine laughs joined his.

Hal looked down and his breath got caught in his chest. The lucky son of a bitch had two beauties standing on either side him. Neither of them looked like Frankie. On one side, there was a blonde with startling green eyes and a girl next door essence. The woman standing next to her had light honey brown hair, brown eyes, and gave off a confident attitude without even doing or saying anything.

The two women on the other side were identical twins. They had darker blonde hair and green eyes. What set them apart was the way they were dressed. One wore a pastel blouse and khaki slacks. The other’s blouse was bright blue, and her black slacks had a matching stripe going down the outside of her legs.

None of the four women had Frankie's deep brown hair, and although three of the four had green eyes, none were the same shade as hers. He wondered if maybe the only sister he hadn't seen yet looked like her. The sisters were all looking him over intently, but they were smiling as they did it. For just a few seconds he wondered if Frankie had said something to them about their *meeting*.

"Hal, I'd like you to meet my wife, Jessica. She runs the lodge with the help of all her sisters." Victor put his arm around the honey blonde's shoulders and pulled her close.

"And this one is mine. She's the best cook in the county," Trent said, slipping behind the blonde and wrapping his arms around her stomach.

"We know," the twins sighed.

"And those two..." The rest of Trent's comment was cut off when his bride stuck her elbow in his ribs.

Everyone laughed, including Trent. It was obvious to Hal that his friends had found themselves a great bunch of women. Was he jealous? You bet your ass he was. Did he hope he'd have as much luck with Frankie? It wasn't in the cards, and he knew it. The brief time together was all they'd ever have.

"This is Joey, our numbers girl," Jessie said, pointing to the more demure of the twins. Then she motioned to the other twin and said, "and this is Georgie, our marketing guru."

"Nice to meet you all." Hal hoped they would tell him what Frankie did for a living.

"You too, but we have to get to work," Joey said, and Georgie added, "Yeah we just stopped by for our monthly breakfast meeting it's time to head to work."

"Then I'm glad I checked in a night early." It was the perfect opportunity for him to ask about Frankie, but something made him hold back.

"Us too," they chimed as they headed for the door.

“You must be hungry. Why don’t we go into the kitchen, and I’ll whip you up something,” Sam offered and he hated to refuse, but he had a date to get to.

“Actually, I have plans for this morning, so I’ll have to take a rain check, if that’s okay with you.” Victor and Trent both narrowed their eyes giving the all too familiar look that said they knew he was up to something, but their wives just smiled and nodded.

“It’s alright as long as you promise to come to the house for dinner tonight. That way you can meet Bobbie and Frankie.” Sam offered him what sounded like a win-win arrangement.

“Deal.” He turned to Victor and said, “Vic, I need you to give me directions to the diner in town.”

“Sure thing.” Victor walked over to the reception counter and grabbed a pen and piece of paper.

“When you get back we’ll get down to business.” Trent’s tone clearly implied he wanted to know what the hell was going on.

Hal took the paper and waved a quick goodbye as he headed out to his rental truck. As he climbed in, he wasn’t surprised to see four sets of curious eyes watching him. Another time it would have bothered him. He usually hated the way everyone watched to see what he was doing or going to do next. Right now, with his mind focused on meeting Frankie for breakfast, everything else fell by the wayside.

He followed Victor’s simple directions, and in fifteen minutes, he found himself pulling into the diner’s small parking lot. He glanced at his watch and realized he was about ten minutes early. He debated waiting in the truck for Frankie to show up, but in the end, he decided to go inside to wait for her. He slid out of the truck and headed across the parking lot. As he reached the door, he heard Frankie’s unforgettable laugh coming from behind him.

He turned around and saw her standing next to an older guy, maybe around fifty, if he had to guess. Hal recognized the way the guy leaned in a little too close as he talked to her. In his opinion, a sure sign the guy was interested in her. She laughed as she tossed her

hair and Hal felt something close to rage surge through him. It was an unreasonable and unexpected reaction, and he had no idea how to deal with it. The only thing that kept him from marching over there and making a fool of them both was the fact that she took a step away from the guy. Hal looked down at his clenched fist and realized that for the first time in his life he just might be in over his head.

\* \* \* \*

There were days when Frankie really hated her job as a public relations consultant. It wasn't always easy helping the local politicians find ways to translate their goals into easy to understand concepts for their constituents. Frankie prided herself on doing the best she could. Politicians weren't her only clients, though, she also helped a few businesses in town with their customer service plans. She was as picky about her clients as she was about the men she dated. Still, there were times, like today, when she had to deal with people who didn't want to take no for an answer.

Mr. Handly seemed nice enough, but Frankie didn't always agree with his ideas, so she politely turned down any offers he made. Lately, he was getting more aggressive, even going so far as to hint that he'd like to be on a more personal level with her. She hadn't spotted him when she came out of the town hall or she would have gone in the other direction. Now he was boring her with his plans to run for city council and asking her to help organize his campaign, which was absurd, since she refused to work on any other committees with him.

Handly took a step closer, and she faked a laugh at his stupid joke and took a step away. What Frankie needed was an escape and fast. She wasn't above being rude, but she would rather not cause a scene. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted an angry looking Hal standing about twenty feet away. Her knight in faded blue jeans had come to her rescue.



“Oh, Mr. Handly, you’ll have to excuse me. Victor’s foreman is here for our meeting.” She looked over at Hal, pleased to see he was already coming over their way.

“Are you and your sisters planning on letting the rest of us in on your plans for the lodge any time soon? My offer still stands you know?” Mr. Handly was referring to the pitiful offer to buy the lodge from them, which they had promptly refused.

“We’re just sprucing the place up a bit.” she lied, knowing even if they weren’t keep things quiet for now, she wouldn’t tell him anything.

“Thinking if you clean it up you’ll get a better price.” His face turned red as he shook his head. “Going to be like old Clayton and sell it off to outsiders.”

“Clayton didn’t sell his land. He gave it to his nephews.” She didn’t know why she was even bothering. Unless you were born here, you’d always be considered an outsider.

About a year ago a friend of theirs, Mike Dionne, married a woman named Claire and brought her to live here. She and Sam had become best friends, but Claire still didn’t feel like she had been accepted. Victor and Trent had a long row to fit in. Of course, after making friends with the sheriff, his brother, Beau, and the seven Mitchell cousins, they were on the right path. She wondered if Hal would get along with them too? His visit would be short, but he’d probably meet at least a few of them when he ran errands in town.

Mr. Handly grasped her wrist, squeezing it tightly. “I made him a more than generous offer for that place.”

“I’m sure you did.” She tried to casually tug her hand free without causing a confrontation, but his grip was too strong.

“Mister, if I were you, I’d let her go right now.” Hal’s deep voice had Mr. Handly dropping her hand and stepping away from her.

Frankie wasn’t sure what to say or do. Hal had no such problems. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against his side. Handly’s eyes went wide, and he puffed out his cheeks. She

looked up at Hal, and he leaned down and pressed a kiss on her surprised lips.

He pulled back and gave her a wink. “Hey there, beautiful, want to introduce me to your friend?”

“Oh right. Hal, this is Mr. Handly. He owns quite a few businesses in town, including the laundromat.” It was the least impressive of his holdings, which is why she picked that one. “Mr. Handly, this is my brother-in-law’s foreman, Hal Bernard.”

Handly reluctantly offered his hand in greeting. “He seems to be more than that.”

Hal reached over and took his hand and gave it a brief shake. “That I am. Sorry if I misread the situation, but I’m partial to being the only man to put his hands on Frankie.”

“Understandable. Frankie, let me know if you change your mind about either of my offers.” He nodded and walked away. Frankie was glad to see him go.

Hal turned them towards the diner, and after a few steps, she thought it was only fair to let him know what he’d just done. “That little scene was just witnessed by half the gossips in town.”

“So your sisters will find out a little sooner than we planned.” He gave a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders.

“I hope you’re this calm when you meet my sisters.” She reached out, grabbed the door, and opened it before he could.

“I already met four of them this morning,” he said. As he walked past her, he flashed her a quick smile and added, “and I’m coming to dinner tonight.”

Frankie stood there holding the door wide open.

*Which four had he met?*

As they walked over to the table, Frankie ran through her options. Sam and Jessie would have to be her first two choices since they were always at the lodge, which led her to believe dinner would have been Sam’s or Trent’s idea. Since Jessie had been dying to meet him and get started on the remodeling, she could have invited him too.

As for the other two, they were probably Joey and Georgie. Bobbie had class this morning or he would have met them all. What he didn't realize was that once they found out they were dating, if you could call it that, they'd be determined to find out every little detail about him in the guise of protecting her. She had to admit she'd acted the same way with Victor and Trent. The only difference was that deep down she knew they were keepers. The only hopes she had for her fling with Hal was that they would both have fun.

"So, let me guess. You've met Sam, Jessie, Joey, and Georgie?" He nodded and turned to the young waitress approaching their table.

Frankie ordered a veggie and cheese omelet, home fries, toast, and a glass of soda. Hal surprised her by ordering a glass of orange juice and two poached eggs on wheat toast. She wanted to ask him if he was trying to impress her by eating healthfully. The waitress walked away, glancing back twice to check him out. Frankie could've acted jealous, but she knew she had no reason to be. She had no claim to him, even though he had given Handly that idea.

"I hope you're not a health nut, because Sam's bound to spoil you while you're here." She picked up the napkin-wrapped silverware the waitress left on the table.

"Nah, I love steak and fries as much as the next guy, but I ate so much junk and fast food yesterday, I figured I should eat something good for me." It was possible, but she'd seen him naked and his body didn't show any signs of over indulgence.

"Did Sam mention what we're having for dinner tonight?" Frankie busied herself by unwrapping the silverware and putting it on the table.

He took the napkin out of her hand. "No. Why didn't you tell me you don't work at the lodge?"

Frankie really didn't care for the tone of his voice. "You didn't ask, and I do work there part time. We all do our share."

"You could've told me instead of letting Victor and Trent do it. What do you really do?"

“Public relations. I know what you’re thinking - not much call for that around here. I was an English major. I think my dad was hoping I’d become a teacher. Anyway, one day I helped one of the college administrators write up a presentation and my fate was sealed.” She blurted out the explanation, not really sure why she thought he needed to know.

“Is that guy, Handly, a client of yours?” The curl of his lips hinted he wouldn’t be happy about that.

“He wishes. I do work with a few of his competitors.” Frankie felt oddly relieved when she spotted the waitress coming their way, but she quickly delivered their orders and left them alone.

The second she was gone Hal reached over and covered her hand with his big one. “What’s your real passion?”

Could she tell him? She’d never told another person. She wasn’t sure why either. He’d probably just laugh his ass off. It was a dream, and that was all it would ever be.

As if he sensed her wariness to share he said, “Tell me and it can be our little secret.”

“Will you tell me one in return?” When he nodded, she figured she had nothing to lose. “I want to combine my two passions, writing and interior design. I’d love to write a book. Nothing stuffy, just a fun how-to with a little why thrown in. That type of thing.”

“Sounds interesting,” he said, and it shocked her that he sounded totally sincere.

“Yeah, but I don’t see how I can make it work yet. So I have to satisfy myself with decorating the lodge for now.” She picked up her fork and dug into her omelet, not wanting it to get cold.

“That’s what the catalogs I saw you looking through last night were for. Maybe you could do a before and after on the lodge. You know what I mean?” She stared at him wondering why such a smart guy worked as a foreman.

He gave her a really good idea. She’d be able to explain her choices and list some other options she could have gone with. Then,

she could explain why she didn't. But, was there a market for that kind of book? She'd have to find out quickly before they made any more changes. She'd get right on it after they finished eating.

"Your turn. Tell me something nobody else knows."

\* \* \* \*

Hal stalled by taking a few bites of his eggs. He wanted to tell her everything, but he couldn't, because it would give him away. So he'd have to settle for something that gave her a peek into his soul.

"I've always wanted a dog. I knew as a kid my parents would never let me have one, so I never even asked. And as an adult, I've never had the time." His wish sounded lame compared to hers, but it was the truth, and that was what was important to him.

She held a forkful of eggs in front of her lips. "What kind?"

He watched her close her lips over the fork, then slide it back out. It shouldn't have turned him on, but it did. So much so, that he totally missed her question.

"Huh?" He hoped she would take pity on him and repeat the question.

"What kind of a dog would you get? A Chihuahua?" she smiled and pointed her fork at him, "No, it would probably be a hooch dog."

"A hooch dog?" *What the hell was a hooch dog?*

"Haven't you ever seen *Turner and Hooch* ? Tom Hanks and the huge brown drooly dog." As she explained, he saw the shock and then amusement on her face.

He was pretty sure he would have remembered seeing that movie. "Never saw it."

"I have it on DVD. If you don't have any plans after dinner tonight we can go back to your room and watch it." Her sexy smile had him pausing with his glass in midair.

He hoped that it meant they'd be doing more than watching a movie. Then again, he had a sneaking suspicion that no matter how he

spent his time with her he would enjoy it. His main objective should and would be to make sure she did , too. He'd do his damndest to make sure it happened. Her sisters and his friends might create a few obstacles for him. Shit, he knew if he had a little sister, he'd do everything in his power to protect her from an unavailable bachelor like himself. So he could completely understand why, but he was also confident that he'd find ways to overcome or get around them.

"Which of your sisters is minding the desk tonight?" he asked, wondering which sister would be his first test.

"None of them. It's Junior's night. He's a kid we hired to work the night shift three days a week so he can avoid his brother's parade of girlfriends." The disapproval in her voice was matched by the scowl on her face.

"And Junior's sensibilities won't be offended if you come up to my room?" He needed to know if Junior would be as protective as her sisters would.

"Hal, you've already shot yourself in the foot. Now all you can do is ride out the pain. Hopefully the pleasure will make it all worth your while." She closed her lips around the straw and smiled as she sucked up the soda.

"Do you talk to everyone like that, or is it just me?" He had to ask, although he knew she probably wouldn't answer.

"Why?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I want to know if you go around turning on every guy you talk to. Or if I bring out that special something in you?" The sexiest pout he ever saw curved her lips, sending a jolt through his whole body.

"Oh. Well, normally I try to be direct and straight to the point, hopefully while being tactful at the same time. For some reason my thought filter seems to shut off around you. Still, I don't think I've said anything outrageous." Frankie had a point, but he thought she was missing a huge part of the picture.

What she said, added to the fact that her voice got all throaty, and the way her eyes devoured him, it was more than enough to get his

blood flowing south. He should have known right then that he was going to have trouble walking away from her.

## Chapter Four

Frankie felt a weird sense of loss as she watched Hal drive away. She'd have thought it wouldn't be possible to miss someone you'd just spent the past few hours with, but that's what it felt like. She shook her head and told herself she didn't have time to dwell on feelings when she had so much research to do.

She hustled to her car and drove to library. The building wasn't very big and the book selection could use some updating, but they had a reliable internet connection. Thankfully, the parking lot was almost empty. Frankie grabbed her laptop case, climbed out of her car, and rushed inside. Choosing a table way in the back of the main section, she laid her purse and laptop case on the table. She reached into her purse, which was really more like a small tote bag, and pulled out a notepad. In her opinion, good research required a few things, including a firm objective and lists.

She was great at making lists and sticking to them. All of the Brazen women were. Mommy and Daddy had raised them to have goals, but it was Grandpa who pushed them to follow their hearts. These contradictions had a profound impact on how she and her sisters chose to live their lives. Attempting to turn the lodge and campground into a romantic getaway would allow them to experience some of their dreams.

Frankie slid her laptop out of the bag and booted it up. Now that she had an idea of the type of book she wanted to write, she knew what she was looking for. She looked up publishers, agents, and editors. There were a lot of books on the market about interior design and remodeling, but she couldn't find one that included both. It's a



good sign, she thought, adding a few more questions and ideas to her list.

She listed supplies she'd need compared to what she already had. It seemed more and more possible that this might be something she'd really enjoy doing. She would have to think of a good way to thank Hal for coming up with this idea. She knew her sisters would support her without question, but she wanted to be one hundred percent prepared to explain everything to them. So, she decided to keep working until she had a complete proposal ready to show them.

\* \* \* \*

The hot water was doing wonders for Hal's sore muscles. He was used to running five miles a day on the treadmill, but it was no match for nature's terrain. Trent had told him the trail around the lake was only four miles, but the way his calves were throbbing, Hal guessed it was closer to six. The run had given him time to think about how he should handle things with Frankie, and though his body was complaining, he was happy he got the workout. Still, he knew he'd be really sore tomorrow, probably feeling every one of his thirty years. The surprising thing was that even after a lousy night's sleep and a rough day of his own making, he felt remarkably energized. That was probably a good thing, since he had to be at the Brazen homestead in less than an hour.

He got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. Running a hand across his chin, he debated whether or not to shave, but vetoed the idea, not wanting to look like his normal cultured self. He wanted to let his rougher side free. After all, that's what this whole two weeks was about. Although, this time, he did have a few other things he had to take care of. He needed to *discreetly* check on the logistics of getting a few trucks up here for another project Victor was working on.

He looked at the black jeans and button -down shirt he planned on wearing. It was the most casual he'd ever dressed for a date. He consoled himself with the fact that only he and Frankie knew it was a date. Everyone else was under the impression he was coming to hang out with his friends and meet their family. He'd even gone so far as to evade answering any direct questions about his appointment this morning.

Victor or Trent might have tried harder to nail him down about it, but every time they were around, so were their wives. He couldn't help but think being married was a double -edged sword. On the one side, you had someone you loved to spend time with, on the other, that same person always seemed to be around when you didn't want them there. Either way, the fact was that the Weatherly brothers had settled happily into domesticity surprisingly well.

After checking his reflection in the mirror, he grabbed his wallet and cell phone, and headed for his truck. He nodded to the young red -headed kid manning the desk and went outside. As he drove to the Brazen's house, he was swamped with an odd excitement. Maybe it was a combination of seeing Frankie again, not knowing if everyone already knew about them, and wondering how Victor and Trent were going to react to knowing he was getting involved with their sister -in-law. Whatever it was, it had him smiling, which he'd done more since he got here than he had in the past six months.

He pulled to a stop in front of the house. Within seconds the door opened and Victor stepped out onto the wrap -around porch. Right behind him was his beautiful wife Jessie. Hal laughed as he got out of the truck knowing his buddy just lost another chance to interrogate him. As he mounted the steps, a younger version of Jessie bounded out of the house.

"You must be Hal, Victor's sexy foreman." She glanced over at Victor and winked, before she held out her hand and said, "Hi, I'm Bobbie."

He laughed and gave her hand a quick shake. “Sexy huh. It’s nice to meet you, Bobbie.”

“We should head inside. Sam’s really outdoing herself in your honor,” she informed him, and the three of them laughed like it was a private joke.

Bobbie held the door open and motioned for them to go in. One by one, they went in. Jessie went first, then Victor, then him, and Bobbie brought up the rear of their little group. He heard voices coming from some other part of the house, but none of them was Frankie’s. Jessie and Victor walked over and sat on the sofa. Being a dutiful guest, he followed, choosing a chair across from them. After all, he couldn’t just go searching for her.

The twins came into the room, each of them carrying a tray of *hors d’oeuvres*. After putting them on the coffee table they moved over to where Jessie and Victor sat. Bobbie came over and sat on the arm of his chair. It was a little odd to have someone he’d just met invade his personal space. Not that it was a bad thing. He took it as a compliment. Like he was being accepted into the fold. Sam and Trent’s laughter preceded them down the hall and into the room.

It seemed that everyone was here except the one person he wanted to see the most. Where the heck was she? Maybe she wasn’t coming at all. Hal really didn’t want to admit there was a remote possibility Frankie had changed her mind and decided it would just be easier to avoid him, than tell him why. What the hell was wrong with him? All this doubt and negativity was a waste of energy.

“So, Victor tells us you’re from the Boston area?” Jessie said, reaching for a puffy thing on the tray.

Victor and Trent knew he liked to keep things as close to the truth as he could, so he nodded and explained, “My father and his wife live there. When I was younger I spent a lot of time away at school. I guess I don’t feel the same ties they do.”

“Is that where you guys met, in school?” Sam asked, lowering herself onto Trent’s lap.

He wondered if Trent and Victor hadn't told their wives that they had attended one of the most exclusive prep schools on the eastern seaboard. If so, how had they explained his attendance? If they asked, Victor could've said he was there on a scholarship. It wouldn't have been too far off since his father had Cummings Transportation set up a scholarship in honor of his Hal's mother right before he started attending.

"You could say that. We actually met in the dean's office after someone's little brother decided it would be fun to swipe the dean's golf cart and go joyriding. Only three people were in the vicinity so we all got called in for questioning." He loved putting Trent on the spot. It was payback for all the times he'd had them balancing on the edge of serious trouble.

"Yeah, you learn a lot about a person when they help you get someone they've never met before out of trouble," Victor said as he looked at his brother, who had the good sense to look chagrined.

Sam kissed the top of Trent's head and gave him a hug. "Hey, stop picking on him."

"Hiding behind another skirt?" Victor and Hal said at the same time, then laughed.

Sam started to pull away, but Trent held her still. "Babe, they're talking about my mother."

"Enough picking on your brother," Jessie gave Victor's leg a healthy swat, "I'm sure you and Hal initiated more than your share of mischief."

"True. Did he ever tell you about his streaking across campus?" Everyone's eyes turned to Victor, who laughed, ducking his head.

"Well if someone didn't shove me out of the room and close my towel in the door I wouldn't have had to." It was one of Hal's favorite memories so he didn't even feel a twinge of guilt over it.

Trent held up his hands. "I wasn't even there."

Through all their laughter, Hal thought he heard a car pull into the driveway. He waited for the door to open, but it didn't. Bobbie leaned

forward, picking up one of little plates on the coffee table filled with a variety of the bite-size treats. She turned and held it out to him. Not knowing what else to do he took it. She winked at him, and he almost dropped the mini-quiche he'd just lifted off the plate. He told himself he was wrong, and she had something in her eye. Then she casually reached over put her hand on his knee and gave it a squeeze.

He snuck quick glances at Trent and Victor, but they were totally oblivious to the minx's advances. *Shit!* He popped the quiche in his mouth and chewed it, though he could barely taste it. Even if he hadn't been interested in Frankie, this little firecracker was way too young for him. Hal's first instinct was to get the hell out of there. He should come up with a quick excuse and make a hasty retreat. If he did that he wouldn't get to see Frankie, but it might keep her sister from making a move on him.

As Bobbie moved back into her position on the arm of his chair, she wiggled closer and whispered, "I just want you to know I know."

He bobbed the plate, barely keeping everything from hitting the floor. How the hell had she found out the truth about him? Had she already told Frankie? Is that why she wasn't here? It took him a few seconds to decide how he wanted to react to her taunt. There was no way he could pretend he hadn't heard her. He leaned forward and put the plate on the table.

"Bobbie, can you show me where the bathroom is?" he asked as he got to his feet.

"Sure." She stood up and headed for the hall, without looking to see if he followed her.

The conversation around him continued as he left the room, but he felt everyone's eyes on him. Bobbie stood pointing at an open door in the hallway. Yeah, right, the smirk on her face was a dead giveaway. She knew something all right, but the question was how much of that something did she know. He glanced back over his shoulder, wondering just how much the others would be able to hear if he asked her here.

It was a chance he wasn't willing to take. He grabbed her arms none too gently and pulled her into the bathroom with him. Her eyes twinkled and huge smile was on her lips. Didn't she know she should be afraid? A strange man dragged her into a bathroom, and she stood there grinning like the cat that ate the canary. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a look he normally saved for the boardroom. Bobbie had the good sense to suddenly get nervous. She took a step back, bumping into the door.

"What is it you think you know?" Hal asked her making sure to keep his gaze lock with hers.

"You know, this really isn't a good idea. Someone is bound to wonder what's taking me so long to come back." She placed her hand on the doorknob.

He countered by putting his hand on the door, using his weight to keep her from opening it. She had a point, but he needed to find out just how much she knew. Equally important was what she was going to do with that knowledge.

He leaned in, not above using his size to try and intimidate her. "How did you find out?"

"Wow, now I get it." She sighed, sagging against the door.

He growled, leaning in closer, and said, "Little girl, you don't want to play games with me."

"No, I can see that would be a mistake." The smile that she was holding back made her lips quiver.

It wasn't the reaction he was going for. Finally, she lost the battle and let out a giggle. What the fuck was with this chick? He'd never wanted to grab someone by the shoulders and shake them senseless before. He felt sorry for the son of bitch who got stuck with her. Maybe he should have asked Victor more about his sisters -in-law before coming here.

"Bobbie, you're really pushing it." He leaned back, giving her some space, but kept his hand braced on the door.

“Jeez, don’t blow a gasket. A friend of mine called me today to ask who the stud manhandling my sister Frankie was?”

“Frankie?” It suddenly hit him that his mind had taken off on the wrong track.

She nodded and continued with her tale. “I told her I had no idea what she was talking about. She told me you two were at the diner looking all cozy. I was only a few minutes away, so I hopped in my car and went to see what she was blathering about.”

“We weren’t hiding,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Why not just tell everyone?”

“You have a lot to learn.” She laughed and shook her head. “Everyone will know soon enough. I think you and Frankie should be the ones to answer their questions.”

Now he was wondering what the hell this had all been about. “So why the act?”

“What act? All I did was let you know I already knew.” She looked at him full of innocence and again he felt bad for whoever she locked horns with.

“You must have known that being cryptic would make me want to know more.” He could kick himself for not seeing her plan before it was too late.

“Okay, so maybe I wanted to get an idea of just how interested you are in her. And I admit I hoped spending a few minutes alone with you might tell me what she saw in you.” Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink as she confessed.

He tipped his head towards the wall. “Do the rest of them know how cunning you are?”

She shrugged her shoulders, brushing off his compliment, but let loose with a huge smile. “We better get back out there.”

They stepped into the hall as Frankie came flying through the front door. She dropped the stack of folders she was carrying on the waist-high table by the door and set her two bags on the floor. He was about to say hello when she dashed into the living room.

It was hard to believe she hadn't even noticed them standing there. He took a step forward, but Bobbie grabbed his arm, pulling him back. Hal looked down at her and she pressed her index finger to her lips in a shushing motion. Before he could do any thing, the others started talking.



## Chapter Five

Frankie's heartbeat had surged when she spotted Hal's truck parked in the driveway. She had planned to come home and take a shower, and be sitting on the porch waiting for him. It was kind of his fault she was late. She'd lost all track of time doing the research for the idea he'd given her for the book she wanted to write.

As she had gotten out of the car, balancing all of her research and bags, she had heard loud laughter coming from inside. *It seemed no one had missed her.* She'd hurried inside, following the voices into the living room, expecting him to be there. All of her sisters except Bobbie were there, along with Victor and Trent too, but not Hal.

"Where the hell have you been?" Jessie sounded more worried than angry.

"I got held up. So where is our guest of honor...and Bobbie?" She made sure to include her so she wouldn't seem overly interested in Hal.

Frankie knew they'd find out soon, if they didn't already know. Still, she wasn't going to be the one to spill the beans.

"Bobbie is showing him the way to the bathroom." Trent said as he grabbed a stuffed mushroom off of a plate on the coffee table.

"So what held you up?" Joey asked.

Joey's natural curiosity was a big part of her personality. She was the one who always needed to get all the details. Usually Frankie admired it, but not tonight.

"I was doing some research on something." Frankie sat in the empty chair, unable to keep from glancing at the door leading to the hall.

“It wasn’t for Handly, was it? I heard you ran into him today,” Georgie said. Frankie held her breath as she waited for her to say something about her and Hal, but she didn’t.

Frankie couldn’t figure out why. It was the perfect opportunity for Georgie to slide it into the conversation without looking like she was trying to embarrass her. Frankie or Bobbie would’ve done it. They were always on the lookout for a reason to tease each other. It was part of their sisterly bond. Hell, if she was in their shoes she would have pounced on her the second she walked in the room. Her sisters had always said she was the aggressive one of the group, so it must be true.

“No, it wasn’t for Handly. I would never ever work with that man. It was for another project I’m working on.” She needed a little more time before she told everyone her plans.

“So you met Hal last night. What did you think?” Victor had to know he was asking her a loaded question no matter how she responded.

“We only talked for a little while.” It was true. The rest of the time they were breathing too hard to talk. “I offered to switch him to a cabin, but he wanted to stay at the lodge.”

“I’ll talk to him to see if he’ll change his mind. Once we get started, he might want a place with little more privacy so he can concentrate.” Hopefully, Hal would take Victor up on the offer before they got together tonight.

She’d feel more comfortable knowing they were all alone once they finally ended up in bed together. They could relax, watch the movie, and get to know each other better.

*What the fuck was taking him and Bobbie so long?* She wasn’t going sit around and wait to find out. Frankie popped a piece of cheese into her mouth, started chewing, and had the perfect excuse for her escape.

She got to her feet. “I could use a soda. Anybody else need anything thing?”

"I'm good," Bobbie said as she waltzed into the room and dropped into the chair Frankie had just vacated.

Everyone else declined her offer, so she headed for the hall. The second she stepped over the threshold, she found herself pinned against the wall. Hal's mouth closed over hers, cutting off her squeal of surprise. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off her feet. As he carried her down the hall to the kitchen, her shoes dangled off her feet. He turned, using his back to push their way through the swinging door. By the time he eased her back to her feet they were both panting for air.

"I'll take the cabin," he said, and she nodded with a smile.

"How about a soda?" she asked. He nodded and she slowly backed in the direction of the fridge.

"God, it smells good in here," he said, sniffing the air appreciatively.

"Lasagna. Sam must want to make a good impression. No one can resist Sam's triple cheese lasagna." She was pretty sure she smelled fresh homemade garlic bread too, but she'd leave it for a surprise.

"So do they know or not?" he asked, and all she could do was shrug her shoulders.

"They didn't come right out and say anything, but they might have been circling it until we we're both in the room together." Anything was possible with her sisters.

She put some ice in two glasses, and just as she started pouring the soda, he said, "Bobbie didn't."

He reached over and tipped the bottle up, saving her from making a mess. "What'd she say?"

"A friend of hers spotted us and called her. So she drove over to see who you were with." He moved in close to her side and eased the bottle to the counter. "Will she tell the others?"

"Bobbie is unpredictable." Frankie let herself lean towards him, rubbing their shoulders together. "She helped Victor and Trent, but I have no idea why. Maybe she'll want to help you too?"

“She gave me the impression she was waiting for us to have some type of showdown with everyone out there.” Hal said as he laid his arm across her shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze.

“Oh yeah, they’ll all enjoy watching you squirm.” She chuckled, remembering the hassle she herself had given her brothers-in-law.

“Baby, I can’t wait to see you squirm.” The deep rumble in Hal’s voice sent a shudder through her.

Hopefully you’ll get a chance soon enough she thought giving his hip a bump. Hal chuckled and gave her a little bump in return. She loved the playfulness she saw in him.

“You think you’re that good,” she taunted, trying to sound cocky, but her gasp spoiled it as he spun her to face him.

“I know I will be with you. By the way, Bobbie and her friend think I’m sexy.” He puffed out his chest looking rather proud.

“That’s nice, but isn’t it more important that I think you’re sexy?” She pressed her hands on his chest, kneading a little.

He closed his big hands over her hips, pulling her closer. “No, but it’s important for you to know I think you are damn sexy.”

She wanted so badly to believe him. It hadn’t occurred to her right away that maybe he was just playing with her to ensure he had a good time while he was here. Still, she wasn’t going to let anything he said go to her head. Even if he thought she was the sexiest woman on the planet it wouldn’t matter because he was leaving in three weeks.

In the meantime, she was going to free up as much time as she could to spend with him. “We better get out there before they come looking for us, but first tell me what your schedule is going to be like while you’re here.”

“My schedule is pretty much flexible at this point. Why?” Hal let her slip out of his arms, but he didn’t step away.

“I was just thinking there are a few things we should do while you’re here. I just wanted to make sure if I plan something, then show up and kidnap you, you won’t get in trouble. I’ll make sure whatever

we do won't affect the project's timeline." Frankie needed to look at all the factors in taking up so much of his time.

"I'm sure Victor will be willing to cut me some slack." Hal said taking the glass she held out to him.

"I hope so, but I guess we'll know for sure once he finds out you're seducing me." Frankie said as the door swung open and they both spun to see who it was.

"He's in here with Frankie," Joey yelled back into the hall, then turned to them. "What's taking you two so long?"

"We were talking about some of the sights Hal should see while he's in town." Frankie wouldn't out and out lie to her sisters, but she had no problem leaving off bits of information.

"Did you tell him about the falls?" Joey's face lit up with excitement.

"Not yet. The falls are a must, though. If one of us can spare the time to take you, it's a great place for a picnic." Frankie could read the confusion on his face and winked hoping he'd be smart enough to play along with her.

"Since he's into construction the guys should take him out to the old mill," Joey added, pouring herself a glass of soda.

"Trent and Victor are too busy with work and their wives to shuttle him around sightseeing. And I don't think it wise to send him out on his own." Frankie hoped she could drop enough subtle hints tonight to get her sisters all thinking it was a good idea for her to squire Hal around to see what their little burg had to offer.

"Mmm, true," Joey agreed. "I'm sure we'll think of something."

Joey walked past them and held the door open, waiting for them to go through first. Hal took the lead with Frankie and Joey following. Frankie was glad he couldn't see the way her sister motioned to his ass and waggled her eyebrows. There was no denying it was a damn fine sight. In a sick way she was relieved their affair was going to be short, because she didn't want to deal with the jealousy she knew she'd feel when other women came on to him.

The conversation in the living room died as the three of them entered the room. Joey chose to sit with Bobbie and Georgie. Hal took the empty chair. Frankie had a few choices —sit on the couch with Jessie and Victor, sit on the arm of Hal's chair, or sit on his lap claiming him as hers. It felt like everyone was watching, waiting to see what she would do, when in truth they had already launched back into conversation. Either Bobbie really was the only one who knew, or her sisters were better actresses than she ever knew.

\* \* \* \*

As Hal sat there trying to get his body back under control he listened to the *Brazen* women talk. He had learned a lot in just a few minutes. Though they joked and teased each other, there was never any maliciousness. Every few seconds Frankie would make eye contact and give him a private little smile. This woman was making it hard to act like the civilized man he normally was.

"So, Frankie, I heard you had a nasty run in with Handly today," Bobbie said, and everyone turned their heads in Frankie's direction.

"It wasn't that bad, but he did want us to know his offer still stands. Oh, and he's still not happy about your uncle giving you guys his cabin." Hal waited for her to tell them about Handly's grabbing her, but she didn't.

He wondered if she kept it from them so her sisters wouldn't worry. Disclosing it would have ensured that Handly received a visit from Trent and Victor. Since Hal was the only one who knew he was going to make sure Handly got the message that all of the Brazen sisters and their property were out of his reach.

"Poor guy." Victor chuckled and pulled Jessie tighter against him.

"He'll get over it." Trent covered his wife's slightly rounded belly with his hand looking happier than Hal could ever remember seeing him.

“Anything else happen today we should know about?” Bobbie asked and Hal wondered if she was trying to push their affair out in the open.

“Actually, yes. I’ve made a pretty big decision. I’m going to write a book.” Hal felt Frankie’s excitement.

Victor and Trent’s mouths dropped open in surprise, but her sisters all started asking questions at the same time. She calmed them down and explained her idea of writing a how-to interior design book using the lodge as her canvas. Hal listened as she told them about all the research she’d done. They were all so excited for her, he found it hard not to get swept up in the momentum. If she managed to get it written he’d do everything in his power to make sure it got published. From the looks on everyone’s faces, he could tell they were all going to do what they could to help.

“There are still a lot of things I need to work out, but I wanted you all to know what I’m planning,” Frankie explained. Then she turned to Sam and Trent and said, “If you guys don’t mind. I’d love to include the before and after of the baby’s room.”

Tears fell from Sam’s eyes as she nodded. A loud buzzing came from the kitchen. Everyone got to their feet, so Hal followed. Her sisters kept talking about how cool it would be if she got published. Georgie was already talking about marketing and how she could help with promotion. As they all headed down the hall, Frankie looked back over her shoulder and winked at him.

Hal instantly realized what she’d done. By dropping her little bomb, she’d taken any focus that might have been on them and turned it all towards her. He knew he should’ve been relieved, but for some reason, he wasn’t. In fact, he was pretty sure he wanted everyone to know how much he wanted her. However, this was her family, and he would have to let her do things the way she saw fit, no matter how he felt about it.

Victor put his hand on his shoulder and said, “We’ll be right there.”

They held back as Sam and Trent and the twins went into the kitchen. Bobbie and Jessie went into the dining room. Frankie paused on the threshold and looked at him. He had no idea what Vic wanted, but smiled and nodded, telling her it would be okay.

"Listen, I know you and Frankie have something going on, or are about to. Just be careful." From the low tone of Victor's voice Hal got the point that Victor wanted this just between them.

"Am I ever anything else?" It sounded flippant, but the harsh truth was, he didn't trust many people.

"Dude, I'm serious. These women are dangerous," Victor held up his hands and smiled, "in a good way. Just be careful you don't let yourself fall for her unless you can live without a piece of your heart when you leave."

"Shouldn't you be warning me to stay away from her, or not to break her heart?" Hal asked, trying to lighten the mood. He was shocked that his friend was watching out for him, not Frankie.

"Jessie would cut me off if I took that pleasure away from her. I don't think Frankie would appreciate it either. Don't get me wrong. If you hurt her, and best friend or not, I'm required to try and inflict as much pain as I can. Since it'll be two on one, we might actually get in a few good shots." Victor slapped him on the shoulder and they both laughed as they joined the women in the dining room.

Jessie sat at one end of the long table set for nine with Frankie sitting beside her. Victor took his seat next to his wife, leaned over, and kissed her cheek. Ready to take whatever came his way, Hal took the empty seat between Frankie and Bobbie. Hal rested his arm across the back of Frankie's chair. She leaned into him and smiled. Bobbie and Victor glanced at each other, and then both of them looked at Jessie as if waiting for her to speak first.

The door swung open and the twins entered. One carried a big bowl of salad, the other a basket of thickly sliced homemade bread. They both froze, staring at Hal's arm around Frankie. Their stupor



only lasted a few seconds before they moved into the vacant chairs next to Victor.

Hal felt someone kick him under the table, but figured it was meant for Bobbie or Frankie. He was about to ask Frankie which when the door opened and Sam and Trent came in.

"So, I guess the rumors are true?" Sam said calmly, as Trent laid a huge platter of lasagna in the center of the table.

"Depends on what you've heard." Frankie put her hand on Hal's thigh and gave it a reassuring pat.

"Let's focus on the truth. What's going on between you two?" Jessie asked as Sam and Trent began loading plates and passing them around.

"We had breakfast together and tonight we're going to watch a movie or two," Frankie answered, thankfully leaving out the fact he couldn't wait to get her into his bed.

"We're getting to know each other." Hal wanted them all to know that, even though he was only here for a short time, he wanted to spend every minute of it with her.

"Break her heart and I'll break a more vital organ." Jessie said it with a smile, but a pregnant pause followed that told him she was dead serious.

Trent coughed, but it sounded a lot like a muffled laughter. Then he said, "I guess it's a good thing we've decided to move you into one of the cabins. Less witnesses." Which was followed by another muffled cough, but this one sounded like an ouch.

Within a few minutes, drinks were poured and everyone had food on their plates, including Hal. Frankie's three younger sisters asked him a few questions during the meal, which he answered or neatly evaded. Hal found it a bit odd that Jessie and Sam were silent. He looked at Victor for some help on that front.

Victor caught his eye and nodded. Soon the group was talking about the project and both women had joined in. They discussed everything from the actual construction work to be done to the

website design. It seemed to Hal they had everything planned down to the last detail. Frankie was just as excited as the rest of them.

Sooner than he expected desert, a delectable chocolate cherry torte, had been served. Bobbie and the twins finished quickly then excused themselves carrying their empty plates into the kitchen. Sam gave Trent a strange look, and he gathered up a handful of dishes and headed for the kitchen too. Jessie gave almost the same look to Victor, but he just smiled and leaned back in his chair.

“Frankie, why don’t you give us a few minutes alone with Hal,” Jessie said, and from her tone, he didn’t think it wasn’t a request.

“Fine. I’m going to run upstairs to change and grab the movie. You two be gentle.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek, whispering, “I won’t be more than five minutes. Will Victor protect you?”

“Go ahead, I’ll be alright.” He figured they couldn’t be more ruthless than some of the stuffed shirt board members he’d dealt with over the years.

## Chapter Six

Frankie made a quick change into a T-shirt and a pair of yoga pants she wore when lounging around the house. Not sexy by any means, but comfortable. She grabbed "*Turner and Hooch*" and a few other movies off her shelf, then headed back downstairs. She could hear her sister's voices as she reached the bottom step.

"Frankie doesn't date much, so she must think you're something special. Don't make her regret this," she heard Sam say, and she wished she could see the look on Hal's face.

"He won't hurt her, but I hope you two can say the same for her." Victor said and Hal laughed, which probably wasn't the brightest move she thought, inching her way to the door.

"As long as he behaves, I'm sure she won't hurt him too much." She knew Sam was joking, but she'd said the same thing about Jessie and Sam at one time or another.

She saw the slight movement of the kitchen door and knew her sisters and Trent were listening in as well. Reaching the door, she leaned against the wall in the hallway and waited for the perfect moment to pop in and rescue Hal. Right now, he seemed to be holding his own.

"I hope she's not going to keep him from getting any work done." Victor's laugh told her he was kidding.

"Work always comes first," Hal said, and although she couldn't see him, she could tell it was true, and he wasn't happy about it.

"I'm glad to hear that, but we're not slave drivers," Sam said with a laugh.

Jessie added, "As a matter of fact, we bowl every Tuesday night. Can you join us tomorrow?"

"He'll be there. If I can get Jake and Beau and one of the Mitchell cousins to join us, we can wipe the floor with you guys," Victor said, which Frankie took as her cue to step in before her sisters started trash talking.

"I'm ready," she announced as she walked into the room.

Hal got to his feet, walked over, and draped his arm around her shoulders. "I'll go, but I've never bowled before, so don't count on winning."

Frankie could hardly believe he'd never bowled before, or never saw one of Tam Hank's greatest films. Something wasn't right with the way things were adding up in her mind. Once upon a time, back when she was young and thought people were brought together for a reason, she would have wondered why he was brought to her. Was it so she could teach him it was acceptable, heck even good to have fun? Now that she was older and wiser, she was just glad to have him there, even if it wasn't meant to last. Still, that didn't mean she couldn't try to get him to take it easy and have some fun while he was here.

"Frankie, set him up in cabin two," Joey shouted through the kitchen door.

Side by side, Frankie and Hal walked down the hall. He didn't let go of her, even when they went through the door. He kept his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. Once they were on the porch, he pulled her to a stop and pressed his lips to hers.

Reluctantly Hal ended the kiss, lifted his mouth, and leaned back just far enough to look down at her. "I take it, you and probably Trent and your younger sisters heard everything?"

"Well, not everything, but, yeah, we heard enough." She didn't want him to waste time thinking about what they all thought. "So are you up for a night of laughs?"

“What do you have there?” He took the movies she held up and flipped through them.

She could tell by his twisted frown he’d never heard of any of them. She decided to cut him some slack on two of the four, because they were what most guys would consider chick flicks. But the other one was “*Bio-Dome*.” She’d never met anyone who hadn’t at least seen a little bit of it at one time or another.

“Are we going to watch them all tonight?” he asked as he opened the passenger door of his truck and waited for her to climb in.

“We don’t have too, but I figured maybe some time over the next few weeks, we might eventually get to watch them.” He closed the door and Frankie slid into the middle quickly fastening the seatbelt as he rounded the hood.

He reached his door, but didn’t get in. Instead, he looked towards the house. She glanced over a shoulder, sure enough, her sisters were standing in the living room window. They had to know, with it growing dark, that the light from inside made them stand out.

*She wondered if her sisters were actually trying to intimidate him?*

\* \* \* \*

Hal didn’t have to look at the house to see that Frankie’s sisters were watching them, but he did it anyways. His father had taught him that facing his obstacles head-on was the best way to determine the easiest route to get around. Sure enough, her sisters were all standing in the living room window staring at him. They were probably debating if they should drag Frankie back into the house and keep her locked up until he left. He was tempted to wave, just to see their reactions.

Instead, he opened his door and slid in behind the wheel. Taking her back to his room should have felt wrong in so many ways. The signs were right there in front of them. From the fact that they barely

knew each other, to knowing there was nowhere for this relationship to go neither of them seemed to have had the good sense to not act on the burning attraction. Hal had to guess since Frankie hadn't brought any of the issues facing them up, she was doing her best to ignore them like he was. He preferred to focus on how right she felt in his arms, and the way his body reacted to hers. Something that felt so damn good couldn't be wrong. If he believed in, or had time for, love at first sight, he would have sworn that's what this was. All he could do was ride out the waves of lust she brought out in him and hope neither of them got more than they could handle.

He started the truck and put it into drive. Frankie surprised him by laying her hand on his thigh, her fingertips just inches from his cock, which instantly hardened at the innocent connection. His foot pressed down a little too hard on the gas pedal as he struggled to get himself under control. Knowing there was only one thing to do, he yanked the wheel to the side and stomped on the brake as he shoved the shifter into park. Not daring to touch her yet, Hal closed his eyes and counted to ten.

"I can't believe they got to you." Frankie's hand slid off his leg as she shifted away, and he missed the contact.

His eyes popped open and a growl rumbled in his chest. In a quick move, he reached out and caught her hand, pulling her tightly against his side. It wasn't close enough. Shit, he had a feeling even when he was buried deep inside her, he still wouldn't feel close enough. He undid her seatbelt with one hand and yanked her onto his lap with the other. She was wedged between him and the steering wheel, but there was enough room for her to wiggle around. Even though this wasn't wrong, he had to admit it was probably the biggest mistake he'd made in a really long time.

"The only one getting to me is you." He saw the brief smile cross her lips before they were covered by his.

Wedged between his large frame and the steering wheel, she didn't have much room to move, but every little wiggle sent him

closer to the edge. His tongue flicked at hers, drawing her deeper into their kiss. She pressing herself against his chest and groaned. Her groan turned into little noises that vibrated in their mouths, creating a sensation he'd never experienced before.

He'd been with all sorts of women over the years, but no one quite like Frankie. Her natural sophisticated, yet down to earth personality was, from what he'd read in dozens of books and magazines, what millions of women strived for and couldn't achieve. She wasn't shy about letting him know what she wanted, or afraid to let him see the way her body responded to his touch. Although they barely knew each other, he already knew she didn't tease or play games to hurt someone or lead them on. If she started something, it was with the full intention of finishing it. And, man oh man, the way her touch set him on fire should have set off dozens of warning bells tolling. She shifted her weight and started to straddle his lap.

He grabbed onto her shoulders and tore his mouth from hers. "I will not take you here, like a horny teenager, with your family no doubt still watching."

She smiled and let him put her back into her seat, this time as far away from him as possible. Hal fought an immense struggle with his unruly body as they made the rest of the drive, which Frankie made harder by sidling closer. The fifteen minute ride to the lodge felt more like an hour. They still had to make it past the desk and up to his room without drawing too much attention to themselves. Either wanting to torture him, or really oblivious to the power she wielded, Frankie undid her seatbelt, leaned over, and kissed him. A deep, wet kiss that tasted like chocolate and a sweet hint of cherries.

He sat there, breathing heavily, while she hopped out of the truck and breezed up the stairs. With a quick wave urging him to join her, she disappeared into the lodge. He stepped out of the truck, leaned against it, and took a deep breath of the cool night air. It was fresh and exhilarating, but did nothing to bring down the fever raging through him. Frankie opened the door. She gave him a look that clearly said,

“hurry up,” then disappeared again. The poor kid minding the desk had to be wondering what the hell was going on.

Hal pushed himself off the truck and headed for the old log cabin style building not wanting to keep her waiting or give the kid time to work up the nerve to ask questions. He climbed the steps, telling himself to keep things light, but the second he opened the door, he knew that was out of the question. He paused with one foot over the threshold.

Frankie stood on her toes, leaning over the counter, looking at the computer’s monitor. When he first caught sight of the faded gray pants she’d put on, he thought she was going for comfort over style. It had made him smile, thinking that she felt comfortable enough around him to want to be herself. Once he touched her, though, he realized his mistake. The material was so thin he could feel her heat seeping through. And now, seeing her standing there in that position, with the soft jersey type material molded to her curves of her ass and hips, he had no doubt in his mind she’d had worn those pants to torment him. Not that they weren’t probably comfortable as hell, but if he had to guess, he’d think the added side effect of keeping him rock hard must have influenced her decision at least a little bit.

“Put him in number two.” Frankie said.

The kid nodded as he started punching keys. “Want me to help him get moved down?”

“Nah, he’s a big boy he can handle it on his own.” They both laughed and she said, “I’ll show him the way.”

Frankie wasn’t wasting any time, Hal thought with a smile. He stepped inside and let the door close behind him, inwardly cringing at the loud squeak that had them both turning to look at him. Getting the door adjusted was probably already on Victor’s list of things to get done before their grand reopening, but Hal made a mental note to mention it to him, just in case.



The kid broke the silence by saying, “Mr. Bernard, I’m glad you had a nice dinner with the Brazens. Ms. Brazen and I were just finalizing the changes to your accommodations.”

He was impressed by the kid’s professionalism, but Frankie just rolled her eyes. “Junior, there’s no need to be so formal. We’ve all decided to treat Hal like family.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, sir,” Junior teased, shaking his head as he turned back to his task.

“Smart ass.” Frankie stuck out her hand and wiggled her fingers. “Just give me the key card, and we’ll let you get back to your book.”

Junior looked at Hal as he handed Frankie the card. “They’re a bossy bunch. You sure you want to be treated like a member of the family?”

Hal rubbed his finger across his chin, pretending to think it over. Frankie walked over and grabbed him by the hand. Her touch may have looked innocent to the kid, but he knew better. The zap he felt when her skin met his was too strong to ignore. She tugged him towards the stairs, flashing the kid a huge smile.

“It’s too late to change it now,” she informed both him and the kid.

As she led him up the stairs, he realized just how true her statement was. This meant sooner or later they’d have a big problem to deal with. Hal really hoped after they got to know him, the real him, not the rich powerful CEO, he’d be able to come clean about who he was. If the Brazen women turned out to be the type of women he thought they were, they’d understand his reasons for subterfuge and forgive him. Normally, he just hid the facts from strangers for a few weeks while he cleared his mind, then disappeared, never seeing them again. This time the situation was different.

First, most importantly, he wasn’t dealing with strangers. If things worked out between Jessie and Victor, he might end up seeing them again, or at least talking to them from time to time.

Secondly, he wasn't just taking a break to recharge his batteries this time. He was avoiding a classic blond beauty who wanted nothing more than to see him married, but not to her. Tawny, his stepmother, who just so happened to be a year older than him, had declared it was time for him to settle down and give his father a grandchild.

For some reason their closeness is age didn't bother him the way he thought it should. What did bother him was the way she kept throwing her friends and even a few perfectly, innocent strangers in his path. And what did his good old dad do? Absolutely nothing. Hal figured he either didn't have the heart, or the balls to tell her to back off.

It still amazed him to see a hardnosed businessman, who had no problem ripping a competitor or board member to shreds, turn to mush when his stepmother batted her eyes and stuck out her bottom lip. The tiniest pout and his father would do whatever it took to make her happy. Since Tawny was just as eager to soothe any of his father's ruffled feathers, Hal figured it was a case of tit-for-tat. Of course, just like all couples, they argued, but never seriously, because Tawny doted on his dad.

Since she made him happier than Hal had seen him in a long time, he was more than willing to ignore their age gap, provided she stopped this insane plan of hers to get him married and nestled securely into fatherhood.

Lord above, if Tawny locked eyes on Frankie he'd be sunk, he thought, as she tugged him into the room and pushed him back against the door.

"Stop thinking so hard." Frankie pressed a quick kiss to his lips before backing towards the bed letting herself fall on it she smiled up at him and said, "Hal, Junior is a big boy. I'm sure he has a good idea what we're going to do, but he knows I'm really, really picky, so you have nothing to worry about. Besides the only thing you're supposed to be thinking about tonight is me."

“Believe me, honey, I’m thinking about you.” Hal had more he wanted to say, but when she propped herself up on her elbows his mind went blank,

“You are now, but out there on the stairs, your mind was definitely not on me.” She tipped her head to the side and smiled. “You can make it up to me later. Right now let’s get you packed and moved.”

She held out her hand, wiggling her fingers. He walked over and pulled her to her feet and into his arms.

“I’ll handle out here,” Hal said, “you go get my stuff in the bathroom.”

“Okay, but you’ll need to let me go.” She was right, but first he just needed to let her know what he was thinking.

Hal lifted her off her feet, spun them around, and pinned her between his body and the wall. He took advantage of her surprised gasp and took her mouth in a deep kiss. The feel of her breasts pressed against his chest as she pulled him closer drove him to the edge of reason. He plunged his tongue deep into her mouth. They darted their tongues around each other’s in a teasing dance. Within seconds, they were both primed and ready for action.

He slid his hand around her hip as he leaned back just far enough for him to wedge his fingers between their bodies. The ties of her pants brushed his hand, and Hal latched onto them, twisting tightly. One quick tug and he’d be able to slide the pants over her hips and down her long legs. Thinking about all that bare skin made it hard for him to concentrate.

He pulled his mouth from hers, finding her whimper of resistance weirdly satisfying. She took a deep breath, and his fingers jerked in response. She let out a soft gasp as her eyes widened. Before this went any further, he knew they should lay down some ground rules, but he couldn’t wait. He had to at least take the edge off their hunger.

“I’m going to make this quick, then we can decide on the rules.” Hal almost didn’t recognize his own voice. It sounded so rough.

He slid to his knees dragging her pants down with him. When Hal reached her calves, he let her pants fall to the floor. Her legs were amazing. Long, toned, and perfectly tanned. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to have them wrapped around his hips as he drove into her over and over until neither of them could take anymore. He leaned forward, resting his forehead on her thighs. As he let his hands slide up to her hips, she trembled under his touch. He inhaled deeply in an attempt to calm his heated lust, but her scent reached him. It was all he could do not to toss her onto the bed and satisfy them both, but he couldn't do that yet.

Frankie moaned and wiggled as his fingers tucked around the tiny pieces of stretchy material that held her skimpy panties at her hips. He wasn't sure what he'd expected to find under her lounge pants, but the insignificant piece of lime green lace wasn't it. She shimmied her hips and the panties slid down with barely any help from him. His breath caught in his throat at the sight he unveiled. Damn, this woman was full of surprises. Her neatly trimmed patch of hair was like a runway directing him where he so badly wanted to go.

## Chapter Seven

Frankie had never done anything like this before. Sure, she'd had sex, but this took things to a whole new level of anticipation. She'd never been so eager just because a man ran his hands over her body. It could have had something to do with the way Hal's breath felt like a cool light breeze against her heated skin. His fingers pressed into her flesh as he dragged them downward along with her panties. His slow intense friction had her fighting a shiver that crawled up her spine.

Hal lifted her foot out of the pool of clothes. He bent his leg, raised her foot, and placed it on his thigh. Frankie pressed one hand against the wall and the other on his head to keep herself from falling. She'd never felt so open or exposed and was surprised at how thrilling it was to see him close his eyes and take a deep breath. He pressed his lips to the inside of her thigh, and she trembled a bit.

He pulled back an inch or two and looked up at her. "You know, maybe we should wait until we get me moved."

Her hand involuntarily tightened in his hair, and he winced.

"Okay no stopping now. I get it," Hal said.

"Sorry." Shocked, she eased her grip, earning a smile from him.

"Don't be. I like a woman who isn't afraid to tell me what she wants. I've never met a woman quite like you, beautiful, sexy, and vicious. I think I like it." The husky timber of his voice sent a surge of liquid heat to her pussy.

"Good. Then you won't mind if I tell you your teasing me is a very bad idea." She could hold back her smile when she thought of all the interesting ways she could pay him back.

“Is that a threat?” His question was accompanied with a dip of his head as he nipped her thigh.

“More of a promise.” She pressed her shoulders back against the wall, which tipped her hips towards him.

“Well, in that case it might be worth waiting just to see what you do.” He started to pull away again, and Frankie decided she’d had enough of being on the receiving end of his teasing.

If he was into games, she had no problem playing along with him. Admittedly she was a novice, but with some practice, she figured she’d become a worthy adversary. There was no time like the present to try a few moves out.

“Okay.” She slipped the foot that she had on his leg closer to his knee, opening herself more to him.

His fingers pressed deeper into her skin. She let go of his head and the wall, slipping her hands to her stomach. She barely hid her smile when his eyes zoned in as she slowly slid her fingers down. When she reached the narrow thatch of neatly trimmed pubic hair, his eyes widened. The subtle bareness still new to her gave her a little boost.

She’d had it done after reading an article on ways to feel sexy without flaunting it. Of course, she doubted it would work, but Bobbie had dared her to try it. Now she owed her little sister a big thanks. With one hand, she parted the damp curls and used the other hand to slide between the slick fold of her flesh.

Hal’s groan filled the air. She felt his hand moving along her leg and waited until he was just about there before she reached over and slapped his hand.

“Oh no. You had your chance.” Her voice had a breathless quality she’d never heard before.

She wiggled her finger pressed between her thighs and brought her other hand up to cup her breast. Never having tried to tease anyone like this before, she wasn’t sure she was going about it the right way. But then, unexpectedly, Hal leaned forward and swung her over his shoulder as he got to his feet. Frankie grabbed onto his ass to

steady herself. Feeling the firm toned muscles there was just an enticing benefit.

From her inverted position, she gave him a pinch and said, “Hey, I wasn’t done. Is there some reason you want to keep me from giving myself what you won’t?”

Laughter filled the air, and she felt herself flying, well, more like falling, through the air.

She hit the mattress hard. Her shirt rode up around her boobs, showing off her belly. Before she finished bouncing, Hal had his body hovering over hers. He caged her in with his hands on either side of her shoulders. Though there was plenty of space between their faces, he settled hips firmly between her thighs. He rocked his pelvis against hers, and the rough fabric of his denim jeans abraded her over sensitized flesh.

He gave her a sexy smile and said, “Oh, I’m going to give it to you, sweetheart, until you can’t stand it anymore.”

Hal’s blue eyes darkened to an almost green hue. Their intense focus had her holding her breath in anticipation. His hands moved to her shoulders. She could feel their heat through her shirt. He held her in place as he slithered down her body. She sighed, barely able to keep herself from squirming as his mouth nibbled and kissed a trail from just below her breasts to her hip. His hand brushed along her sides as he brought them to her hips. He scooted lower between her thighs and flashed her a sexy satisfied grin.

She couldn’t tear her eyes off him as he lowered his head. His hands slid across the tops of her thighs and she felt his finger slide into her curls, opening her to him. He made a strangled noise, then she felt his breath blow on her delicate folds. The sensation was enough to have her hips rising off the mattress. She knew she was in trouble when she felt like begging, and he hadn’t even really touched her yet.

His lips settled over her, and she felt a slight tug on her clit before he began sucking hard. She started to reach for his head, but

remembered what happened earlier and fisted her hands in the comforter instead. His tongue licked and swirled, driving her insane. Her breath came in ragged pants between loud pitiful moans. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't hold still under his assault. Hal must have taken the wiggling of her hips as the desperate plea she meant it to be. His tongue kept teasing as he slipped a finger inside her hot channel. After a minute of playful testing, he added another, pressing deeper as he drove her to new heights.

Hal's devilish ministrations were more than she could handle. Of their own free will, her legs started to close around him. He didn't let her off that easy. He used his free hand and shoulders to hold her open wide as he feasted on her pussy until she screamed his name, begging for mercy.

Frankie had never felt anything so strong before. The aftermath of such an earth shaking orgasm, turned out to be her muscles had become mush. It was a small sacrifice that she wouldn't mind making as often as possible while he was there. The only part of the whole climax she regretted is he hadn't enjoyed as much as she did. She hoped he'd be coming right with her next time. Unable to more than just lay there and quiver, she decided to ignore the cocky smile he aimed her way as he got to his knees.

\* \* \* \*

Hal couldn't wipe the smile off his face, and not wanting to make her uncomfortable, he tried. He couldn't take his eyes off Frankie either. Damn, that had been fucking unbelievable.

"A satisfied woman is a beautiful thing to behold." Hal knew he was never going to forget it.

"Shut up," Frankie said as she tried to roll away from him, but he refused to let her go.

He pulled and she tugged, which resulted in their bodies being pressed together in all the right and wrong places. A wrestling match



filled with moans and laughter ensued. The only problem was the bed wasn't big enough, and they landed on the floor with a loud thud. He did his best to turn them so he took the brunt of the impact, but the hit was just as jarring for her as it was for him. He closed his eyes and waited for the tears, or slap he figured was coming.

Her body started shaking against him. Hal wrapped his arms around her, willing to accept any punishment as long as she didn't cry. It wasn't until she snorted that he realized she was laughing, not crying. He would never have thought that he would be lying on the floor with a half-naked woman he barely knew wrapped around him. This time away was meant for getting out of his normal routine for a while, but this was way, way out. He couldn't believe how right it felt.

Frankie eased out of his arms and crawled away. He sat up and watched her make her way across the room to her pants. Her sexy pink ass moved up and down with each stride. She looked back over her shoulder at him and winked. He was hard -pressed not to lunge after her. Hal couldn't take his eyes off her as she turned and faced him.

She sat on the floor with her back against the wall. Frankie picked up her panties and swirled them around on the tip of her finger. He felt the muscles in his jaw go slack. She winked again, and stretched the panties out between her hands and flung them at him. The scrap of lace floated through the air, landing a few inches from his feet. She slid her feet into her pants, each wiggle of her legs flashing him with teasing glances of her sweet pussy.

"Are you going to sit there all night, or are you going to get your ass moving?" Frankie said, and though he would have been willing to sit there and stare at her for awhile, the sooner they got him moved, the sooner they could finish what he'd started.

He got to his feet, walked over, and held out his hand to her. "Bossy. I've had women in my life like that."

He wished he could take the words back before they even finished coming out of his mouth. Not because of the way she suddenly found the strings on her pants so important. He hadn't meant it the way it sounded. The last thing he wanted was her thinking about him with other women. He wasn't very good with apologies, so he wasn't going to bother, but he would explain.

Using his knuckles, he tipped her chin up so she had to look at him. "My mother hadn't been shy when it came to telling me what she thought I should do. And now my stepmother has decided to take over for her."

"And do you listen to them?" She cocked her head to the side leaving him wondering what she was thinking.

"Enough to keep them happy." He'd often wondered if he'd gone too far, which would explain his stepmother Tawny's sudden intrusion in his love life.

She'd decided the time had come for him to give his father a grandchild. She'd even gone as far as dropping by the offices flaunting women she thought were acceptable. Not to mention the dozens of women she managed to get to volunteer at the charity events the company chose to sponsor. His father was trying to be helpful with the whole situation, but Hal could tell the bastard was getting a kick out of seeing him dodge the blatant and sometimes aggressive advances.

Her lips curved into a smile and she rubbed his chest. "Aw, that's sweet. The big tough man is a mommy's boy."

"Hardly." He might listen, or try to, but he always did what he thought was best.

"Oh, don't tell me I've hooked up with a rebel." Frankie leaned into him, and he felt his cock, which had eased to a semi-hard state, stiffen.

"Vixen." He swatted her ass and gave her a nudge towards the bathroom. "Get to work."

She walked away laughing. Hal walked over to the closet and leaned his head against the door. Damn! She managed to get to him harder and faster than anyone else ever had.

*Now what was he supposed to do about it?*

## Chapter Eight

Frankie slipped out of the bed. Hal didn't even move. After the wild night they'd had, she really didn't expect him to. Just because she had to get up at the crack of dawn didn't mean Hal had to. She crept into the bathroom and flicked on the light. One look in the mirror, and she wished she hadn't, but at least she would have a chance to fix herself up before Hal saw her later this afternoon. She should be glad she had to go, but deep down she didn't want to.

If this appointment hadn't already been postponed twice, she would call and reschedule. She'd been the one who decided that a breakfast meeting was the only way to mesh her schedule with her clients. Normally, the night before a meeting, she would spend at least a few hours going over the proposal she'd made. Last night it had been the farthest thing from her mind. All she'd been able to think about was the handsome sexy guy lying beside her.

There had been times throughout the night when Hal had made it impossible for her to form even the simplest of thoughts. Damn, she wanted to crawl right back in bed with him, but that was out of the question. She needed to get home, shower, grab her stuff, and head into town. Unable to hold back a huge yawn, she stepped into her pants and yanked her shirt over her head.

She'd seen firsthand how hard her brothers-in-law worked and knew Hal needed his rest. His job, like most construction workers, was strenuous, where her s was more tedious. There were even days when she thought she could do her job in her sleep. Today would be the test, because she was totally and thoroughly worn out. She slipped out of the bathroom and crossed the small cabin to the door. With one

last look over her shoulder, she slipped out into the early morning. The sun had barely risen, but there was enough light for her to make her way up to the lodge.

Not having her car, she'd either have to make the twenty minute trek home on foot, or she could take one of the four-wheelers and be there in just a few minutes. She wasn't up for walking, so four-wheeling it was. Junior didn't look surprised when she walked into the lodge. And he didn't even try to hide his smile when she ducked behind the counter and took a set of keys off the wall.

"I'll bring it back later," Frankie said as she scribbled her name on the sign-out sheet.

"Okay." Junior nodded his gaze still on the book he was reading.

She crossed the floor, relieved that Junior wasn't asking the questions she would've asked if she was in his shoes.

"Hey," Junior said, halting her escape, "Does he have any food down there, or should I send down a muffin basket?"

Frankie stilled inches from the door. She knew there was nothing but a few bottles of water in Hal's fridge. She didn't want him to starve or anything. Too bad she couldn't deliver him breakfast herself. Maybe tomorrow they'd have breakfast in bed.

"Yeah, but don't send it down until around eight." She reached for the door ignoring his chuckle.

She headed around back to where they kept the quads, which gave her a perfect view of Hal's cabin. She forced herself not to look at it. Instead, she ignored the machine rumbling under her ass and between her thighs and focused on her schedule for the day.

First there was this breakfast meeting, then she needed to make a few phone calls, and hopefully this afternoon she could get started on her book project. She pulled up behind the house and cut the engine.

If she was lucky everyone would still be asleep. There was a fifty-fifty chance that Sam might hear her come in. A few months ago, Sam would have already been up and getting ready to start her day, but

being pregnant, she was getting a little more sleep than she used to. Frankie snuck in the back door and up the back stairs.

“Good morning,” a deep voice said from the darkness and Frankie almost screamed as she jumped at least a foot.

Trent stood there leaning against the wall with his arms folded across that broad chest. He didn’t look happy.

“Hi. Did I wake you?” She kept her voice low not wanting to wake anyone else.

“No. Are you just getting in?” It was kind of funny that he was using the same tone her father had whenever one of them misbehaved.

She watched his face to see how he reacted. “Yes.”

“Thought so.” He pushed off the wall and closed the distance between them. “Are you okay?”

*This must be what it would have been like to have a big brother.*

Not that different from having bossy big sisters, she thought, with a smile. At least he had bigger shoulders to cry on if she needed them. She hated to even think about it, but she might need them after Hal left. Seeing the concern in Trent’s eyes, she felt sorry for teasing him.

Frankie laid her hand on his arm. “Trent, I’m fine.”

He covered her hand with his and a smile tipped the corners of his lips. “Is Hal?”

“Yeah, he’s good. He was still snoring when I left.” They both laughed.

“Why did you sneak out? You don’t strike me as the skittish type, like your sister Sam.” They all knew Sam had bolted on him a few times before he managed to get his ring on her finger, but those days were over.

“I have a breakfast meeting in town that I can’t miss.” Pushing herself up on her tiptoes, she pressed a kiss to his cheek, “But thanks for worrying. It’s sweet.”

\* \* \* \*

The sun streamed through the crack between the curtains and right into Hal's eyes. He rolled away from it, reaching out for Frankie at the same time. Instead of finding her warm soft, silky skin, his hand slipped into a pile of tangled sheets. He sat up, scanning every inch of the room for her. Waking up alone was a common occurrence for him, but today it just felt so...wrong.

Not seeing any sign of her, he slipped out of the bed hoping to surprise her when she came out of the bathroom. Maybe he could entice her into sharing a shower with him before he brought her home. He knocked on the bathroom door and waited for her to invite him in or tell him to go away, but there was no response. Hal pressed his ear to the door, hoping to hear the shower running. He didn't think the door would be thick enough to muffle any noise, but he didn't hear anything. Inch by inch he eased the door open. He stepped inside and looked around the empty room, wondering where the hell Frankie was.

Since he drove, she had no way to get out of here unless she walked. Her clothes and shoes were gone, which brought him to the only logical conclusion. *She's gone.* The idea didn't please him. Asking himself why she left didn't help either, because it occurred to him that she might have regretted last night. What if she hadn't enjoyed spending the night with him as much as he thought she did and left to avoid an awkward morning after? There had been times he'd wished women would just disappear, but this was not one of them. Damn, he was actually looking forward to a little morning-after nookie.

Hal grabbed his jeans and yanked out his cell phone, determined to get some answers. Most people would have been worrying about having service being this far out, but Hal had a plan that covered him anywhere. He paid a hefty sum and it would finally pay off.

He dialed Frankie's number and waited for her to answer. An intermittent buzzing noise came from under the bed. He tossed his jeans onto the bed and crouched down to look under it. Frankie's cell

phone did a little vibrating dance across the floor. He scooped it up and tossed it onto the bed with his. At least she'd given him a reason to go find her. Hal took a quick shower, and while he dressed, he tried to formulate a plan in his mind the whole time.

Not knowing her schedule, he decided the best place to look for her would be at her house. He stuffed both phones into his pocket and whipped the door open. The kid who had been manning the desk last night almost knocked on his face.

"Sorry. Frankie left orders for these to be brought down to you," the kid said, thrusting a basket of muffins at him.

Hal took the basket and put it on the table and then joined the kid outside on the small porch. "When did you see her?"

"Around four, I guess, because Sam got in a little after five." They walked over to the edge of the path where Hal's beat-up truck sat. "Do you want me to send anything else down? Maybe some microwave popcorn to eat while you guys watch all those movies."

Hal got the hint loud and clear. The kid was no fool, but was willing to pretend to be one if it protected Frankie's reputation. He earned Hal's respect with just that one sentence.

"Nah. I'm going to run into town and drop off Frankie's phone, then I'll do some shopping. But thanks for the offer, Junior." Hal held out his hand, and the kid shook it.

Hal didn't run into many young kids who had other people's best interest at heart. Hell, he didn't run into many adults who did either. Frankie and her sisters must treat the kid really good to have earned his loyalty. Hal would make sure Victor and Trent knew how lucky they were. The kid would go far if his friends had anything to say about it. Hal gave Junior a wave as he climbed into his truck and headed out of the parking lot.

It seemed like it was only a few seconds before he pulled to a stop in front of the big white house. In reality, he knew it had taken him a good ten minutes to get there, but his perspective was a bit skewed right now. At least he'd come up with a plan. If anyone asked, he



could say he was there to see Trent in order to keep the suspicions off him and Frankie. He climbed out of the truck as Bobbie came barreling out of the house. She would have run right into him if he hadn't stepped out of the way.

"Hey, short stuff, where's the fire?" He watched her open the door to a beat-up little car and toss a bulging backpack inside.

She slammed the door and turned to him. For a few seconds he thought she was going to either scream, or cry. Then she started laughing, and he let out a sigh of relief. She glanced back at the house and then at him. With a toss of her hands in the air, it all came out.

"Sorry. Thanks to my sisters tripping a breaker by all using an electric appliance at the same time, my alarm clock got fried. Now I'm running a bit late," she rounded her car, heading for the driver's side. "Oh, are you here for Frankie?"

He nodded and she laughed. "Duh. Dumb question, right? Well, she's not here."

Not here. Fuck. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He still had the excuse of needing to return her cell phone, but he needed to find her first.

"Stop fretting. That wrinkle in your forehead is really unattractive." He instinctively reached up to smooth it away, and she giggled. "Relax. She had a breakfast meeting in to wn. You'll find her at Dionne's."

Hal walked over and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Thanks. I owe you one."

He didn't even bother to ask her for directions. He just jumped back in his truck and headed for town. He drove into town scanning the buildings. He located Dionne's easily since it was smack dab on the center of Main Street. One glance into the packed parking lot and Hal knew he needed a plan, because rushing in and dragging her into his arms in front of the crowd didn't sound too good.

He spotted her car and pulled into the closest empty spot next to it. Killing the engine, he just sat there thinking. People walked by

eyeing him warily. Not that it surprise him. This was a small town and a stranger like him was bound to garner a little attention. It suddenly hit him that most people probably knew Frankie or one of her five sisters. With a family that big, in a town this small, it would be pretty hard not to run into someone one of them knew.

Hal stepped out of the truck and started walking the short distance to the door. He hoped like hell something would come to him before he got there. As he came around the corner, he spotted Frankie through the window that ran across the front of the building. She sat at a table with an older, refined looking woman and a guy around his own age, but nowhere near as good looking, in his opinion. From the point of view of a businessman, Hal would have to admit everything looked on the up and up, but from the viewpoint of her lover he thought the guy looked at Frankie with a little too much interest gleaming in his eyes.

A part of him stood up and shouted that he should go in there and drag her out. He barely fought back the urge. Usually he wasn't one for making rash choices, but since laying eyes on Frankie, he'd been acting on instinct. Raw and one hundred percent genuine impulses were driving him. On the surface, most of them seemed sexual, but he knew it went way deeper. With a little flash of his cash, Hal figured he could probably have his choice of women. He'd never had to resort to that before and didn't plan on it now.

Besides, right now, he only craved one woman, and he was beginning to think his money wouldn't get him anywhere with her. He'd never wanted any other woman so much. He didn't like the foreign and unnerving way he felt. He told himself it was a good thing he would only be around Frankie for a few weeks, because any longer, and he might become addicted to her.

The restaurant's door opened and a woman with a baby on her hip ushered out three little boys who danced around her knees. This scene wasn't one he came across in the city. Usually, by the time he got out of the office, it was late and most of the restaurants he

frequented didn't really cater to families. Of course, that was by choice. Ever since his stepmother, Tawny, started to harp about it being time for him to settle down and give his father some grandchildren, he'd felt awkward eating alone surrounded by couples and families. Still, Hal wasn't ready to admit that she might be right just yet.

He was willing to go was admitting he wouldn't mind taking Frankie to a place like this. He decided to make a point of taking her out and giving himself a chance to see if he liked it. He knew that couldn't happen unless she came clean with her sisters about dating him, if that's what you could call what they were doing, while he was there.

*Did that mean subconsciously he wanted her to?*

Not wanting to give himself too much time to dwell on it, Hal pulled the door open and stepped inside. The restaurant had a nice homey feel to it, yet there were enough classy touches to give it an elegant charm. Frankie sat with her back to him, which gave him a few more seconds to come up with something intelligent to say. He noticed a few women trying to catch his eye and deftly avoided them. While he hesitated, the son of a bitch sitting across Frankie slid his hand across the table his fingers covered hers.

Hal wished he could see her reaction to the guy's touch. Was she smiling, pleased with his attentions? Or, was she frowning with disgust? She didn't pull her hand away, so he had to assume she didn't mind. It didn't go unnoticed by him and probably others that the bastard hadn't taken his eyes off Frankie since Hal had walked in the door. He'd seen that look on other guys' faces before. He was eating her up with his eyes. Whoever he was, the bastard wanted her.

Suddenly the guy let go of Frankie's hand, and the three of them rose to their feet. Hal watched the woman, who was now smiling, shake Frankie's hand before pressing a quick kiss to the guy's cheek and walking away. She headed right for Hal. He stepped back, giving her room to pass between him and the hostess's podium. He returned

the nod and smile she gave as she passed. When he turned his attention back to Frankie, he found her in the jerk's arms with her feet dangling inches above the floor.

All the sounds around Hal faded. His hand fisted, and before he could stop himself, he strode across the restaurant. He didn't think. He was just going with the flow. As he got closer, he could hear Frankie's laughter mixed with the guy's deeper laugh. It sent him over the edge. Hal marched over, reaching them just as the guy lowered Frankie back onto her feet.

Hal reached out and grabbed Frankie's arm, spinning her around to face him. Without a word, he scooped her up, slung her over his shoulder, and headed for the door. Gasps and laughter from the patrons accompanied Frankie's squeal. Hal just walked out the door.

## Chapter Nine

Frankie squealed and squirmed, but it did her no good. Hal just kept going. To her surprise, her friend Simon Cruft leaped from his seat and ran to open the door for him. She'd deal with him later. Right now, she had her hands full with Hal's ass, literally, to keep from falling. She was afraid if she let go she'd plummet head first to the ground.

Frankie stopped fighting and held on tightly as Hal's long legs ate up the distance between the restaurant and his truck. People stopped and stared as they, well he, walked by. She guessed right now at least twenty people were trying to call her sisters. Frankie knew they'd gotten lucky with only Bobbie finding out about their very intimate breakfast the other day. There was no way in hell that her sisters weren't going to hear every little detail about this escapade.

"Do you realize what you've opened yourself up to?" she asked.

Hal lowered her to the ground, keeping her body in contact with his the whole time.

He pinned her with an angry glare, ignoring her question. "Who's the guy?"

"Half the people in there are probably calling my sisters, the other half are probably calling the sheriff." She wondered why her cell phone wasn't buzzing away.

Hal took a step forward, backing her against the side of his truck. "Either you tell me who that guy is, or I'll go ask him."

"Easy, tiger." Okay, maybe laughing wasn't the right thing to do, but she couldn't help it. "That guy was Mrs. Ogilvie's grandson, and he's not my type."

“Honey, he may not be your type, but you’re his.” Hal’s fierce tone just made her laugh harder. “What the fuck is so damn funny?”

“He hugged me because I just helped him convince his grandmother to invest in his dance studio. Nothing more.” She never would have taken him for the jealous type, especially not over a fling, which is all she was.

“If you really think that was all there was to it, you haven’t been paying attention.” He braced his hands on either side of her and leaned in.

The minty smell of his mouthwash tickled her nose. There was no doubt in Frankie’s mind that the few inches that separated them would be enough to keep the town gossips going for months. Hell, by the end of today, she was going to either be sequestered in Jessie’s office listening to a lecture about behaving like a proper lady, or she’d be on the phone with her clients explaining this little episode. What she needed to do was get him out of here before he made things any worse.

“Hal,” she put her hand on his chest fisted it in his shirt pulling him to her, and in a whisper said, “he and his boyfriend, Mike, aren’t into women. If anything, he’s probably back there drooling over you. Now can we get the heck out of here? We’re starting to draw a crowd.”

Hal looked back over his shoulder and groaned. A few people among the group standing by the corner of the building actually waved at him. Frankie eased her grip, smoothing her hand down his chest. He took a step away and yanked open the passenger door.

“Get in the truck.” Damn, even his growl sounded sexy, Frankie thought as she did as he said.

Now didn’t seem like the right time to remind him she had her own car. She climbed in, doing her best not to flinch when he slammed the door. He managed to walk around the front of the truck, keeping his eyes on her the entire way. It took every ounce of her self-

control not to squirm under his watchful gaze. He didn't say a word as he climbed in the truck and stabbed the key into the ignition.

Her phone started to buzz. For a second she thought about ignoring it, but she knew her sisters would freak out even more if she didn't answer. Frankie reached for her bag to get out her phone. Hal's hand suddenly covered hers.

"Dude, after your display back there I have to answer it." His laughter caused her head to snap up.

"Honey, if you don't answer, two angry men are going to hunt me down and beat me black and blue." He tugged her hand and pressed it on his thigh. "You forgot something when you ducked out on me this morning."

Frankie felt the vibration as her phone buzzed again. She moved closer and tried to stick her fingers in his pocket to get it out. Even after he lifted his hips it was still a struggle, but she managed to slide the slim phone out. His grunts and groans may have had more to do with the fact that her fingers brushed over his zipper two or three times during the retrieval. The first time had been purely accidental, but when she felt him instantly start to harden under her touch, it was impossible not to do it again. She didn't bother to look at the number. She just hit the little green button, allowing the call to go through.

"Hello," she said.

"Don't come home, or go to the lodge. Take him anywhere but here," Bobbie whispered her words like rapid fire.

"Just let me talk to Jessie." Frankie was sure she could clear all this up with a few carefully chosen reassuring words.

"She's busy trying to calm everyone down. Tell lover boy he's lucky Jake was here when he got the call, so I was able to persuade him to let us call you first," Bobbie's voice came through a little louder and slower, which probably meant she stepped away from her sisters.

"Bobbie, just tell everyone I'm on my way." Someone had to take the heat and it may as well be her.

“Jessie said you’d say that. She also said to tell you she’s got everything under control.” Bobbie’s laughter seemed a little forced. “She will too, and you know it.”

Before Frankie could argue anymore, Bobbie ended the call. Even though everything Bobbie said was true, Frankie didn’t like it. Frankie hated that her sisters were in an uproar because of her. Jessie would have everything under control in short order, but it wasn’t her responsibility. Damn it, they had enough on their plates right now without Frankie making things worse. She should have ignored her attraction to Hal. That would have been impossible, but if she had been upfront with her sister about things between her and Hal, then this wouldn’t have been an issue.

“What’s going on?” Hal asked, but before she could respond, his phone started ringing.

He grabbed it out of his shirt pocket and pressed the speaker button. “Hello.”

“You stupid jackass. Do you have any idea what you’ve done? What the fuck were you thinking?” Trent’s shout was so loud Frankie jumped.

Hal reached over and pulled her against his side. “I’ll explain when we get there.”

“That’s, so not a good idea. The phones been ringing off the hook, take Frankie out for the rest of the day and give her sisters some time to cool down. Make sure you enjoy the time alone, because if my wife has anything to say about it, this may be the last time you two will ever be alone together again.” Trent’s laugh reverberated in the air.

“Just because she’s older doesn’t mean she can tell me who I can see.” Frankie’s outburst was an automatic response acquired from years of living with a controlling sister.

“I’ve never met such a stubborn bunch of women. God I hope Sam has a boy.” Trent said, and though a nephew would be nice she knew he would be happy no matter whether it was a boy or girl.



“We’re coming home, so brace yourself.” She snapped the phone closed on whatever his response might have been.

She looked over at Hal. “You better brace yourself too, because they’re going to be all over you like a fat kid on cake.”

\* \* \* \*

“This is all your fault, you know.” Hal almost laughed when her jaw dropped open.

“My fault?” Frankie stabbed her index finger at her chest as she said it, then waved her hand in his direction. “What happened to this being a casual thing between us while you’re in town? That little scene back at the restaurant didn’t seem very casual.”

Her accusation hit its mark and he nodded. She was right that had been his fault, but not completely. In Hal’s eyes, they both could take some of the blame, because there was plenty to go around.

“We never did get to the ground rules last night, which again was your fault,” he said.

“Mine? I seem to remember you being too busy stripping my clothes off to take the time to lay down those rules of yours,” she said. The hard edge he heard in her voice implied he’d hurt her feelings, but the twinkle in her eyes told him she like it.

He groaned, because even though he felt guilty, he wished there was a bed nearby so he could do it again. “Damn it. That’s exactly what I mean. I can’t seem to think straight when I’m around you.

“Oooh,” Frankie said, her sigh drawing the word out.

Most women Hal knew would have been thrilled to have him admit they got to him. With Frankie’s pale cheeks and wide eyes he’d say she looked...shocked would be a good description. He was surprised himself.

“Can we talk about this later?” Her request sounded more like a demand, even more so when she followed it with, “Right now we have to find a way to get you out of this trouble *you* caused.”

The combination of her innocence and her boldness pushed all kind of buttons in Hal. They drove along in silence for a few minutes. Every time she made the slightest move, he glanced over at her. At this rate, they would crash before they made it to her place. They needed to get a few things straight, and he needed to get some of the raging passion out of his system before they faced her family.

Hal yanked the steering wheel to the right, and stomped on the brake pedal. The truck swerved, bouncing onto the shoulder of the road. Carefully he maneuvered the truck down the small hill behind some trees. They weren't completely hidden, but hopefully anyone who drove by would be going fast enough and wouldn't notice. He slammed the gear shifter into park before pulling Frankie onto his lap. She didn't resist, but she didn't make it easy for him either.

Once he got her settled, he tipped her chin up so she had to look at him. "I think you're right about me being in trouble, but it has nothing to do with my *bosses*, or your sisters."

She shook her head and slid her arms around his neck, making herself comfortable. "Really. Then you're even more delusional than I thought, because if we don't have a damn good explanation for your behavior my sisters will make it their mission to make you regret it for the rest of your stay."

"Well then, I'll just have to tell them the truth." He wouldn't really have any other choice.

"Which is?" she asked, and he knew she couldn't be so blind she didn't see it.

Fuck it. He may as well practice it before he made the announcement to her entire family.

He took a deep breath then said, "I saw the way that guy looked at you and decided he should know you're off limits."

"Well, that'll set them spinning." She was probably talking about her sisters, but Hal knew Trent and Victor would be reeling too.

"Jealousy is an unusual feeling for me. I guess I over reacted ."

Saying it out loud didn't make it any easier for him to accept.

“Lust can turn even the smartest guy into a fool.” Frankie smiled as she slipped her hand down and patted his chest.

He’d felt lust before, but what he felt right now was so much stronger. For now, he was willing to grab onto her excuse for his behavior. “And how does a woman in lust act?”

“I think from the way I’ve fallen into your arms you can see it makes her a little crazy too,” she confessed.

Hal thanked God, Cupid, or whoever was in charge of matching people up that he wasn’t the only one who’d been thrown for a loop. She was definitely handling it better than he was though.

“So am I forgiven for acting like an ass?” he asked, hoping she’d take pity on him.

Hal wasn’t surprised that she made him wait for an answer. He knew if the roles were reversed, he’d have to think it over, so he expected nothing less. She should seriously think twice about forgiving him, because he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t embarrass both of them again at some point before he left town.

“Yeah, I can let it go this one time. Besides, you’re too sexy for me to stay mad at, but why don’t we discuss your rules so we don’t have any more of these little outbursts.”

“Fine. Let’s start with rule number one. Exclusivity. I don’t expect you to be at my beck and call while I’m here, but I don’t want to have to think about you and other men.”

Frankie snorted and shook her head. “Not something you have to worry about. If anything, I should be worried about the women in town making a play for you.”

“Okay, moving on to number two. We’ve pretty much covered this one already. Honesty at all times.” She nodded and he moved on to the next thing on his list. “Number three, no regrets.”

“Here’s the deal. I’ll agree to all of your rules, if you’ll agree to one of mine.” Frankie’s soft whisper had him leaning his head closer to hers.

“Name it.” It was damn hard to focus with her wiggling her ass against his dick, but Hal managed to nod his agreement.

Shit. He never agreed to anything without thinking it over first and considering all the options. It just proved he’d lost his mind. He should just take her home, drop her off, and get the hell out of town before he did something stupid. He had friends who had gone nuts over women. They tossed loads of money around, got into fights, and promised their undying devotion. Hal didn’t want to turn into one of those sappy fools.

“The next time you see a guy looking at me or touching me in a way you don’t like,” she paused at his groan then smiled, “which you most likely won’t, walk up and say hello. It’ll probably draw almost the same amount of attention, but it’ll give people less to talk about.”

*Yeah right, he’d just walk up and say ‘Hi, I’m Frankie’s lover. Now please direct your eyes elsewhere before I blacken them.’*

He figured that probably wasn’t what she had in mind. Hell, it wasn’t what he wanted either. He knew he would have to keep his emotions locked up tight unless they were alone. And even then, he was afraid if he wasn’t careful he might let too much show. If she caught a glimmer of the real depth of his feelings for her, it might lead her on. He didn’t want to do that.

Not when he couldn’t give her everything she deserved. He just wasn’t ready for anything serious yet. At least he hadn’t been when he left home, but since he met Frankie, Hal realized he was becoming more comfortable with the idea. If he ended up hurting her, Victor and Trent would be first in line to kick his ass. He just wasn’t sure he could be civil if another man laid his hands on her again.

“Honey, it’s already happened twice, so I don’t feel as confident as you. If I could I’d suggest we lock ourselves in my cabin for the next few weeks.” He eased her off his lap opened his door and stepped out of the truck.

## Chapter Ten

Hal slammed his door and started pacing back and forth along his side of the truck. Not for a second did he think Frankie was about to let him get away with a comment like that without giving him her two cents on the subject. He was right. She got out and came around the back of the pick-up to face him. She jammed her hands on her hips, giving him a look that would have scared a lesser man.

Hal stopped walking and took in the vision she made. He slowly let his gaze travel up from black leather high-heeled boots that ended just below her knees to her skirt, which started right above her knees and clung to her thighs and hips. The stretch of the material looked damned fine on her. He moved his gaze to her shiny see-through pink blouse. He had no idea what the sexy silky shirt with the tiny straps under it was called, but it showed off enough of her cleavage that he wanted to take it off. He could probably snap the strap with his teeth.

The strange thing was, he'd seen similar outfits on other women, but none of them made his dick pulsate the way this one did. Right now, his cock was pressed painfully against his zipper. He knew it wasn't polite to do it in front of a woman, but he had to reach down and adjust himself. Frankie's smile grew wider with each step she took towards him.

"We really should do something about this." Frankie said as she boldly reached out and stroked him through his jeans.

Hal couldn't hold back his groan. The friction was like hot flames licking his skin. He caught her wrist and still her hand. That didn't stop her teasing exploration. Instead, she molded her fingers around him and squeezed.

“This isn’t the place.” He wished to God it was, but anyone could come across them.

Frankie eased her grip and tugged her hand out of his, then crooked her finger, and said, “Come with me.”

Hal let her take his hand and lead him around to her side of the truck. Once there, she let go, walked over and opened her door. Frankie turned back to face him and he noticed the sparkle in her eyes. He watched as she slid her hands down over her hips. Using just her fingers, she drew her skirt up. Inch by agonizing inch, it went higher and higher. By the time it reached her hips his heart was beating so hard, he thought it was going to explode in his chest.

Frankie kept tugging until her skirt was bunched up around her waist. Hal watched as she stuck her thumbs under the sides of her panties and shoved them down over her hips. They slid past her thighs and knees, and landed around her ankles. She stepped out of them and crooked her finger at him.

He unfastened his jeans as he walked towards her. Hal watched her hop up onto the seat and brace one foot on the armrest of the door, a position that put her on display for him. He pulled his wallet from his pocket, fished out the foil packet, and tossed the wallet on the dashboard. Frankie took the condom from him and slowly rolled it onto his cock, while he shoved his jeans down past his hips. Within seconds he was sheathed and standing between her knees.

Frankie’s fingers wrapped around the material of his shirt and pulled him forward, and just before her lips covered his, she said, “We’re gonna have to make this quick.”

Her tongue teased his into an intimate dance as she made sexy little noises. He grabbed her hips to hold her in place as he slipped into her. She was hot, wet, and so fucking ready it drove him wild. He forced himself to go slowly at first. Frankie urged him to go faster, so he picked up the pace. Frankie gave as good as she got, tipping her hips up to meet his thrust. She dropped back onto her elbows, which put her breasts on display. He could see her hardened nipples pressed

against her blouse. Hal couldn't stop himself from reaching up to caress her. He cupped one of her breasts and brushed his thumb over the sensitive peak.

Hal felt her start to shake beneath him, and he knew that neither of them was going to last much longer. Frankie screamed out his name shuddering as she dropped to her back on the seat. She crossed her legs behind his back, holding him to her. Hal's legs trembled with the force of his own release and grabbed onto the back of the seat and the dashboard to keep from falling on her.

"Wow." She dropped her legs and he helped her to sit up.

"I agree." He opened the glove box and pulled out a package of tissues.

Frankie laughed as they started to clean and straighten themselves.

Hal had to ask, "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking for my first time parking, I, we did pretty damn good." She smiled and he thought it lit up her whole face.

Before he could respond, a male voice said, "Ms. Brazen, is everything okay?"

Hal spun around surprised to find a sheriff's deputy standing a few feet from the back of the truck staring at them. He hadn't heard a car. How long had this guy been there?

## Chapter Eleven

Tongues were wagging all over town. It wasn't like Frankie and her sisters hadn't given people plenty to talk about over the past few months. First, there was Jessie's long-lost husband, which no one knew about, returned to claim his heart again. Next, was Sam's surprise pregnancy and very unusual and hasty wedding to their brother-in-law's brother. Lastly, Frankie had been spotted all over town for the past two weeks with a stud muffin half the women in town wished they could get cozy with.

Still, Frankie was pretty sure most of what had been said so far was just speculation. Only one person other than the people directly involved had the inside scoop on what had really happened. Jake would never tell anyone though. Not because he was in love with her youngest sister, Bobbie, either. He'd keep it to himself because he was practically one of them. The Brazen sisters treated him like family, which is why he was currently sitting at their dining room table glaring at Hal.

Frankie would have felt bad for Hal if he and Jake weren't so evenly matched. Not so much in their looks, but they both had a fierce protective streak that gave them an edge over most other guys. She knew if she had a quick private conversation with Jake, she could get him to ease back. Probably not all the way, but enough to give him a chance to see that Hal wasn't a bad guy. Instead, she decided to distract Jake for a while.

She turned to Bobbie. "Hey, I almost forgot that Shawn stopped by today. He told me to tell you he got tickets for that concert you wanted to see."



“Yay!” Bobbie squealed doing a little dance in her seat, which really got Jake’s attention.

His head twisted towards Sam when she said, “I thought you said they weren’t coming up this far.”

“They’re not. I’m going down to Boston to see them,” Bobbie said, and everyone’s head swung towards her, including Hal’s, who had no idea what was really going on.

“Bobbie, that’s a long way to drive just to see a concert.” Due to Joey’s practical nature, sometimes she missed the most obvious things. Not this time, however. She glanced over at Jake before saying, “You’d be better off to stay overnight, or maybe the whole weekend.”

Frankie wanted to laugh at the pout on Jake’s lips. She’d started this, and it was for a good cause, but she was beginning to feel a bit guilty. She’d make it up to him later. Right now, she was going to take advantage of the diversion and sneak out. She reached under the table and laid her hand on Hal’s thigh. He moved his leg closer to her, but kept his eyes on the action happening on the other side of the table. She slid her hand higher, covering his zipper and gave him a little stroke, which got his attention. It also got everyone else’s attention, too, when he jumped and shook the entire table.

“Everything okay over there?” Sam asked, elbowing her husband, who was trying not to laugh, in the ribs.

Hal’s cheeks turned a deep red as he reached over and captured her hand. “Fine.”

“Good,” Jake said. Not wanting to let anything keep him from getting his answers, he turned his attention back to Bobbie and asked, “Now who is going on this little trip?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said with a smile that really got him riled up.

Frankie leaned in close enough so only Hal could hear her. “Now would be a good time for us to go.”

“Now?” He glanced at her, then back to Jake, obviously interested in seeing how this all played out.

Frankie turned her hand over under Hal’s. She wrapped her fingers around his and tugged. He got up, though a little reluctantly, and let her pull him to the door. It didn’t surprise her that bit by bit Hal was getting sucked deeper into her life by her family. It was going to be hard for her when it was time for him to go. She figured it would probably be harder for him with all the connections he was making here. Maybe that was just hopeful thinking on her part. Frankie reminded herself he had another life somewhere else. She’d resigned herself to the fact that even though he worked for her brothers-in-law he most likely wouldn’t have a reason to come back.

If he did come back, would things be different? Probably not. She sure as hell wasn’t going to sit around and wait for him. Frankie had a life to live and goals she wanted to achieve. This brief interlude was a fun disruption to her normally boring life, but it would be over in a matter of days. She would make sure the next few days were something neither of them would forget, starting tonight with the romantic scene she set up in his cabin.

Once she had Hal outside, she shoved him against the wall and plastered her body to his. One look into his wide blue eyes filled with shock had a sense of power surging through her. Frankie’d never felt this potent feeling before. She pushed onto her toes, raising her face to his. He started to lower his head, but she tilted her head to the side, stopping with her lips inches from his ear.

“I have something special planned for us tonight.” She kept her voice low even though they were completely alone.

He grabbed her hips, tugging her to him. “I’m up for whatever you have in mind.”

Frankie couldn’t hold back her lust-filled sigh. “Never had a doubt about it.”

This man was built for sex, among other things. She was going to make sure she got her fill before he drove out of town. It bugged her

to admit it, but he'd most likely be taking a huge chunk of her heart with him. Still, a little heartache was worth the time she'd spent with Hal over the past two weeks, four days, and fourteen hours. What she had planned for the next few days would just be the icing on the cake.

\* \* \* \*

Hal hadn't been kidding. He was ready to sample whatever naughty little adventure Frankie had her heart set on. He knew she wasn't into anything too kinky, but he liked that she was adventurous and playful in the bedroom. Her lovemaking was as unique as she was. She could be the seductive vixen one minute, then in a flash she was the shy innocent urging him to lead her into a sinful night of passion.

He'd be torn if he had to choose which version he liked better. No woman, not even the most experienced he had been with, and he'd been with a few, had ever lured him in the way she did. Walking away from her would be the hardest thing he ever did, if he actually managed to do it. He kept telling himself to break the one rule he hadn't when it came to taking these short breaks from his real life. He needed to tell her the truth about who he was. No doubt she'd be furious at first, but he knew that somewhere deep inside she'd forgive him.

*Then what?* It was the question that kept him up at night, when she finally let him sleep. Frankie had more than enough class and wit to schmooze the people who worked for him, and his clients, but she also had enough backbone to stand up to the ones who might give her a hard time.

He hoped she'd think he was good enough to be accepted in her world. Trent and Victor would do what they could to help him fit in. Her family wouldn't mind his wealth since the Weatherly brothers had way more money than he did, but he had a lot more connections, so he figured that made them even. Hal knew, for the most part,

people in town hadn't given the boys too much of a hard time. Except for Sam's ex-boyfriend who had made a big stink, but Trent and Jake had put him in his place.

Hal honestly had no idea how he and Frankie would handle the living arrangements, but he had more immediate issues to consider before he focused on that. A much bigger question gave him so much angst that it felt like a hot coal burning a hole in his stomach. It instilled a fear he had never encountered before. When they started this, they both knew it would be temporary. He didn't know if it he had the right to change things on her. His feelings may have gone past a quick fling into wanting something more, but Frankie hadn't given him any signs that her feelings might have wandered that way as well.

If he made a move, he'd be taking a chance on making a fool of himself. Then again, if he didn't, he'd definitely lose the chance to spend the rest of his life with a woman who would, at the very least, keep things interesting.

He'd heard guys whine about women and what finicky creatures they were, but he never really cared about a woman enough to put up with any feminine nonsense. If a woman developed an attitude, or showed attributes he didn't like, he just ended the relationship and moved on.

He had a feeling that no matter how Frankie acted, he wasn't going to be able to just give up on her. Of course, the niggling voice in the back of his mind kept reminding him he might not have a choice. His future would be thoroughly in Frankie's hands if he manned up and told her he didn't want things between them to end. Normally, with a decision as big as this he would take a step back and reevaluate before he made a choice. He only had three days to declare his intentions and hopefully persuade Frankie to allow the two of them the chance to see if they could make it.

Frankie leaned back and looked up at him. "We should go."

"So I take it we're not going to make love on the porch where your sisters could find us."

Frankie pulled out of his embrace, latched onto his hand and tugged him along behind her as she headed for the stairs, and he let her.

“Well, I admit I’ve had some wicked fantasies about me and you enjoying the porch swing in ways it was probably never meant,” Frankie looked back over her shoulder and flashed him a smile as she added, “but it’s a little chilly for that right now. Besides I haven’t figured out the mechanics yet.”

Hal’s next breath caught in his throat and his pulse surged when an image of her kneeling astride him flooded his mind. He came to a sudden halt, causing her to slide backwards into his chest. This was his chance. She’d given him the perfect opening, and all he could do was stand there and stare at her. He could simply say, “We could try it this summer,” and hope her response would be a happy one. He would have said it, if his brain hadn’t decided it was time to create a slide show of ways they could use that damn swing.

“Earth to Hal.” Frankie waved her hand so close to his face she almost hit his nose.

“Sorry.” He let her start walking again.

By the time they reached his truck, he’d regained enough of his senses to spring into action. He put his hands over the top over the door trapping her. She looked up at him without an ounce of fear, but with desire that had her eyes glittering.

“Just for future reference, I’ve got the mechanics down, so I’m ready whenever you are.” With that said, he walked away leaving her standing there watching him go, her eyes as wide as her smile.

## Chapter Twelve

Hal let his gentlemanly ways drop by the wayside as he walked around the truck and climbed in. Normally he would have opened Frankie's door and helped her in. While he waited for her to join him, which didn't take long, he decided that by the end of the night he'd have to make sure she knew every little thing about him.

First, he was going to let her spring her little plan. This meant he might not get around to telling her until morning, preferably while they were having breakfast in bed. Since the Brazen sisters were all so close, it surprised him that her sisters had cornered him and demanded to know his intentions. Frankie might be one of the strongest-willed women he'd ever met, but he figured a good part of that came from knowing her sisters had her back no matter what. Good or bad decision, they would support her and offer help if she needed it.

He looked at the house, half expecting to see Sam or Jessie standing on the porch. To his surprise, neither of them stood there. But one of the twins, Joey, paced back and forth between the big windows that looked out over the front yard and driveway. He wondered if she'd seen the way he acted.

Frankie followed his gaze and frowned as she said, "Sooner or later one of us is going to have to find out what's eating at that girl."

"What do you mean?" A strange curiosity to know more rose up in him.

"She's been acting distracted for the past few days."

"Is that unusual for her?" He hoped she'd give him more time to really get to know each of her sisters better.

“Very. Joey is very levelheaded and practical. Of course, she has emotions like the rest of us, but nothing really shakes her.” It sounded like Frankie’s enthusiasm about sneaking off with him seemed to be fading.

“Is that a good or bad thing?” he asked.

Hal had his own opinion about people who kept their emotions locked up tight. Someday there was bound to be an eruption, and all hell would break loose, but he’d keep that to himself.

He felt Frankie shrug her shoulders against him. “It’s worked for her so far. She’ll talk to one of us eventually, probably once she’s worked it all out.”

“So you’ll just wait?” He knew he couldn’t. Shit, he fought the urge to go over there right now and ask her if something was wrong.

Frankie nodded and said, “We should get going before she realizes we’re watching her.”

Hal started the truck and slowly made the way down the driveway. “Where are we going?”

“Your cabin.” She slid into the center of the seat right up against his side and snapped the belt over her lap.

It took every ounce of his control not to touch her. Luckily they didn’t have far to go. Keeping both hands on the wheel helped a little, but when she laid her hand on his thigh, he found his foot leaning a little heavier on the gas pedal. Her hand squeezed as he pulled into the lodge’s parking lot. The rutted lane that led to the cabins forced him to slow down. He pulled to a stop in front of the cabin and Frankie was already climbing out before he shut the car off.

Hal could sense that she was eager too, and it did something to him. It wasn’t just the sex either. She showed the same gusto when they were getting ready to settle down with a big bowl of popcorn and a movie. Her enthusiasm was part of who she was, and it drew him like a moth to a flame. Then again, the bossy little witch that poked her head out from time to time was strangely cute too. Hal climbed from the car and rounded the hood.

Frankie reached out and latched on to his hand. He expected her to lead him inside, and would have been hard -pressed to wipe the surprise from his face when she tugged him around the side of the small cabin. He heard some light elevator -style music before they reached the back of the building. Hal wanted to make a remark about it, but he stood momentarily stunned. Some one had been busy while they were gone.

White lights had been draped along the railings that led to the dock. They were attached along the dock too. Other than those little twinkling lights, the only other light came from the moon and stars. Hal moved up behind Frankie and wrapped his arms around her waist. Frankie's hands covered his as she leaned into his embrace. They stood there in the dark, neither of them speaking, both of them just taking in the rightness of the moment. He knew for sure, there was no way in hell he'd ever forget it. And he couldn't ruin it by telling her the truth now. His secret would have to wait one more day.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie held her breath as she and Hal looked out over her surprise. She had no idea what a guy's perception might be, but she thought it was a pretty romantic sight. The reflection of the lights strung along the dock twinkled in the water as it gently swayed. The soft music she'd asked Bobbie to arrange drifted out from the open window of the cabin. She knew that inside the lights were set low, and the bed was turned down. Even the wood stacked in the small fireplace waited ready to add something extra to their romantic night. She smiled, knowing they wouldn't need the heat, not with the way they'd been burning up the sheets.

Up until now everything they had done had been fun and deeply passionate. The few quickies where they could have been caught at any moment were some of the most exciting moments in her life. And there were some all -nighters that had been so mind b lowing, she was



surprised she could think afterward, never mind walk. No matter what, they laughed and teased each other the whole time. With their time winding down, Frankie had decided to slow things down tonight.

If she could find a way, she'd keep him in bed for the next three days, right up until the minute he had to leave. *Then what?* Frankie knew she wouldn't be able bear to stand in the yard and watch him drive away. She wouldn't think about it anymore tonight. When the time came, she'd come up with a good reason why she couldn't be there. Tonight she would make sure there was only one thing on either of their minds.

She turned in his embrace, her body rubbing against his. Frankie smiled up at him as she slid her hands up his chest and looped them around his neck. His arms tightened, pulling her closer.

She tipped her head to the side and playfully batted her eyelashes at him. "Hey, handsome, how about a dance?"

Hal chuckled as he lifted her off her feet and twirled her around, humming along with the music. She should have known he would find a way to remove any heaviness from the moment and make her laugh. God, she was going to miss this. Her body stayed in contact with his as he lowered her to the ground. She had planned to take him down to the dock to eat, and dance the night away, but right now, all she wanted to do was drag him inside and make wild passionate love to him.

"It isn't fair." She ran her fingers through the hair above his ear.

He stopped swaying from side to side and tipped her chin up so she had to look at him. "What's not fair?"

"That whenever I get you alone, all I can think about is getting you into bed." She could feel the heat in her cheeks and hoped he wouldn't notice.

He laughed, and she started to look away. "Hey, none of that. Baby, getting you into bed is always on my mind, even when you're not around."

"Really?"

Hal scooped her up into his arms and carried her down to the dock. "Stay put."

She watched him turn and run back to the cabin. It didn't take more than a minute before he came back out with his arms full of the comforter and pillows. He carried them down to the dock and dropped them at her feet. She couldn't tear her gaze off the view of his denim covered ass as he bent over to spread out the blanket. He tossed the pillows together and stood up. He took her hands and pulled her into his arms and started swaying them to the music once again.

"I want you all day and night, but right now, dancing with you sounds great." Hal's whisper felt warm against her cheek.

"Then what's with the blanket?" she asked, pressing her body closer to his.

"I wanted to be prepared, just in case you get carried away." He brought them closer. So close that sliding a playing card between them would have been impossible.

"I bet I can last longer than you." Frankie didn't know what was it about a challenge that made her so cocky.

He lowered his head until his lips hovered over hers. "Oh, honey, that's a bet I'm willing to take."

"You're on." She couldn't resist seeing just how far she'd have to push him before he broke.

For a few minutes, they swayed as one. She loved the way her breasts felt pressed against his hard muscular chest. From the bump poking her in the belly, she was damn sure he liked it too. She eased away from him, turning in his embrace and then pulling his arms tighter around her. It firmly put her back against his front. She wiggled her ass, and he moaned in her ear.

One of Hal's hands stayed low on her belly, while the other drifted up her rib cage, and nestled right below her breasts. She felt his breath on her neck and shuddered seconds before he pressed his lips to her skin. Frankie let her head fall to the side, which gave him plenty of access. He licked and kissed her down to her shoulder. Then he

worked his way back up to her earlobe where he nibbled, driving her crazy. If she wanted him to be the one to cry uncle, she needed to do something more drastic than rub up against him.

Frankie grabbed the hem of her T-shirt and pulled up. His hands left her, but not for long. By the time she tossed the shirt onto the blanket, Hal was smoothing his hands over her bare skin. She took his heavy breathing as a sign that her plan was working. Covering his hands with hers, she lifted them to her breasts. That was all it took.

"I give up, you win." Hal spun her around in his arms and covered her mouth with his.

Frankie let him walk her backwards and lower her to the blanket. With a couple of strategic yanks, she managed to strip off his shirt on the way down. She hoped he didn't mind that it ended up with a few less buttons than it started with. Once Hal had her lying down, he knelt over her and the look in his eyes almost made her whimper in anticipation. Exposed to the night air her skin should have felt chilled, but instead it burned as if on fire. The way he kissed her belly as he undid her jeans made her stomach muscles quiver. She laughed and rolled away from him. During the wrestling match that ensued, they stripped each other. Somehow, Frankie ended up on top, which was fine with her.

She didn't waste any time getting Hal where she wanted him. With her straddling his hips, it was easy to guide him into her. His cock stretched her inner muscles as it filled her. He moaned, dropping his head to the dock with a thud. Frankie used her hands on his to steady her as she rocked her hips. Hal lifted his hips up, pushing himself deeper inside. He reached up and cupped her breasts in his hands. He rasped his thumbs over her nipples and she wondered if somehow they were connected to her sex, because it was suddenly flooded.

"Frankie. Baby, uhh that's so good." His voice came out all low, husky, and Frankie loved the way it sounded.

The rough reverberation just added to the sensations that were driving her. She would have responded, but she couldn't form a coherent thought at the moment. Hal grunted and moaned beneath her. Frankie felt all her muscles start to tighten and increased the speed of her movements. Hal groaned and stiffened between her thighs and Frankie let herself go, shuddering around him.

"You're going to wear me out," Hal said as she collapsed on top of him.

Frankie smiled and started to get up. Hal pulled her back down and settled her beside him with her head pillowed on his arm.

"Let's just lay here and look at the stars for a while." Hal pressed a kiss on her forehead, then her nose as he reached down and pulled her leg up over his thigh.

*I'd like to stay like this forever.* Frankie fought back the instant state of panic the thought brought on. She pushed it right back out of her mind, telling herself everything would be fine in the morning.

## Chapter Thirteen

Frankie knew Hal was lying there awake, just like she was. Something other than their dreaded goodbye hovered in the air between them. She never would have considered herself a coward, but as she silently slipped from the bed, grateful she had to work this morning, she realized she had a yellow streak a mile wide running down her back.

“Francesca, come back to bed.” His gruff use of her given name hinted that he had something on his mind.

“Sorry, I can’t. Sam has a doctor’s appointment this morning, and Jessie and Victor are meeting with the building inspector, so that leaves me to cover until they get back.” Afraid he might see that she was making excuses to avoid spending time with him this morning, she didn’t look at him as she dressed.

“Fine. I’ll drive you home.” There was a curt edge to his voice she didn’t like.

“You don’t have to. I kind of figured I wouldn’t make it home last night so I left clothes up at the lodge.”

“You could have brought them here, you know.” It seemed he was still a little piqued that she refused to start off her day from his place.

Whether she spent the night or not she always went home and got ready for whatever the day held in store. Something didn’t feel right about leaving her clothes and what little makeup she used in his cabin. In her mind, it was too much like living together, which had a permanency they didn’t. She’d tried to explain it to Hal before, but he just grunted and said she was silly. His argument that their sharing morning showers would conserve water and energy made her laugh,

but thinking about all the soapy fun they could have almost had her giving in. She refused to talk about it again, especially since he was leaving so soon that it didn't matter.

"Junior is coming in to help out today so he can cover the desk while I shower and change." Frankie said, hoping he'd just let her go.

Frankie had her hand wrapped around the doorknob when she felt Hal's big hand close over her shoulder. He spun her around with barely any effort. She looked up at him and fought the shiver that ran down her spine. Hal Bernard was a very potent man.

"You forgot something." He lowered his lips to hers in a rough kiss.

She moaned as he pinned her between his hard naked body and the door. It was impossible not to feel his arousal pressed against her lower belly. His manhandling should have set off some kind of warning, but instead it excited her. Deep down, she knew he wouldn't hurt her, because even though he was forceful, he always seemed to hold back just a little.

He pulled his mouth away, leaving her gasping for air. Her hands clutched his shirt at his shoulders. Her knees wobbled, but she managed to stay upright.

"You and I are having lunch at one o'clock, no excuses." The anger and intent in his tone was very clear.

She nodded, knowing he'd make it happen one way or another, so it would be best just to go along with it. He smiled and pulled her from the door and opened it. A couple of quick moves on his part, plus a desire hazed brain on hers, and she found herself standing all alone on the small porch with the door closed firmly behind her. Frankie shook her head as she made her way up to the lodge. Somehow, she needed to get her mind straight so she could make it through the next few days.

\* \* \* \*

After Frankie left, Hal dropped back onto the bed and covered his face with the pillow. It occurred to him what a bizarre picture he made. A six foot four, naked and fully aroused man lying on a bed, which his feet hung off of, with a pillow over his face, would be a sight to see. He laughed, wondering if he'd make the cut for *Playgirl*. Maybe the magazine had a special millionaire stud muffin issue. They could show everything but their faces, and see if women could identify them.

Hal tossed the pillow aside and got to his feet. He wasn't going to let this day go by without telling Frankie the truth. It might be easier for her to understand if he had some visual aids. He crossed the small distance to the dresser and grabbed a pair of boxers out of the top drawer. Then he reached deeper into the drawer and pulled out the pre-paid cellular phone he'd bought specifically for this trip.

Hal knew he took a risk calling his office. By now everyone probably had lists full of questions they thought only he could answer. It wasn't true, but even some of the upper-level supervisors ran their slightest changes by him for approval, even though they didn't have to. Hal stabbed the numbers, hoping Natasha, his personal assistant, would be alone at her desk.

"Cummings Transportation. Halbert Cummings office. Natasha speaking," Hal heard the tension in her voice and instantly went into business mode.

"Nat, what's wrong?" He skipped the pleasantries, but hoped using her nickname made up for it.

"As I was just informing Mrs. Cummings. I'm not sure exactly when Mr. Cummings is due back in the office." He took that to mean his stepmother, Tawny, was close enough to overhear Natasha's side of the conversation.

"I take it she's been a pain in your ass the past few weeks." He really did feel bad that she had to be the one to deal with Tawny in his absence.

“Yes, sir, I do agree, not having Mr. Cummings in the office daily is a massive inconvenience, but nothing I can’t handle.” She was telling the truth, but he knew Natasha could handle anything that came her way.

Hal remembered the first day she walked into his office. His first thought, damn she’s young. Then he took in what she wore. She’d paired black skintight jeans and knee-high leather boots with a white T-shirt that said ‘stuff it.’ Her brown hair had been twisted into some funky thing on the side of her head, and the only makeup he could see on her naturally tanned skin was black eyeliner that made her green eyes stand out dramatically. For a few seconds Hal had been totally in awe.

He’d mistakenly thought she wanted to interview for the position of his assistant. When he started to explain that he needed someone who dressed more businesslike she’d laughed in his face. Truthfully, he wanted someone older and more formidable to be a barrier between him and the rest of the company. She tossed a clipboard on his desk, and said if he’d just sign it, then she’d get out of his way, so he could find someone to fill whatever his need might be.

He was busy signing for the package when a ruckus started in his outer office. Before he could do anything, Natasha stomped out, and within second diffused the situation, scolding two of his top-level managers for letting things get so out of control.

Hal had seen enough. He’d offered her the job on the spot. He even agreed that she could dress however the hell she wanted. She didn’t seem too interested, until he sweetened the pot by explaining they’d provide her with a state of the art laptop, since she may be called upon to do some things from home. In the end, Hal thought it was the company’s tuition reimbursement program that really hooked her.

She’d started the next day. Hal had never had to worry about being interrupted, unless there was a damn good reason, again. In some ways Natasha had become the little sister he’d never had. They



joked and teased like siblings would, and she even teased his father from time to time.

The thing was, Tawny hadn't always been in the picture. She married his dad about three years ago. Having Natasha run interference between him and his stepmother wasn't part of her job description.

Although, Natasha seemed to relish putting the woman in her place. Probably because Tawny had assumed they were having an affair, which was keeping him from settling down. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and Natasha had told her so. Since then the two women seemed to be on civil terms. Still Natasha wasn't ready to let Tawny think she could worm her way around her like she did a lot of other people.

What Hal thought it really came down to was Tawny was nice and sweet, and that just rubbed Natasha the wrong way. Maybe she thought it was a little false, but Hal knew it wasn't.

"I'll be back in few days to handle Tawny myself." He hoped hearing that helped.

Natasha laughed for a second before saying, "That's good to hear. So what can I do for you *today*?"

He liked that Natasha never wasted time getting to the point. "I need you to fax me a few things."

"No problem. Just tell me which documents you'd like, and I'll send them right over."

Hal rattled off the fax number for the lodge while he tried to think of something that would verify who he was in one swoop, but he couldn't. Instead, he asked her to enclose a message to him written on his personal letterhead, a copy of one of his business cards, and a copy of the company employee list, just the upper management.

"Oh-kay?" He could hear the question in her voice.

"Don't worry. Everything's fine. Hey, add a copy of that picture and article you clipped about Cummings reaching to all ends of the

globe.” Yeah, he thought that would be a nice touch, even though he thought it was a terrible picture of him.

“Yes, sir, I’ll get these documents right out to you. You just call me if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

“Thanks, Natasha. You’re the absolute best, and I won’t forget this when bonus time rolls around.” And he wouldn’t. He’d make sure Natasha received something special this quarter.

“You have a good day too, sir.” She hung up and he stood there holding the phone, wondering how Natasha would get along with Frankie.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie sat behind the check -in desk, flipping through a lighting catalog. She needed to pick a few choices for Sam to look over for the dining room. With Trent’s help, Sam had already chosen the lights for the kitchen. Frankie’s marker hovered over the page, but she just couldn’t make a decision.

She was having a hard time concentrating, period. Junior’s nervousness wasn’t helping any. Neither did the fact that Bobbie, Georgie, and Joey had called at least a dozen times to see if Sam and Trent had come back from the doctors yet. Joey had sounded distracted and little annoyed. Frankie had almost called her on it, but had figured now wasn’t the time.

She glanced at the clock, becoming a little more anxious herself. In less than two hours, she had to meet Hal for lunch. Sam should have been back by now.

*Damn, patience is not one of my virtues.*

She flipped back to the first page of the catalog and started over.

When the chime above the door sounded, both Frankie and Junior turned, expecting to see Sam and Trent. Instead, they found a perky blonde around her age standing there. The woman walked farther into

the reception area and looked around the huge lounge, which also served as a common room of the lodge.

“Uhhh...” Junior was obviously a little tongue-tied by their new visitor.

“Welcome to The Lodge,” Frankie jumped in, hoping the woman had been too distracted to notice Junior’s flub.

The blonde, who Frankie noticed was carrying a very expensive Coach tote bag and purse, walked over to the counter, and said, “Wow, this place is so not what I expected.”

Her comment didn’t sound like an insult, so Frankie smiled and said, “We’re about to begin a big remodel, but this is one room that we won’t be changing much. I’m Francesca Brazen. What can I do for you, Ms.?”

“Cummings. Mrs. Tawny Cummings,” she replied, letting her bag drop to the floor.

“Well, Mrs. Cummings, what can we do for you today?” Frankie asked and elbowed Junior to move out of her way.

“I hope you can help. I’m looking for someone.”

“I’m sorry, but we don’t give out our guests’ names.” Frankie didn’t think it mattered because she didn’t seem like the type to mingle with the kind of men who were guests right now.

“Oh, that’s okay.” She waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Hal’s not a guest.”

Frankie couldn’t breathe. It felt like air had been squeezed out of her lungs. She had to have heard the woman wrong.

Frankie held onto the counter and worked up a weak smile. “Hal?”

“Halbert Cummings. He’s about six-foot-four, handsome, with a devilish grin.” She laughed and Frankie instantly hated the melodious sound. “He came to help the Weatherly brothers with some business.”

“Umm...” Frankie was a bit confused, she glanced back at Junior who shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

The Hal Frankie knew told her his last name was Bernard. She'd even seen it on his license. Tawny reached up and toyed with a heart pendent on a delicate looking gold chain that hung around her neck. Her gold wedding band and huge diamond solitaire caught the light and sparkled.

*Shit.* Had Hal lied about who he was? How would he have changed it on his license? God, was the license even real? Most importantly, was he married to this woman?

*Cummings.* The name sounded so familiar. Then it came to her in a flash. She'd seen Cummings Transportation on some of the delivery forms Trent had them all initial. Tawny's light sigh broke into her thoughts.

"You know men. They're all little boys at heart. Hal's no different. He likes to have his *fun*. Every year around this time, he takes a vacation. Usually he goes with one or both of the Weatherly brothers." Tawny paused and giggled. "They try to keep where they're going a big secret, but Hal should have known that after three years, I'd know him so well I'd figure it out."

Just how well did she know him? Frankie needed answers, and she knew just where to get them. First, she needed to take care of Mrs. Tawny Cummings. Then, after she found out what the hell was going on, she'd confront Hal. Or, maybe she'd just try to forget he even existed.

Frankie did her best to smile, and said, "Mrs. Cummings, why don't we get you settled in one of our best rooms. Then we'll see if we can help you locate this Hal you're looking for."

"That would be great. I'd love to freshen up before I see my sister." Before she could finish, the bell above the door chimed again, drawing their attention.

Sam and Trent entered, cozied up against each other. Frankie couldn't help but smile seeing her sister so happy in love. Tawny let out a loud gasp that had everyone snapping their heads in her directions.

“Tawny! What the hell are you doing here?” Trent shouted, in a tone more full of surprise than unfriendly.

Sam was looking very concerned, which pissed Frankie off. Since Trent knew her, Tawny must be telling the truth about who she was. And, maybe even about why she was there. Frankie needed those answers. Now! Thankfully, Junior approached the counter, so he could finish getting Tawny registered.

“Frankie, are you okay?” Samantha asked, rushing to her side.

“I’m fine, but I really need to go. Can you or Junior check Mrs. Cummings in?” Frankie didn’t wait for an answer. She grabbed her keys and practically ran for the door.

## Chapter Fourteen

Damn it! Hal hadn't meant to make Tawny cry. The shock and anger of finding her waiting for him at the lodge made him react a little harsher than he normally would have. After his outburst, Samantha and Jessica had instantly cast him in the role of an ogre. The last thing he saw was their backsides as they ushered Tawny into Jessie's office and slammed the door. It didn't surprise him since most women stuck together. He wondered how they were going to react after Tawny explained who she was and what she'd said to scare Frankie away.

Hal tossed his cell phone onto the seat beside him. It bounced from the force and landed on the floor with a thud. He slammed his palm on the steering wheel a few times. It didn't help, but it made him feel a little better. Frankie was nowhere to be found, and she wasn't answering her phone either. Whatever Tawny had said to her must have really pissed her off. He could go back to the lodge and find out what it was, but Hal wasn't calm enough to deal with his stepmother or her tears.

Hal knew he wouldn't be getting his answers any time soon, so he decided to go after Frankie and see if he could get them from her. First, though, he called his father and asked him to come get his errant wife. His father had seemed truly surprised that Tawny was there. He'd thought she had gone to New York on a shopping trip with her sisters. Hal had never known Tawny to lie. So, if she told his father she was going shopping that had probably been the original plan, before she found out where he was.

His dad promised to fly up right away. He felt both horrible and relieved that his dad was coming to the rescue. Pretty sad for a thirty year old man to need his *daddy* to come and bail him out of a mess. But since it was his father's wife who created part of the mess, Hal refused to dwell on it. Instead, he wanted to concentrate on Frankie and set her straight about him and his family.

He had a lot of time to think things over while he drove around for the past two hours searching for Frankie's car. He should have told her last night. Hal hoped he found her before his father got to town. If anyone let it slip about him and Frankie spending so much time together, Hal senior might get ideas. Probably the same ones Hal had gotten himself. Either way, everything would change today.

Hal knew something nobody else did. Well, her sisters probably knew. Frankie wouldn't be rushed into anything. And admitting she loved him might be more than he could hope for. Even though he planned on letting her know just how strong his feelings for her were, he knew finding out he'd lied to her from the minute he met her might be too much for her to forgive. It would cause some major trust issues. He feared his relationship with Frankie might have suffered irreparable damage, and not just theirs. If he couldn't fix things because of his stepmother, they would have some issues to work out too.

Victor and Trent had lied, or at least they had omitted certain details, about him when it came to their wives. There would definitely be repercussions for them too. He planned on trying to take the blame, but he already knew Sam and Jessie weren't going to let their husbands get off scot-free. He had a bad feeling that they all had a rough day all in store.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie dropped into the over-stuffed chair and stared at the thick file sitting on the coffee table. Jake hadn't questioned her when she

asked him for his help. Instead, he had pulled out all the stops getting this info for her. Attached to the cover with a shiny paper clip was a color photo of Hal and an older, gray-haired version of him, both wearing tuxedos with Tawny sandwiched between them, wearing a stunning aquamarine dress with matching stones around her neck and dangling from her ears. Hal and the older guy's arms were draped around her shoulders and her hands were on their cheeks. It was all very glamorous.

Not that Tawny needed the dress and jewels too look glamorous. Hell, she could've stopped traffic wearing the jeans and a T-shirt she had been wearing when she'd shown up at the lodge. All that wavy blonde hair framing such a delicate face, paired with a body a stripper would envy, was a hard combination to compete with. Not that Frankie would even attempt it. She had never encroached on another woman's territory.

Reaching up with both hands she dug her fingers into her ponytail, spreading it apart, which tightened it. Unable to sit still she lunged to her feet and walked around to the back of the chair. She turned away, wondering if she could just walk away.

Frankie caught her reflection in the mirror that hung in the hall. "Uhgg...what the hell am I doing?"

"I'm not sure." Frankie jumped at the sound of Bobbie's voice. "But since it involves talking to yourself, it can't be good."

Damn, Bobbie moved like a ninja sometimes. "When did you get here? And why aren't you in class?"

"I got here a few minutes ago. My class got cancelled, so I dropped by the diner and ran into Jake. You know, there's a drawback to going to the sheriff for help." Bobbie sat on the couch and propped her feet up on the coffee table, eyeing the folder.

"There is when your baby sister has the man tied up in knots." Frankie wondered just how much Bobbie had wormed out of him.

He may have fought it, but Bobbie probably already knew most of what was in the folder. Everything Frankie wanted, no, everything she



needed to know about Hal Bernard was in that fucking file. The problem was his name wasn't Hal Bernard. It was Halbert Bernard Cummings the III.

"For your information, that goes both ways. And all I heard was you stopped in to see him. Jake was very tight -lipped about whatever's going on." Bobbie's pout told Frankie she wasn't very happy about that. "He did, however, suggest I might come home and keep you company."

Frankie nodded as she sat back down. She wiped her sweaty hands on her thighs. The soft material of her sweat pants made her cringe. Of course, the day his exquisite wife shows up, Frankie decided to dress down. Instead of her normal blouse and slacks or jeans, she wore her old comfortable sweats and a faded T-shirt.

"Want to tell me what's going on?" Bobbie's concern may not be noticeable to the naked eye, but it was clearly audible in her voice. "Maybe it'll help to hear whatever it is out loud."

"Maybe I don't want to hear it at all." Frankie closed her eyes and admitted to herself that she was afraid of finding out just what a fool she had made of herself, even to her sister.

She felt Bobbie sit on the arm of the chair. She fought the tears that threatened when Bobbie stroked the top of her head. Damn, it was sad that her baby sister comforted her. The role should have been reversed, but Bobbie was in love with a man who would never lie to her in anyway, never mind putting her in the place of being the other woman.

"Frankie, whatever happened, it can't be that bad. Come on honey, talk to me." Bobbie's soft tone knocked down the last of the barriers keeping Frankie from spilling her guts.

"He's married." It came out so softly, she barely heard herself.

"He's what?" Bobbie fell off the arm of chair into a heap on the floor.

"*Married*. His beautiful wife showed up at the lodge today looking for him." Frankie swiped at the tears rolling down her cheeks.

“No way! Victor and Trent never would have let you get involved with him if he was married. She must have been his sister or something.” Bobbie said.

“She said they’ve only been together for three years. Besides, she was there when Sam and Trent got back from the doctor. He knew her.” Frankie explained, watching Bobbie get to her feet

“Okay, so some woman shows up claiming to be Hal’s wife,” Bobbie said, holding out first one hand palm up, then the other, adding, “and you left without confronting him?”

“I went to Jake to get the facts. I mean I have no idea what else he lied about besides his name and being married. I want to know everything before I talk to him.”

“His name isn’t even Hal?” The sharp squeak in Bobbie’s voice had Frankie smiling and it felt good.

It felt so good she actually laughed. “It is. But it’s Halbert Bernard Cumming the Third, not Hal Bernard.”

“So you think because Vic and Trent let him lie about that, they may have let him lie about being married and who knows what else?”

“Exactly.” She knew she wasn’t the only one who might see it that way.

Bobbie dropped back onto the couch across from Frankie. “So what else did you find out?”

“I haven’t looked yet.” She felt a yellow streak running down her back.

Before Bobbie could ask why, the front door whipped open, banging against the wall. Georgie stormed into the room. The door closed just as loudly. A disheveled looking Joey entered the room. Momentarily taken by surprise, Frankie and Bobbie both just stared at Joey.

Joey’s neatness was a major part of her work persona. Her clothes were always neatly pressed and lint free. Right now, her shirt was half untucked, and there was a large dirt smudge on the front of her right pant leg by her knee. Joey’s hair, which was usually up in a bun or

ponytail, hung loose around her shoulders. Frankie was about to ask her what happened when she heard a loud car coming down the drive.

As Frankie moved to the window to see who it was, she heard Bobbie ask, “Did Jake call you guys?”

“No. I called the lodge to see how Sam’s appointment went, and Junior told me about a blonde babe coming looking for Hal. So I went and grabbed Joey and we came straight here,” Georgie explained in one breath.

It was a mighty feat to keep her sisters from rushing to protect her, Frankie thought, as she pulled back the curtain. Hal’s truck pulled to a stop at the edge of the drive. Frankie gasped and let the curtain drop back into place. She couldn’t move or breathe, but that didn’t stop her sisters from pushing her out of the way so they could see who the newcomer was. Bobbie peeled the curtain back just enough so they could peek out.

“He has some nerve showing his face around here,” Joey whispered, but Frankie heard her.

Bobbie came over and took Frankie’s hand in hers. “Want me to call Jake?”

“No need. He just pulled up.” Georgie sounded way too happy.

“Honey, why don’t you go upstairs, and let us get rid of him for you.” Bobbie suggested as she tugged her towards the stairs. When Frankie glanced at the coffee table, Bobbie stopped and grabbed the folder.

Frankie took the first few steps in a fog, but when she did look back over her shoulders, she saw her sisters standing in front of the door. It was as if they were her own personal guards. One mean and gruff outside and three avenging angels inside, in case the beast got past.

What the hell was she doing? She’d never been the type to run and hide while her sisters fought her battles, and she wasn’t going to start now. Frankie always faced her problems head on, and sure, she retreated to go over the facts, but the truth was, she hadn’t done

anything wrong. Hearing another car approach, she turned and ran back down the stairs. She couldn't see past her sisters, so she ducked back into the living room and ran to the window.

Trent's SUV was now parked beside Jake's Bronco, which had "Police" boldly written down the sides. Jessie's car was coming down the drive followed closely by a large black Cadillac SUV. Jake and Hal stood in front of Hal's truck, watching the cars make their way down the driveway. Neither of them looked happy. Not that she really cared if Hal was happy or not. By the time Jessie pulled to a stop behind Trent's SUV, Sam and Trent had joined Hal and Jake.

Frankie wasn't appeased by the fact that Sam had her back turned to the men and was staring at the house. She didn't want her sisters or their husbands anywhere near that lying dirt bag. She couldn't help but wonder how deep Trent's subterfuge went. She couldn't believe her brothers-in-law would risk the fragile bonds of trust they'd forged with her sisters, but it seemed like they had.

Frankie's hand tightened on the file in her hand. Maybe she had missed something, but no matter how many times she had gone over her conversation with Tawny, everything led her back to the same conclusions. She should march outside and demand Hal explain what was going on in order to get everything out in the open. The slam of a door made her looking at the black SUV that had followed Jessie. The older version of Hal from the picture stood by the front of the truck, wearing khakis and a blue and gray striped polo shirt. Fit and trim, he looked good for an older man. If that was what Hal was going to look like in about thirty years, Tawny was one lucky woman.

Speaking of the beauty queen. The guy opened the door and helped her out of the car. He tucked her protectively against his side as they walked over to the small group, which now stood at the bottom of the porch steps. From the looks Hal gave Tawny, they definitely weren't a blissfully wedded couple. It was more like Hal wanted to blister her ass or something along those lines. Frankie slapped the folder against her leg. It was bad enough that she found

out the way she did. Now they expected her to stand there and watch them have a lovers' tiff.

*Not in this lifetime.*

She turned away from the window and headed for the door, intent on sending their unwelcomed guests on their way.

Bobbie met her in the hall. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to go out there."

"Probably not, but it's something I need to do." Frankie gave her a smile.

"Then we're going with you," Georgie said.

And a now tidier Joey added, "Hal knew from the start if he messed with you he messed with all of us."

The squeak of the front door caused the four of them to turn to see who was coming in. Frankie's heart pounded as the door slowly opened and Sam ushered Tawny in. Her sisters moved aside and let Sam lead Tawny down the hall to the bathroom. As she passed, Frankie looked into Tawny's red-rimmed, puffy eyes and felt like she had been punched in the stomach. Even though she didn't know the woman and hadn't intentionally hurt her, knowing she caused Tawny pain in any way made her feel horrid. Hal deserved to be slapped into next week for the trouble he caused.

Once the door closed, her sisters, including Sam, all turned and stared at her. Frankie had no clue what they were waiting for. Did they expect her to say something to Tawny? It wasn't her place to try and explain Hal's infidelity. That was something he needed to do, and from the looks of Tawny, he may have already done it.

Georgie realized that Frankie wasn't going to say anything, so she turned back to the door.

Frankie watched Georgie peel back the curtain and peek out. Now would be a good time for her to go out and tell him to leave. It might save Tawny from any other unnecessary misery if he mentioned anything that had happened between them.

“He’s coming up the stairs,” Georgie squawked as she let the curtain flutter back into place and jumped away from the door.

Frankie hated the way her heart leapt. She’d already known it was going to take some time to get over him, but she wasn’t accustomed to having to cut off her feeling instantly.

*Neither is falling for a fine -looking, and let’s not forget married, guy who rolled into town and swept me off my feet.*

It had happened, even though she had tried to guard her heart. Now she’d have to pay the price.

She had to stop herself from rushing to the door when she heard Hal’s knock. She took a slow, deep breath, walked past her sisters, jerked the door open, and looked up into his handsome face. Maybe it was wishful thinking on her part, but he looked miserable. His eyes had lost the sparkle that normally drew her in. And he held himself so stiffly, she wondered if he’d snap if a good gust of wind came along. She almost smiled at the thought, but caught herself in time. Frankie figured she should get right to the point and not drag this out.

“You need to leave,” she said relieved her tone didn’t waver.

“Frankie, I came to explain. It’ll just take a few minutes.” The way his voice wavered tugged at her heart.

She knew she needed to be strong even if her heart wept at the loss of him. “Isn’t it too late for explanations?”

“Look, I know I’ve kept some things from you, but —” Before he could finish the sentence, Frankie stepped back and swung her arm. The curtain on the door waved wildly as it closed. Hard. Right in Hal’s face, leaving the rest of his lame excuse hanging in the air.

“Frankie that was so...” Georgie for once seemed at a loss for words.

“Rude,” Sam volunteered from down the hall.

“Powerful.” Bobbie nodded with an approving smile.

“Impressive.” Joey sounded a little in awe.

Frankie was a little in awe herself. She had no idea where that had come from. Somewhere deep inside a part of her had acted on pure

instinct. Hal probably hadn't expected to have the door slammed in his face either. Truthfully, she had no clue what he thought might happen. Did he think she'd just invite him in for a cup of coffee? So he could tell her all about him and his wife? If so, the man was teetering on the edge of insanity.

She groaned and shook her head when he knocked again. Frankie should've known Hal wouldn't give up easily. Her anger, and, yes, her hurt, kicked in at that point. Turning, she grabbed the knob and whipped open the door.

"Listen—" The words she'd been ready to hurl at him died in her throat.

The older version of Hal smiled down at her. "Well, girl, you seem mighty worked up so don't stop there."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else." She glanced past him to where Hal stood talking to Jake, Jessie, and her brothers-in-law.

He followed her gaze. "I take it my son has crossed you in some way."

"You could say that, but it would be a major understatement." She didn't like admitting that, but it just came out.

"Junior sure does tend to irritate a lot of women. Damn , it seems to be part of his nature." When he chuckled, the deep, rumbling sound soothed her nerves enough to have her smiling.

"Junior?" Frankie asked, giving him her undivided attention now.

"My son," he leaned forward and whispered, "but trust me, he didn't inherit my talent for charming the ladies."

Frankie didn't know how to respond. He had charmed her into his bed, but she wasn't sure it was a good idea to tell his father that. "I guess I'll have to take your word for that."

"Too bad. I had hoped that he might find himself faced with a tempting woman on one of these excursions of his."

Surely, he didn't mean he wanted his son to go out and have an affair. Then again, who was she to try and guess what a total stranger

expected from his son. It didn't matter, since once she got them out of her driveway, and hopefully, out of the lodge too, she planned on never seeing any of them ever again.

Georgie came up beside her and said, "Sorry about my sister's lack of manners. Is there something we can do for you?"

"Hot damn! Each one I meet is just as pretty as the last." Hal's father winked, making Georgie giggle. "Your father must have had to beat them off with a mighty big stick."

Frankie could see her sister falling under his spell. "Georgie. This is Mr. Cummings, Hal's father."

"Really," Georgie didn't bother to hide her surprise, "I was thinking older brother or something."

"Girly, you're good for my ego, but don't let my wife hear you talking like that. She gets jealous very easily." He laughed his warning off, but from his tone, Frankie could tell he was serious.

"Will you and Hal's mother be staying at the lodge?" Georgie's question was one Frankie wanted to ask.

Something flashed in his eyes before he blinked it away. "Hal's mom passed, but my wife and I may stay for a while."

Georgie smiled and nodded. "Well, just let us know and we'll make sure you're comfortable while you're here."

Frankie slanted her a look promising severe retribution. What the hell was she thinking? If they stayed, then Hal would probably stick around as long as they did. Frankie refused to hide away until they left. She planned to continue to live her life as if she'd never met Hal. *I may as well start now.*

"If you'll excuse me, I have some important work to get done before I meet with a client tomorrow," Frankie turned and headed for the stairs, but stopped when she thought of a way to start paying her sister back. "You know what? If you do decide to stay, Georgie can meet you up at the lodge and get you settled."

File in hand, she went up to her room. She tossed the file onto her bed as she walked over to the window. Tugging the curtain back, she



looked down hoping to see them all leaving. Instead, Hal leaned against his truck staring up at her window. She could have moved out of his line of sight. Fool she was, she stood there and watched him pull his phone from his pocket. Before he even had it to his ear, her cell phone buzzed on the dresser where she'd tossed it earlier.

Frankie knew better than to answer, although her hand literally itched to pick it up. She shook her head and the S.O.B. actually smiled up at her. He lowered the phone and fiddled with it, then brought it back to his ear. Instantly, Frankie heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Without knocking, Jessie opened the door and came in.

Jessie waved the phone in her hand in front of Frankie. "You need to deal with this situation. If you want him to go away, just tell him so."

"I did, but just to make you happy I'll tell him again." Frankie wrapped her hand around the phone, but her sister didn't let go.

Jessie let out a deep sigh and said, "Frankie, just make sure you know what you're doing."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you knew what I do." Frankie grimaced, knowing that had been the wrong thing to say.

Jessie's eyes opened wide and her mouth hung open for a second or two before she managed to get her mind going. "And what would that be?"

"Nothing. Can I have a little privacy to handle this?" Frankie asked as she tapped the phone against her palm, hoping the noise irritated the hell out of him.

"Don't think you've gotten away with brushing me off. I'll be back, and you're going to explain." Jessie backed out of the door, and closed it.

Frankie wasn't going to tell her anything until she had a chance to confront Victor and Trent herself. Somehow, she'd find a way to bide them all some time. Then once she got her answers her brothers-in-law could face their wives on their own. Well, not really, since they had each other, though Frankie didn't think they'd be happy if they

had to keep each other warm at night. It seemed as if this whole mess could be laid at one person's feet. She turned back to the window as she raised the phone to her ear.

She didn't wait for him to try and charm her. "I want you to leave. Now."

"No! And I'm not leaving this spot until we talk face to face." His gaze never left hers.

"We are talking face to face. I really don't think we have anything left to say to each other, so you can hit the road with a clear conscience."

"Bullshit! I have plenty to say. Damn it, just this morning we were—"

"I don't want to think about this morning, never mind talk about it. In fact, I'd like to forget about the past three weeks altogether." She knew she never would, but she could hope.

"Frankie, that's not nice. You keep acting like this and I'm liable to do something we both might regret." The deepness of his voice delivered his warning, but she was too far gone to care.

"Haven't we already? I think so." In her blurry mind, she couldn't acknowledge she was poking a restless bear.

"I don't regret one damn second of the time I've spent with you. And no matter what you say, I don't think you do either." His cocky tone spurred her to react.

"Don't presume to tell me how I feel," she said before she could stop herself.

"If you don't love me, at least a little, then I'm the world's biggest fool."

Hal's chuckle grated, but it was his brash declaration that gave the ammunition she needed to shoot him down.

"Love goes both ways, so unless you're professing your ability to love and devote yourself to me and only me, then I suggest you end this conversation right now." She kind of hoped he would just admit he was married and end this stupid charade.

“I am.”

“What’s wrong with you?” She couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“Come down here, or, better yet, let me come up there, and I’ll tell you.”

Frankie couldn’t hold back her gasp that filled the air. The jerk would throw the fact her heart was so involved in her face. Was he proud of the fact? She’d heard of men who needed to have lots of women in love with them to feel content. She refused to be another notch on his belt, well not anymore. How could he talk like this to her with his wife standing not twenty feet away? It was impossible not to notice how often Tawny glanced over at him.

Frankie didn’t know what idiotic notion would lead him to believe she’d be willing to date a married man. Maybe it was her fault. In the beginning, it had been her idea to sneak around behind her sisters’ backs? That had just been some innocent fun, but sneaking around behind his wife’s back would be something else altogether.

“I changed my mind. I don’t really want to know. I have lots of work to do, so just consider this goodbye.” She pressed the off button and tossed the phone onto the bed.

It started ringing, so Frankie picked it up and walked over and stuffed it in her underwear drawer. He should like it in there, she thought, walking over to her desk. She pulled a file from her desk and laid it next to her computer. She turned on her computer and the radio to block out the muffled ringing.

## Chapter Fifteen

Hal squeezed the phone in his hand so hard he thought he heard it crack. Frankie had another thing coming if she thought he'd let her blow him off that easily. The only thing that kept him from barging past her sisters and into the house, other the fact that the damn sheriff was blocking the door as he stood there talking to Sam, was that Frankie hadn't denied that she loved him.

He glanced over at his father who chatted animatedly with Victor and Trent. Tawny quickly looked away, but not quickly enough. Had Frankie seen her looking at him? Was Tawny the reason she was so determined to end things with him?

He marched over and took Tawny by the elbow. "Excuse us for a minute."

"But—" Tawny looked into his eyes and stopped arguing.

Hal eased his grip a little, but didn't let go. If it was up to him, he would make her find Frankie and apologize for whatever she said that pissed her off. Tawny probably hadn't even meant it. She was one of those people who tended to talk before thinking. It had gotten her into trouble on more than one occasion. This time, however, her carelessness had him in the hot seat, and it wasn't so funny.

"Did you say something that would've made Frankie upset?" Hal watched the surprise flash across her face before it was replaced with hurt.

"I don't think so." She shook her head slightly, her eyes filling with tears. "Do you want me to go say I'm sorry, just in case?"

Hal slid his hand from her elbow to her shoulder and pulled her into his arms. Seeing Tawny so upset made him feel like a heel. Still,

something had happened between the time Frankie had left his bed and the time Tawny showed up. He rubbed Tawny's back before easing her away.

"You don't have to apologize. I was wondering because she's really angry with *me* for something." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her back to his father.

He looked back at the house and caught the look of pure malice Jake was giving him. Hal had noticed that he seemed pretty pissed off, but he figured it was because the girls. Most likely, Bobbie had called him to come out here for no reason. Maybe this all went deeper than his not telling Frankie the truth about who he was.

When he turned back, his father raised a questioning eyebrow at him. Hal knew he wasn't just curious about what was going on. Hal Senior might come across as an easy-going flirt, but he had a cold, cunning side that often led him to try to control everything around him. When Hal noticed how it was affecting his health, he'd asked his dad to step down from his position as president and CEO and try to enjoy his upcoming marriage to Tawny. His father had seemed relieved and almost giddy about semi-retiring.

"Why don't you take Tawny back to the lodge? I'm going to stick around and talk to the Brazen sisters for a bit." Hal hoped his dad wouldn't put up a fight.

"If you think that's best." He reached out and took Tawny's hand, and they moved towards the car. "Junior, I expected to be kept in the loop."

Hal knew his father would read more into the situation than he wanted him to. "Yes, sir."

"Boys, I hope you're going to help my boy win that girl's heart, if he's smart enough to fight for what he wants." Victor and Trent enjoyed a laugh with his father at his expense.

"Dad, if I have my way, you'll be getting that daughter you've always wanted." He loved seeing the way his father's jaw dropped, and Tawny's head spun so quickly Hal wondered if her neck snapped.

"Mr. Cummings, we'll do our best," Trent said, rushing to help Tawny into the car.

"Son, you better not be playing with me."

Hal walked over and slapped his dad's shoulder. "I have to find out what the hell I did to piss her off, but I'm dead serious. I'm going to get her to marry me."

"Damn it, boy, you've got your work cut out for you. Couldn't you have chosen a woman who at least likes you?" His father's insinuation cut him to the quick.

"She loves me," he blurted out louder than he meant to.

"Are you sure?" his father asked. Hal nodded, and his father said, "Then what the hell are you waiting for? Get the hell in there, and sweep that gorgeous creature off her feet."

Hal gave his father a gentle shove. "I need some privacy."

"And someone to get you past that man guarding the door." His father added as he walked away.

He was right, but hearing it said out loud gave Hal an idea. He yanked his phone from his pocket and scrolled through his incoming call list. Frankie had called him a few days ago from Bobbie's phone. Shit! He couldn't remember if he'd thought to tag the number with her name. Where is it? Come on. Where is it?

"Yes!" He found her name and hit send with a huge sigh of relief.

Bobbie had told him to come to her if he needed anything. Well, he needed her help now. He just hoped that whatever had Frankie and Jake so pissed didn't cause her changing her mind. Maybe Bobbie could even give him a hint about how to get Frankie to talk to him. Victor and Trent stood close by, silently watching and waiting to see what he was doing. If he wanted Bobbie's help, he'd have to be totally honest with her, and hope she took pity on him.

"You must have lost your mind?" Bobbie asked before he could even say hello.

Hal turned his back on the other guys and talked softly so the other guys couldn't hear him. "If I have , your sister stole it, right along with my heart."

"Tragic. You think some fancy talking is going to get you off the hook?" From her tone, Hal figured even if he begged getting her to help him was a long shot.

"Fuck no. It's probably going to take a lot if wiggling, which I'd like to do with your sister." Bobbie's giggle gave him hope that she might be willing to help him. "So I was wondering if you could possibly think of a way to get Jake away from the door so I can sneak up to your sister's room."

The sudden silence on the line made him wonder if she'd hung up on him.

Finally Bobbie said, "I don't know if that's a good idea. She said, she has a lot of work to do."

"Bobbie, we both know she's up there burying herself in work so she doesn't have to think about me." Damn it, Hal thought, everyone in the house had to know that on some level.

Hal had come to the realization that Frankie was using whatever this was to distance herself from him. Probably to keep from admitting how she really felt about him. He wasn't going to let her get away with it.

"You think so you're going to be able to make her forget what she found out so easily." Bobbie's tone held a hint of incredulity.

Her comment set him back to thinking it had to be something Tawny must have said or done.

"What did she learn about me that has her so angry?" Hal knew he was wasting his time asking.

Bobbie confirmed it by saying, "That's something you two need to talk about. And since I think you should do it before you have to leave, I'll help you."

"Great!"

“Don’t get so excited. I’ll get Jake away from the door, but that doesn’t mean Jessie, Sam, and the others will let you in.”

He realized she was right, but he hoped that’s where Victor and Trent would come in. If his buddies could find a way to sidetrack their wives, and any other Brazen women who were in the house, he might be able to sneak in. All he needed to do was get up to her room and get her alone. Then he would find a way to fix everything. He had to, because if he couldn’t, he’d have to let her go. It was either all or nothing for them. That much he knew. Hal wasn’t going to like giving up, but he would also hate knowing he was hurting her even more.

“Ten minutes face to face is all I need. I’ll beg your sisters if I have to. If I’m still in her room after five minutes, then we may have a chance to work things out.”

“Oooh, I love a man who isn’t afraid to beg. Too bad my heart is already taken,” Bobbie teased.

“I think you could have Jake begging before too long.” Hal was pretty confident that everyone else would agree with him.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie had the only place no one would harass her about giving Hal a chance to tell her his side of things. She could still hear people outside and down stairs, but not for long. Using caution she stepped into the tub and lowered herself, sighing as the hot water enveloped her. The vanilla bubble bath she borrowed from Bobbie gave the steaming water a silky feel against her bare skin. She leaned back and rested her head on the folded towel behind her on the rim of the tub. As she adjusted the ear buds connected to her MP3 player, she let her eyes drift closed. The loud thrum of the music made her feet sway under the water.

Normally to relax she would have chosen a soft mellow playlist, but relaxing wasn’t a high priority right now. What she wanted was numbness. So, she chose her 1980s’ rock playlist to stop her mind



from wandering too far. She had hoped that focusing on work would have done that, but it failed to keep Hal from popping in and out of her mind.

After making a dozen stupid little mistakes on a rough draft of a promotion proposal, she gave up. She'd tried to do some research, but she caught herself losing her train of thought. Then she took a few minutes to look over her notes and the photos of the remodel. The problem was that Hal was in too many of the pictures she'd taken over the past two weeks.

*My Photoshop software is going to get a serious workout this weekend.*

Then those pictures could get locked away where she'd never have to see them again.

She ran her fingers through the bubbles, loving the funky feel as they popped. Frankie let her shoulders slide a little deeper into the water and propped her feet up on the tub rim by the faucet. Her toes wiggled to the rhythm of the music pounding in her ears. She knew this blissful bubble she was in right now wouldn't last long.

Sooner or later, her sisters would come looking for answers, answers to questions she didn't want to hear them ask. When they did, she'd have to face the truth. She had no idea what her sisters would think once they found out what she'd done. They were probably downstairs talking about it right now.

Would she now be seen as the sister who was the shame of them all for sleeping with a married man? Surely none of them had done anything so stupid. Frankie hated that she'd been so in lust that she missed any signs that he might be married. To make it worse, she had gone and fallen so hard that she wasn't sure how long it would take to get over him.

"But I will, if it's the last thing I do." She slapped the surface of the water, and suds flew up and hit her in the face.

She rose, pressing her hands to her face, and used her fingers to wipe the water and bubbles from her eyes. The movement knocked

the wires from her ears. Frankie could still hear the music, but it sounded so far away. The fact that it was the only noise she could hear made her wonder what her sisters were up to.

“You will what?” she heard a familiar voice ask.

“How the hell did you get in here?” Her voice came out a lot stronger than she expected.

Frankie got to her feet, ignoring her shaking knees and the bubbles dripping down her naked body. She stepped out of the tub and reached for the towel hanging on the back of the door. Hal was quicker. He grabbed the towel held it out for her.

Images of the last time he towed her off flashed through her mind. It was like they starred in their own private triple X-rated movie. The way he had rubbed and teased with the thick soft cotton drove her nuts. She knew letting him touch her now would be a mistake. It made no sense to hide her body from him. He’d seen it all before. Hell, he’d touched and caressed every inch of her at some point during the past few weeks.

Frankie crossed her arms over her breasts, which had started to show some signs of feeling a chill. That had to be the reason for her shiver. It couldn’t have been from the intense way Hal stared at her. Though his gaze never dipped below her neck, she knew he wasn’t unaffected by her state of undress.

How did she know? The answer was simple, because her traitorous eyes *did* look below his neck. She could miss the prominent bulge behind his fly. Her heart raced, and her hands started to shake, which just reinforced that she wasn’t strong enough to be so close to him. If she was smart she would avoid any contact at all.

“If you aren’t going to answer me, you can just leave.” She lowered herself back into the tub fighting a smile when Hal groaned and rubbed his hands on his thighs.

“I found a way past Jake and up here so we could talk.” Hal sounded so proud of himself.

“Somehow, I don’t think it was easy as you made it sound.” She sighed, settling back against the tub and smiled up at him.

He rubbed the back of his hand across his chin. “What makes you so sure?”

“Well, to start with, my sisters wouldn’t let you in without asking me. The next clue was those scratches on your hands. They resemble the ones Victor was sporting the first few days he was here.” She shook her head and sighed, “I have no idea why I’m even wasting my time explaining.”

“Fine, so I had a little help. It came in the form of a death trap trellis that is getting replaced as soon as I can arrange it.” He shook his head when she laughed.

As if he’d be around long enough to arrange anything but his plane ride home. “Really. It seems to me that you’re overstepping your bounds. This is my home, and I remember quite clearly telling you I don’t want you here.”

“Yeah, well, until I get a reason for your sudden urge to get rid of me, I’m sticking around.”

The determination in his voice pissed her off.

“I don’t know why you insist on playing games with me.” She sighed and closed her eyes so there was no chance of him seeing the pain she felt.

“You’re accusing me of playing games. That’s really rich.”

“No, but you are.” Frankie shrugged her shoulders hoping he’d believe she thought it was insignificant.

“Tell me truth. Is that the reason you’re breaking things off?”

“No, but it really doesn’t matter.” Frankie knew that was the biggest lie she ever told.

“And why is that?” He sat down on the toilet, which brought them closer together, yet he still looked down at her.

“Because you’re leaving anyway. No matter how things turned out, that’s the truth,” Frankie said, trying to keep from dissolving into a fit of tears.

“So if I stayed, the amount of money sitting in my bank account wouldn’t matter to you?” Sarcasm dripped from in his voice.

“Nope. It might be an issue for you, but since it has nothing to do with me. Why should I care?” It was true, but he probably wouldn’t believe her.

“Frankie, I have good reasons for keeping that part of me and my life a secret.”

“Well, I hope the reasons you’re pretending to be someone and something you’re not are better than good.” She couldn’t stop herself from looking over at him.

“They are, and if you’ll just give me a few minutes I’ll explain.” Hal slapped his hand down on the vanity.

Frankie could tell he was annoyed. Well, good. So was she. Frankie leaned over and took the bath poof and body wash off the shelf. She felt Hal watching her every move as she poured a dollop onto the bright pink poof and worked it into a bubbly lather. Hal’s breath grew ragged as she lifted her leg into the air and began to run her hands along it. She wondered what she was trying to achieve by acting so bold. Something kept her from blurting out that she knew everything. Did she want him to try and make a move so she could shoot him down? Maybe a perverse facet of her just wanted him to tell her so she could say she already knew. Throwing the fact that she knew he was married in his face would feel pretty damn good. It would serve him right. It occurred to her that if she gave him a chance he might tell her and then she’d be rid of him for good.

*That’s what I want isn’t it?*

It didn’t take her long to confirm that decision. “Fine. So tell me why you came up here and pretended to be Victor’s foreman.”

“Every year I take some time for myself.”

“I heard this part already.” She sighed and moved onto her other leg.

“That’s damned distracting.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Why don’t you tell me what you know, and I’ll fill in any blank spots?”

“Okay. Your real name is Halbert Cummings the Third, and you’re rich. Every year you take a vacation to get away from the stress of your high -powered job. Usually Victor or Trent, or both of them go with you. Oh, and your father is a handsome, charming devil. Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Yes. First, we’ll start with my name. It’s Halbert Bernard Cummings the Third. So, I only partially lied about who I am. As for being rich and having a high -powered job, they’re both true. And yeah, I like to visit with the Weatherly boys when I take some time off, which hasn’t been much. But, I hope that’s about to change. Frankie. I need you to understand it wasn’t like I was a poor little rich boy trying to run away. When I take my time off, I just want to be one of the guys. Do you think that would happen if people knew who I really am?”

“Okay, I get that you wanted to be accepted for who you are and not your bank account. Now that you’ve set me straight, you can leave with a clear conscience.”

“There’s something else bothering you. It’s more important than me misleading everyone about who I am. Tell me what it is,” he demanded, getting to his feet.

Frankie pulled the drain plug as she stood up. “Hal, we had a nice fling, but it’s over.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I do. So I’d like you to leave.” She pulled the curtain closed, ending the conversation.

She turned the shower on and stepped under the spray. Frankie heard the door open and close. Even though he was only giving her what she wanted Frankie couldn’t hold back the sudden onslaught of tears that started falling. She was amazed she’d held them off so long.

She turned off the water and whipped open the curtain, reaching for the towel as she stepped out of the tub. This was crazy. Hal was married, so there was nothing to cry over, except for the fact that her heart was broken into pieces, and her ability to trust was fractured too.

She rubbed the towel over herself, her movements jerky and erratic. Frankie wrapped the towel around her body tucking the ends between her breasts. She walked over, opened the door, and found herself nose to nose with Hal. Her squeal of surprise was unstoppable. She tried to step back, but her feet slipped. Hal's big hands shot forward and wrapped themselves around her shoulders. He held her upright and pressed firmly against his chest.

"If we're over and you don't care, then why were you crying?" The tenderness in his tone tore at her heart.

"I got soap in my eyes." It was a lie and they both knew it, but she hoped he'd just let it go.

"Sure you did." He turned her towards her bed where the file about him lay. "Explain that."

"I needed to know more, so I did a little digging."

"You couldn't have just asked me?" He swung his hand towards the bed. "From the size of that folder, I assume you had some help."

"It never hurts to have an in with the local law enforcement. Of course, if the in just happens to be the overprotective big brother you never had, it's even better."

"Damn it," his fingers tightened, pressing deep into her arms, "I planned on telling you everything last night."

"*Everything* you want me to know?" She hated that she sounded so suspicious. She would rather have sounded indifferent.

"Think back to this morning when you climbed from my bed. I asked you to stay so we could talk."

Hearing him talk about his morning made her stomach clench. Knowing she'd wantonly enjoyed herself in a married man's bed brought on a level of guilt she'd never felt before. It also spiked her anger.

“Things were different this morning. And I’ll have you know, it has nothing to do with what’s in here, because I haven’t even read it yet.” She yanked herself out of his arms walked over to the bed and picked up the file.

“The important thing is you took the time to check me out.” His cockiness irked her.

“I admit I *was* curious, but I’m over it now.” She tossed the file onto the bed, the contents spilling out across the comforter.

“So what happened after you ducked out on me this morning to make you check me out?”

“Nothing.”

“It seems to me your curiosity got piqued after meeting Tawny.”

Of course meeting his wife had her wondering. Mostly about how she’d managed to miss the signs he was married. And, okay they had been inseparable, but he hadn’t received any phone calls other than the ones from Trent and Victor. She should have found it weird that he never heard from friends or family. There was probably a dozen other things she’d missed, but he was right, meeting Tawny had been like a big red flag waved in her face

“Are you saying that if some guy knocked on the door and asked for me by another name you wouldn’t wonder what was going on?”

“First, I would wonder why the hell he was looking for you. Then I suppose the name thing would have me questioning what the hell was going on.”

Frankie walked over, opened the door, and looked up at him.

“Now that we’re seeing eye to eye you can leave.”

Hal strode towards her. Each step he took caused her pulse to race a little faster. Her breasts grew heavy and a hot, wet heat coated her pussy, readying it for him. Knowing what she did, her body shouldn’t be reacting to him like this. So what if the chemistry between them was undeniable. Frankie let go of the door and folded her arms over her chest, hoping he hadn’t noticed her response to him.

He was a married man and in her opinion, which was the only one that mattered right now, that's where things ended between them. Hal came to a stop in front of her. Frankie fought the urge to take a step back. He reached out, and she thought he'd grab her, but his hand slapped at the door, sending it flying. The slam was loud enough to be heard downstairs, so she expected her sisters to show up any second.

"I already told you, I'm not leaving until you tell me why you're ending things like this." He reached out, wrapped his fingers around her towel, and pulled her close.



## **Chapter Sixteen**

“Let go.” Frankie slapped his hand hard enough for it to sting.

He loosened his grip, letting the back of his fingers stroke the top of her breasts as he slid them out of the towel. Frankie tried to hide her reaction, but he was so tuned into her that he knew what to look for. He saw the slight pink blush follow in the wake of his fingers. The hitch in her breathing was a clear sign she wasn’t as unaffected as she pretended to be.

His semi-formed plan had changed the instant he found Frankie lying in that goddamned bathtub. Fuck, if he was totally honest, he’d made his decision when the first thorn penetrated his skin. At first, when Victor told him climbing the trellis would probably be the easiest way to get in the house, Hal thought he was kidding. Turned out the son of a bitch hadn’t been. There hadn’t been any people in his way, but the pink blooms had their own way of keeping people out. Shit, he had the scratches and puncture wounds to prove it.

Still just getting to talk to her was worth the pain. He wasn’t giving up until she told him exactly what he’d done to make her want him out of her life. Even if she did want to forget him like he was just a bad dream. Too bad for her because now he was so pissed that he intended to haunt her every fucking move until she realized that what had happened between them, and was still happening, wasn’t just a fling.

At least he’d determined a few things from trading barbs with her. One, she wasn’t intimidated by his money or power. Two, she wasn’t afraid to do whatever it took to get what she wanted, even if it meant breaking at least a few rules. How else would she have gotten Jake to

give her that information? Hal had taken a few seconds to thumb through the thick file and had been surprised at Jake's thoroughness.

Shit, there seen stuff in there he never would have thought of asking for. Why Jake would have included a copy of his father's wedding announcement totally escaped him. It had made the front page of several financial newspapers so he may have just run across it. Still he had to have dug pretty deep to find it. If she'd told him the truth about not reading it yet, and he felt confident she did, then she was about to learn just about every detail about him when she finally did. He'd like to be on hand to answer any questions she might have.

"I'll make a deal with you." Hal tried to keep his cool, but he could hear the nervousness in his voice loud and clear.

"I'm not interested, but since you refuse to leave, let's hear it." She urged him on with a wave of her hand.

Hal could hear the frustration in her voice, which might just work in his favor if he played it right.

"You and I sit down and go over everything in that folder together. If you still want me to leave when we're done, I'll go, but if not, then you'll admit how you really feel about me."

Hal expected her to take a few minutes to think his offer over, but she flashed him a smile, walked over, and sat on the bed.

"Fine, let's get to it," she said as she reached for the folder.

He didn't think he would be able to keep his mind on the paperwork with her wearing just a towel, so he said, "Wouldn't you like to get dressed first, just in case your sisters come up to see how you are?"

"If they were coming, they'd already be here. Especially after you slammed the door like that," she got to her feet and grasped the towel as it started to slide, "but since you seem unsettled, I'll slip into something more comfortable."

He watched her open and close a few drawers. Her erratic movements made the towel flutter, which flashed him more of her tantalizing skin. The vanilla scent of her body wash wafted to him as

she marched past him into the bathroom. She closed the door, and Hal sat on the edge of the bed. He put his elbows on his knees and dropped his face into his hands.

*How the hell did I manage to get myself into this situation, and how the heck am I supposed to deal with it?*

\* \* \* \*

Frankie leaned back against the bathroom door and took a deep breath. She really didn't want to do this, but Hal had pushed her into it, so she figured anything that happened he brought on himself. She used her ass to push herself off the door and walked over to the vanity to put her clothes down. Frankie yanked off her towel and tossed it into the hamper in the corner.

She picked up her tank top and slipped it over her head. With a few quick tugs, she pulled it down to her hips. The bright green ribbed material had a lot of stretch to it, but it still fit snugly over her breasts and hips. She picked up her boxers and bent over to step into them. First one foot, then the other. She shimmed them up over her thighs and butt, letting the elastic snap to her hips over the bottom of her shirt.

Frankie stood up and with a quick flip of her head sent her hair flying back. She grabbed the brush off the shelf beside the sink and ran it through her hair. Instead of leaving her hair down to dry she pulled it back and wrapped a ponytail around it. She looked at herself in the mirror for a few minutes. The same reflection she saw every morning stood there looking back at her. The change wasn't outwardly noticeable, but she felt it.

Frankie headed back for the bedroom with a new sense of determination. Hal couldn't get her to confess her feelings with intimidation and stubbornness so now he was switching to bargaining. It must be a guy thing, because her father had taken the same tact a lot when he wanted something from her or one of her sisters. But she had

few surprises of her own. It seemed like a little turn the tables may be in order. She may even have a little fun doing it. After all, he wasn't above using what had happened between them to his advantage, so she shouldn't be either. By the time he left, one of them would be spilling their guts, and it sure in hell wasn't going to be her. She opened the door and watched Hal lurch to his feet. His eyes went wide and his mouth fell open.

"Is there a problem?" she asked with a smile.

"No. It's just, I thought you were getting dressed."

"I did." She held out her arms, showing off the outfit that barely covered more than her towel had, probably less.

Hal's gaze slowly roamed over her body. She looked down to where her breasts were prominently on display, but his gaze went much lower. His stared at her boxers. She smiled, knowing they were a bit different. The big white circles with black centers passed for crazy eyes, and the red tongue couldn't be mistaken. She walked past, heard his guffaw, and knew he saw 'ribbit' written across her ass.

"Okay, let's get this over with." She rounded the bed and sat down with her back against the headboard.

She expected Hal to sit opposite her at the other end of the bed. He surprised her, something he'd done enough already. She watched him pull her desk chair over to the side of the bed and sit down. They both reached for the file at the same time, and their hands collided.

Frankie tried to yank hers back, but Hal latched onto her fingers before she could move them out of his range. His touch sent tingles up her arm. She tugged hard, and he let go. His smile didn't fade a bit as he picked up the file.

"Let's see what Jake was able to dig up." The chipper tone in his voice made her wonder what he was up to.

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to enjoy this?" She folded her legs in front of her and leaned forward.

"Not just me." He looked up from the folder to her and winked. "I hope we'll both enjoy it."

He took the picture off the front of the folder. Frankie waited for him to explain it, but he just laid it to the side. He opened the folder, pulling out the first sheet. He handed her a copy of his real license from Massachusetts. It was simple enough that it needed no explanation. Frankie noted it was identical to the one he'd showed her when he checked in, except for the name on it.

They went on for about fifteen minutes. He'd look at a sheet of paper and then hand it to her. He answered her questions with an ease that told her he was being honest. Still, it seemed as if the subject of his marriage to Tawny was never going to come up. She couldn't discern if he managed to avoid anything that might mention it, or if it was just buried deeper in the file. It had to be in there somewhere. Frankie was tempted to grab the folder and flip through until she found something that would either force him to admit or deny it.

Hal put the file down and got to his feet. The way he stretched his arms above his head made his shirt rise. Her eyes zoned in on the strip of hair that lead from his belly button down into his jeans. She turned away, but not before he caught her looking. With a chuckle, he walked across the room and flicked the light switch by the door. The light flashed on then off again. He did it again with the same result.

Now it was her turn to chuckle. He turned and looked at her, tipping his head in question. She whistled softly at first and the light came on, but dimly. Then, as she got louder, the light got brighter.

"Cool." He whistled a happy sounding tune, sending the light dancing.

"I know. I read about it and just had to have it." It had been one of her very infrequent indulgences. "It took me about three months to find one."

"I'll set someone to work on scaring up a few more for us."

"You can get some for you, because there is no us."

"There could be if you'd tell me what I did to scare you off. Has there been anything we've uncovered so far that makes me unworthy?"

“No, but-”

“There is no but. If you can’t give me a really good reason why we can’t be together, then I’m going to assume it’s just cold feet.”

“I have my reasons, so if you’re done with this,” she waved her hand at the file, “we can put it away and say goodbye.”

Hal paced back and forth at the end of the bed before walking over to her. He sat on the bed directly in front of her, with the folder lying between them and the damn picture of him, Tawny, and his father staring up at him.

“Tell me.” He was damn close to begging, and he could hear it.

“Hal, it was going to be over in a few days anyways. I really don’t want to get into it.”

“Fine. Back to work.” He let out a harsh breath and flipped the file open.

Frankie knew she could put them both out of the misery of going through the rest of the papers with just a few words.

*Who knew that I have a sadistic side.*

She wanted to hear him say the words. So, she sat back and let him go on with the farce they played. The whole situation was totally ridiculous. Hal picked up another form and read off the pertinent info before handing it to her. It became obvious that the quickest way out of this would be if she took the lead.

She would let him think he was in control. She did it all the time with her clients. She waited until she had an idea of where they wanted to go and then worked out a plan to get them there in the most positive, yet efficient way. If she thought of Hal as a client, one she really didn’t want to work with, she could aim him in the right direction. She figured it shouldn’t take too long to get him to tell her what she wanted, needed, to hear so she could put an end to his charade.

Since his goal was to find out what had come between them, she could start dropping hints to help him figure it out. She’d have to use

tact and keep her temper in check, because since he hadn't come clean yet, she knew he'd never go down without a fight.

"Your dad seemed like a fun guy."

"Yeah, he's mellowed a lot since he cut back on his work load."

"Cut back?"

"He comes into the office once a week to read all the reports and keep himself up on everything. And he has no problem adding his two cents. Then he goes home and basically does whatever he wants."

"You don't sound like you resent having him check up on you."

"I don't." Hal's deep laughter filled the air. "As a matter of fact, I like having him around. He's worked really hard all his life to provide the best for me, most of it on his own, and he deserves to take the time to enjoy himself before he's too old to do it."

"He seems pretty able to me."

"Really?"

"Sure. He's a little old for me, but he's still got a great sense of humor and more masculinity than a lot of guys I can think of." The look on his face urged her to dig a little deeper. "So, yeah, if he was single and a little younger I wouldn't think twice about giving him a go."

From his tone and the intense way he glared at her, she got the feeling he was a little jealous. Jealousy might play into her hands later if this plan didn't work. Frankie didn't think he had any right to be jealous, since he was the one who wanted two women. Still it was something she may need to consider. For now, however, she'd just plant a seed or two in his mind.

"Frankie, we had a deal that while I was here we wouldn't play any games. Do you really want to see what I'm capable of when the gloves come off?"

"You also said we'd be exclusive." Of course, that had been before his wife arrived.

She hoped he didn't think he'd be jumping out of bed with Tawny and into hers for the next few days. If so, he was sorely mistaken.

With frightening speed, Hal lurched to his feet and stared down at her. “Are you saying we haven’t been?” he shouted.



## **Chapter Seventeen**

Frankie thought about lying. She knew if Hal thought she was seeing someone else it might get him to go away, but at the cost of what little dignity she was fighting to hold onto. Besides, with the way her luck had been lately, lying would probably just come back to bite her in the ass. And, really, since she was pushing him to be honest shouldn't she?

Frankie forced a smile to curve her lips. "No, like you, I just stated a fact."

She watched Hal stalk from the bed to the window. He ran his hands through his hair, leaving it a disheveled mess. Frankie had no idea why he went out of his way to make this so hard on both of them. After a few minutes, he walked back to the bed, but instead of sitting on the bed, he grabbed the chair. He moved it a few feet away from her before he sat down. Was he afraid to be close to her?

He reached for the file. "Let's get back to work."

Frankie slapped her hand down on top of the folder. She'd had enough. "Tell me about Tawny."

"Tawny? What do you want to know?"

That had to be the stupidest question he ever asked her.

"Everything. Start with how long you've known her."

"I've known her for about six years or so." Hal shrugged his shoulders as if he wasn't sure.

Obviously, he was going to have to be prodded through the direct approach too. "How did you guys meet?"

Hal leaned back in the chair with a sigh and Frankie thought he might finally say it. "We met when a friend of mine brought her to a

charity ball that my father and I hosted. She was just another socialite with too much money and time on her hands. At least that's what I thought at the time. Especially when she started popping up at every event we attended."

"Was it strange for you two to keep running into each other?"

"Not really. But once her flirting got to the point where people started to notice, and talk, it became a little embarrassing. More for Tawny's father and mine than for me."

Frankie wondered if their fathers had pressured them to marry. She knew her father would never have considered pushing her or her sisters into marriage. Then again, if he could see the way Bobbie baited Jake, he might have had a word or two with both of them. She turned her focus back to the man sitting there staring at her.

"And now?" she asked, getting back on track with her questioning.

He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. "And now what?"

"Where does she fit into your life now?" She couldn't get any plainer than that.

The corners of his mouth turned up a bit. "She's become a permanent, yet comfortable fixture in my life."

Frankie had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep her mouth shut. What a horrid way to describe someone. He made it sound like Tawny was a couch or tattoo. How would he explain her to his friends? He probably wouldn't even mention her at all, which was probably a good thing. She'd hate for his remarks to get back to Tawny.

If Hal was so complacent about his relationship with Tawny, and so eager to cheat on her, why didn't they get divorced like normal people? The only reason she could come up with it was so basic it made her groan. Money was always a huge factor when it came to things like this. Hal had already proved it was a big issue for him. He'd thought her love would be affected by his bank account hadn't he?

\* \* \* \*

Hal was doing his best to stick to his goal. Finding out why Frankie was suddenly so cold, almost icy, towards him was imperative. Frankie could taunt him about his father all she wanted. It wasn't as if other women and girls in his past hadn't made a point of telling him how handsome the amusing old goat was. Hal was a big boy and well adjusted enough that he could handle it. Her hinting that she may have started a relationship with someone else had forced him to react. He'd briefly lost his tight hold on the leash he had on his control.

Now she had switched tactics, asking him all sorts of questions about Tawny. Sure, the questions seemed innocent on the surface, but he sensed they might be leading up to something big. She could have meant for the questions to distract him. Not that he'd let them. Now he started to wonder what she hoped to learn. She'd tried to hide her grimace at a couple of his answers, but he watched her so closely, he saw it.

Maybe Tawny had given Frankie the impression that he treated her like an evil stepmother, which wasn't even remotely close to the truth. Sure, he may get a little short with her sometimes, but even then, he tempered his words with love. He thought Tawny understood that. And though he didn't like her interfering in his love life, he really appreciated how happy she made his dad. It wouldn't be a bad thing to let Frankie know he felt that way too.

"Tawny may stick her nose a little too far into my personal and private life at times, but I like the way she dotes on my dad. So I usually let her nosiness slide." Hal explained hoping she'd understand.

Fuck! There it went again. The slightest wince crinkled the corners of her eyes. He replayed the words over in his head and didn't find anything sinister in them. Hal got the feeling that not knowing what went on in her head had him digging a deeper and deeper hole

for Frankie to bury himself in. Short of demanding she tell him every word Tawny had said to her, Hal didn't have many choices. He had no idea how to get around the walls Frankie threw up between them.

He fought back a smile as he decided since climbing over and knocking the barriers down wasn't working, he'd crawl under them. Not giving her time to guess what he was thinking, Hal reached over and laid his hand on her knee. Frankie stilled, her eyes briefly dropping to his hand. The file she gripped tightly in her hands shook as she looked at him. He flashed her a smile, but he didn't get the one he hoped for in return.

"Frankie, I'm going to be a hundred percent honest with you." Hal just hoped she was ready for what he was about to say.

"Finally," she muttered barely loud enough for him to hear.

"I don't want what's happening between us to end. I want to keep seeing you." There let her deny that confession.

"How? Will you sneak up here to see me every few months?"

Luckily that hadn't been his plan, because she didn't sound happy about it.

She started to scuttle away, but Hal got to his feet and grasped her lower leg. It halted her escape, at least momentarily. Her soft, silky skin stretched over her firm calf muscle that tensed under his palms. Frankie glared up at him as she tugged at her foot. Hal pulled back, sliding her closer to the edge of the bed.

"No! I was thinking you could come down and spend a few weeks with me. My apartment has a nice view of the city. Not as stunning as the one up at the top of the peak, but it's still pretty inspiring."

He hoped if he reminded her of the night they spent up there making love under the stars, she'd come around enough to tell him what the hell was going on. He ran one hand along her leg to her foot and started to massage it.

Frankie's eyes narrowed and her lips puckered in to an angry pout. She tried fruitlessly to twist her foot away from his touch. Even though she acted annoyed, he could see the signs that her body

welcomed his caresses. Her nipples, which had formed hard little pebbles, stabbed at her T-shirt. Hal's body responded in kind. His dick went stiff against the fly of his jeans, demanding to be set free. His mind warred between irritation and desire. No woman had ever driven him this hard before.

He felt an instinct to conquer and shower her with love for the rest of his life. Other people talked about finding their soul mate, and love at first sight. Bullshit, Hal had never believed it. Hell, he still didn't. This, whatever it was, hadn't been instant. Hal wouldn't lie and say he didn't want her from the first second he'd laid eyes on her. How could he deny one of the strongest emotions he had ever felt? That would have been bad enough, but now he was fraught with a need to have her love him as much as he loved her.

"Fine. If you don't want to come down to Massachusetts, then I'll just keep coming up here until you do." In his mind, he wasn't making a concession, because he was willing to do whatever it took to show her he was serious.

Frankie's hands clutched at the thick blanket under her. Hal figured it wasn't a good sign. Every word he said just seemed to make her more angry. If he could get close enough, he could try to use his kisses to coax her into agreeing to give him time to show her how right for each other they were. Frankie let out a loud sigh that filled the air. She shook her head back and forth, and all he could do was watch and wait.

After a minute or so she finally said, "You have work to do, and so do I."

"I'm willing to make the time for us, and I'm hoping you are too." The harsh edge to his tone stabbed at his conscience, which reminded him he wasn't supposed to be forcing this on her.

"No, I'm not," she said through her clenched jaw. She yanked her foot so hard Hal lurched forward.

He caught himself and took a huge step backwards, which inadvertently pulled her and the blanket with him. Frankie squealed in

surprise. She caught herself on her elbows, her ass hovered over the floor, suspended between them. Any other time he probably would have laughed, but the furious glare she gave him served its purpose.

“Let me go.” Her demand only proved he had the upper hand for the moment.

“Tell me why, because I don’t plan on letting go until I get an answer.”

Frankie must have realized it too. She lifted herself higher. “The remodel is barely under way, so I can’t just take off whenever I feel like it. Not to mention my clients who need me.”

It was true, but he sensed it wasn’t the real reason behind her wanting to end things between them. There was something else bugging her. Otherwise their break-up wouldn’t have been so sudden. He ran his fingers along the bottom of her foot, making her squirm. She made the mistake of kicking her free foot at him. He snagged it and wrapped his arm around both of her ankles.

“Nice try.” He rocked from side to side, just a little, but enough to send her ass swinging. “This time I suggest you be honest with both of us.”

“Or what?” She let her perfectly rounded ass lower towards the floor, making him support more of her weight.

“Or I’ll end this now and go ask your sisters what the fuck is going on.”

“Leave my sisters out of this.” She reached out and grabbed the closest thing, which luckily for him was a pillow, and threw it at him.

The pillow hit him in the face, then fell to the floor. It didn’t hurt, but it wiped the cocky smile off his face.

“Honey, the choice is yours,” he said just as a loud knock sounded on the door.

## Chapter Eighteen

“What?” Frankie and Hal shouted in unison.

The door swung open, and Bobbie stuck her head in. Hal watched her eyes widen as she took in the scene she’d just walked in on. The file had fallen to the floor spilling the papers all over the place.

Frankie was being dangled between himself and the bed, with a pillow more or less under her. All this had to come as a shock. He wondered if Bobbie thought they were up to something kinky. In his opinion it was too bad they weren’t.

Still, it wouldn’t hurt to let Bobbie think they were, so he smiled and winked at her. “Hi there.”

“Um, hi.” She looked from him to Frankie, who was blushing profusely.

Damn, the deep red tint looked intense slashed across the top of her breasts.

Frankie cleared her throat and Hal tore his gaze off her breasts and brought it up to her face. Her scowl almost made him chuckle.

Neither of them were happy. And, until Frankie told him what he’d done wrong, he was more than willing to heap the blame on her.

Knowing Bobbie was on his side, at least for now, gave him a powerful edge. He wasn’t above using it to put Frankie on the spot.

Hal lifted Frankie’s feet to his shoulder, then he smoothed his right hand slowly down from her ankle to her knee. Frankie stopped squirming and maybe even stopped breathing for a second or two. From Bobbie’s gasp, she may have too. It took every ounce of his restraint to outwardly ignore the way Bobbie gaped at him. Inwardly, he was giving himself a fist pump of satisfaction.

“So, Bobbie, what’s up?” It was damn hard to keep his voice dispassionate.

It took her a few seconds to reply. “Uh...Jessie wants you both downstairs. Now.”

Hal tipped his head in Frankie’s direction and felt his smile zing through him. “Well, isn’t that a coincidence. I was just about to head down.”

“You’d have to put me down first.” The dare was clear to her in her mocking tone.

“Okay.” Hal opened his hands and Frankie started to slide towards the floor.

Her eyes closed and her hands tightened on the blanket, turning her knuckles white. She let out a little shriek, and so did Bobbie, who watched with avid interest. Hal should have let her hit the floor. Maybe a little pain in her backside would show her he wasn’t a man to be played with. Instead he reached out and snatched her up. Her ass was mere inches from colliding with the floor.

“Get dressed.” His order came out gruff as he gently put her down. “I’ll wait in the hall.”

Frankie looked up at him, and he could see the distrust in her eyes. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen it today. He turned and walked out of the room into the hall, wishing he knew what he’d done, or was doing to cause her to doubt him. He closed the door, and leaned back against it. Hopefully, after he talked with her sisters he’d have more of a clue what he was dealing with.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie had seen the way Bobbie had looked at her. Frankie knew she would have been shocked to find any of her sisters in a similar situation. Well, maybe not Jessie and Sam since they were both married to sexy, and possibly devious, men. Not to mention the way she was dressed, or the position she’d been in. There was no doubt in



Frankie's mind that Bobbie was probably waiting for an explanation. She'd have to keep waiting because Frankie wasn't letting Hal out of her sight for too long. Just having Hal in her bedroom broke one of their father's famous rules: No men upstairs!

She scrambled to her knees and crawled over to her dresser. With a hard yank, her bottom drawer slid open. She grabbed a pair of faded gray sweatpants and the matching sweatshirt. By the time Frankie made it to her feet she already had the shirt on. She stuck her feet in the pant legs, and tugged them up. Then she kicked the drawer shut. Her bureau shook from the force, making the picture on the top rattle. She turned for the door, ready to go after Hal, but Bobbie stepped in front of it, blocking her way.

"If you think we're walking out of here without you telling me what the hell is going on, you're just as nuts as he is." Bobbie's foot tapped a quick rhythm, a clear sign she was getting impatient.

"Nothing was happening." And Frankie would have put a stop to anything that did.

Bobbie shook her head. "'Frankie, take a good look around, and then tell me nothing was going on."

"Okay, so something was going on, but not what you think." Frankie leaned forward and lowered her voice in case Hal was trying to listen through the door. "I was trying to get him to tell me he's married, without me asking."

"Well, did he?" Bobbie asked in a hushed, yet demanding tone.

"No." Frankie let out a frustrated sigh admitting she hadn't gotten anywhere.

"Then are you sure he really is married?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you just tell him you know? Wouldn't you feel more satisfied having him know you caught him? Instead, you're going to just make him tell you and let him off the hook."

“That’s not the point. I tried to just end it, but he refuses to go away. God, he’s even talked about how he wants us to keep seeing each other. I want him to realize I would never do that.”

“So let us at him. What else are sisters for, besides stealing your best clothes, of course? We’ll have your back and run the worthless dog off.”

Bobbie was right. Hadn’t she said pretty much the same thing to Sam for the past three years? Obviously, the Brazen women had a thing for men who thought they were entitled to more than one woman. Frankie’s heart squeezed a little tighter as she thought about how wrong she’d been about Hal. Frankie hadn’t harbored any outrageous dreams about them settling down, getting married, and having babies. In fact having his baby hadn’t even crossed her mind until right that second.

All she’d wanted was an uncomplicated affair, with no long lasting ties or commitments. Instead, the son of a bitch was trying to change the rules. He deserved what she was about to agree to do to him. Hopefully, he’d learn his lesson and never cheat on Tawny again. Either way he’d learned that if you messed with one Brazen sister or you messed with them all.

“You know, for a brat you sure are right an awful lot,” Frankie teased giving Bobbie a complement at the same time.

“I know.” Bobbie blew on her nails and rubbed them on her shirt.

“Luck is only going to get you so far.” Frankie hated to say it, but it was true.

“Yeah, but with luck and a little creativity I’ll get Jake, and that’s the important thing.” Bobbie’s smile reminded her that a positive attitude went a long way

“I’m so glad you managed to capture the heart and soul of the most eligible bachelor in town, hell, in the whole county.”

Bobbie’s smile slipped a little and she said, “He hasn’t admitted it yet.”

“Maybe not with words, but his actions speak twice as loud.”

“Which brings me back to Hal, how can he act so wrapped up in you if he’s married?” Bobbie tossed her hands in the air as she spoke.

“I don’t know, and I really don’t want to dwell on it. Let’s just go see what Jessie wants, and then we can come up with a plan to send Hal packing.”

“Deal.” Bobbie opened the door and Hal practically fell in.

Frankie and Bobbie burst into laughter. The bewildered expression on Hal’s face as they brushed past him into the hall made Frankie laugh harder. Knowing she had her sisters on her side took a lot of pressure off of her —pressure that would soon be put on him if he was stubborn enough to stick around. Bobbie raced down the stairs ahead of them, leaving Frankie and Hal to follow. Frankie glanced over her shoulder to make sure Hal was coming. She wasn’t surprised to see him hot on her heels.

They reached the bottom of the stairs within seconds of each other. Hal was so close that she could feel his heat at her back. She took the last few steps a little quicker.

She found the kitchen empty, but could hear voices coming from the dining room. She walked over to the swinging door and waited for Hal to join her. She could have just gone in and left him to follow on his own, but in her opinion, it would have looked too much like a sign of weakness. She wanted him to think her heart was hardening where he was concerned.

“Any idea what your sister wants?” Hal asked as he approached her.

“Nope,” she lied, knowing Jessie was probably going to grill them both to find out what the hell was going on.

“Maybe I’ll get a chance to ask her a few questions of my own.”

She glared up at him not liking his tone. “Threats roll off your tongue so smoothly. I wonder how I missed that over the past few weeks.”

"I believe in using any and every thing in my arsenal to get what I want, but I'll have you know this is the first time I have ever been forced into resorting to threats of any kind."

It could have been a lie, but Frankie sensed that when it came to business he told the truth. The problem was this wasn't business. The relationship between them could only be classified as intimately personal. Did that change things for him? There might be a fine, almost invisible, line he straddled while deciding whether or not about to cross? Or had she pushed him? All these questions gave her a headache.

"There's no need for threats. I told you what you wanted to know."

"Bull!" His low even tone grated on her nerves more than when her sisters shouted. "You've told me what you wanted me to believe."

"I've told you everything you need to know." She rubbed at the tension gather at her temples.

"You're so fucking stubborn." His comment came out so rough, but he was smiling.

It was the smile that confused her. Did it mean he liked that about her or not?

"I guess the fact we're so tied up in one another blinded both of us to the other flaws. Good thing this is over." As Frankie reached for the door, Hal's hand wrapped around her wrist.

"I still want you, flaws and all." He pulled her into his arms and lowered his mouth to hers.

Frankie held herself still as his lips brushed over hers. She refused to let herself melt into him the way her body wanted to. He let her go without saying another word. She stood there silently and watched him push the door open and walk into the dining room, leaving her alone.

She swiped the tears off her cheeks. "Well. Hell, I am a home wrecker."

## Chapter Nineteen

Frankie stepped into the room, coming to a dead stop, which brought her shoulder to shoulder with Hal. She glanced around at the all the faces staring at them. Her five sisters were seated around the table along with Tawny. Victor stood between Jessie and Joey, while Trent stood between Sam and Georgie on either side of him. Jake stood resolutely behind Bobbie with his hands on her shoulders. Hal's father was a few feet away behind Tawny.

Frankie met Tawny's eyes for a moment. An awkward sensation roiled through her. A mix of guilt, fear, and shame all fought for a stronghold. She wished she knew what the other woman was thinking, yet at the same time she was also glad she couldn't read her thoughts. In her place, Frankie knew she would probably be imagining roasting her over an open pit. She was already picturing the things she'd like to do to Hal. And though most of them included his being naked, none of them would be the slightest bit pleasant. She knew she should be trying to forget what he looked like naked, but as they say, the horse was out of the barn on that score. She wouldn't forget that any time soon. Unless she was struck with a sudden case of amnesia.

"Sit down. Dinner should be here any minute." Jessie waved her hand at the two empty chairs.

Frankie bristled at the sweet tone Jessie used. Something was going down and she didn't like the vibe she got. Hal, either unaware or unconcerned, walked over and held out a chair for her. She glanced over at Tawny who was looking up at Hal's father as she fidgeted in her seat. Nothing good was going to come of them all being in the

same room. She should have told Jessie what was happening so this could have been avoided.

Hal smiled over at Sam and asked, "What are we eating?"

"Sam's a little tired, so we ordered pizza," Trent patted Sam's shoulder as he lied through his teeth.

Sam glared up at him before she turned and flashed Hal a small tight smile. Frankie knew Sam would never allow company to be treated like this unless she was under duress. Sam always had something ready to be whipped up for surprise visitors. Pizza in the Brazen house was reserved for when Bobbie had study groups, and even then Sam usually threw something together to go with it.

This wasn't about all of them just getting together to eat. No, this was a family meeting. They had them regularly, mostly to keep everyone updated about how things were coming with their remodel plans. Frankie knew that at this time they'd be talking about something else because Jessie didn't believe in discussing family business with outsiders. She glanced over at Jake's stony expression, remembering the last time he'd been to one of their meetings. She wondered if Hal had heard about the last time Jake got involved in a situation between a Brazen sister and a man. It ended up with Sam, Trent, and Sam's ex-boyfriend in jail, a judge, and a couple of hastily said 'I Do's'.

That wouldn't happen this time. It couldn't. Then again, if Jake did try something, it would force Hal's hand. Hal wouldn't be able to keep pursuing her if everyone knew the truth. Her sisters would be outraged on her behalf. They sure as hell weren't going to let him sneak off into the night without having to answer for himself.

"So, Hal, while you were upstairs," the look Jessie gave Hal, so much like the one their father used to give them when they broke a rule, was comical, "we got to know your dad and Tawny a little."

Out of the corner of her eye, Frankie saw Hal's shoulders and back go straight. Obviously, he didn't like the sound of that. She wanted to laugh. It was okay for him to think about asking her sisters

about why she wanted to end their affair early, but knowing her sisters had been doing some digging of their own bothered him.

“Did my father regal you with stories of when I was a young rascal turning him gray before his time?” Hal smiled at his father, whose cheeks coated with a light pink tinge.

“No, I saved the embarrassing stuff to share with Francesca.” The way his father used her full name had her looking over at him.

He winked and Frankie couldn’t hold back her smile. A quick glance at Tawny had her wishing she had. The woman’s pout just made her more attractive. It made Frankie wonder again why Hal wasn’t happy with her. Maybe happiness wasn’t what Hal was looking for. Not that Frankie had a clue what he was looking for? It didn’t matter. What did matter was Tawny knowing that she wasn’t a threat.

“That’s nice of you, sir, but I’ve heard enough,” lies was the first word that popped into her head, but she chose a more tactful way of expressing herself, “tales about Hal already.”

Hal senior’s deep chuckle reverberated in the air. “Oh, sweetheart, I’m sure any tales these three rascals told you had them coming off as princes. Believe me they won’t in mine. So if you ever change your mind you just let me know.”

“I will. Now if you’ll all excuse me, I really do have some work to do.” She started to rise out of the chair, but Hal pulled her back down.

“It can wait, can’t it?” His question sounded more like the warning she was sure it meant to be.

“Boy if the girl has work to do, let her get to it.” Hal’s father came to her rescue, but it was too late.

Frankie didn’t want to give Hal the chance to interrogate her sisters without her being there. Hell, she didn’t want him talking to them at all. She decided the best thing for her to do was stay and keep control of the conversation away from him. However to pull this off, she might need a little help.

“No, he’s right. It can wait until morning.” She smiled and looked in Bobbie’s direction.

Bobbie must have seen something in her eyes because she instantly said, “Great. Since everyone else already has drinks, why don’t Frankie and I go get you two something? Frankie, you know what Hal likes, right?”

“She sure does,” Hal answered for her, which pissed her off even more.

“I’ll tag along,” Jake said, holding out a hand to help Bobbie out of her chair.

“I’d hate for you to miss anything, so hurry back,” Hal whispered as she got to her feet.

Jake held the door as she and Bobbie walked through. Frankie didn’t miss the way his eyes narrowed as he looked over at Hal. The door closed and Jake stood in front of it with his arms crossed over his broad chest. Frankie whipped open the fridge and hid behind the door. Bobbie’s laughter had her glancing back over her shoulder.

“Why do I get the feeling you two escaped in here to concoct some plan to get rid of Hal and his family?” Jake kept his voice low enough so only they could hear him.

“Because we did.” Bobbie’s careless shrug just proved she wasn’t the least bit afraid of Jake.

“Ba...Bobbie you’re trying my patience.” The look Jake aimed Bobbie’s way was hot enough to melt ice.

Frankie noticed Jake’s slip and how quickly he caught himself.

Jake didn’t usually use endearments when others were around, but there were plenty of times when he’d slipped and called Bobbie things like baby, honey, and sweetheart. Mostly it was when he was angry or when Bobbie pushed him too hard. Someday he’d realize he wasn’t fooling anyone by trying to keep his distance from her.

Frankie knew that sooner or later Bobbie would wear him down, and then he’d have to admit he couldn’t live without her. Until then everyone was willing to sit back and watch the sparks fly. Maybe



once Frankie cleaned up her own mess she'd sit down with Jake and lay out the facts for him.

"Jake, I'm just trying to help my sister. You don't want to let that slimy toad get away with mistreating her do you?" Bobbie batt ed her eyes giving him her best, and most practiced, innocent look, "

Jake walked over and leaned his hip against the counter. "Damn it, of course not. Frankie, did you find the answers you were looking for in the contents of that folder I had Edgar pull together for you?"

"Not yet." Frankie sighed, wishing she'd found something.

Bobbie started to pour the soda and said, "From the looks of things when I walked in-"

"Bobbie!" Frankie scolded her even though she knew it wouldn't do any good.

"What? All I was saying is it would've been easier for you to read the file if Hal wasn't there." Bobbie's tinkling laughter was contagious.

Jake blew out a breath, clearly accepting his defeat. "Alright, so what's your plan?"

Bobbie tipped her head down and smiled. Since Frankie still wasn't sure how deep Trent and Victor's lies went, she wanted to keep them out of the loop on this as long as possible. Besides her plan had a simplicity to it that couldn't go wrong.

"We're going to do what women do best." Frankie hoped once her and Bobbie started her sisters would follow suit.

"Brazen women do everything best." Bobbie's wink aimed at Jake made him groan.

"We are going to talk. I don't want Hal to get control of the conversation at all. The less he talks the better."

Jake shook his head and Bobbie laughed.

"Frankie, you're not going to get any answers that way." Bobbie spoke to her, but stared at Jake, who stared back.

“Right, but neither will Hal. He already had his chance to tell me what I wanted to know.” And now, she didn’t want to hear anything but “Goodbye.”

“You know, it would be easier if you just let me take him out back and question him myself.” The huge smile that curved Jake’s lips confirmed what a pleasure it would be.

Bobbie threw herself at Jake, and he opened his arms to catch her. “I love it when you go all Neanderthal.”

He held her against him for a few seconds before easing Bobbie away. “Hal knows I consider you girls like sisters, so he should be expecting something from me.”

“You think of us like sisters?” Bobbie said and Frankie watched her dramatic pout got the reaction she’d probably hoped for.

“I try to,” he grouched and stomped back into the dining room.

Frankie took a slow, deep breath, waiting to see how Bobbie responded. Bobbie walked over and grabbed the soda off the counter. Frankie knew her baby sister was sick of hearing their warnings, but it was hard for her and her other sisters not to try to protect her as best they could.

So, Frankie found herself offering another warning that would no doubt be ignored. “Bobbie, one of these days you’re going to cause serious damage to that man’s pride. He may not forgive you for it.”

“Jake is a big boy. He can handle whatever I throw his way. If he’d just stop fighting there would be no need for me to tease him at all.” She put the soda in the fridge slammed the door shut and leaned back against it.

“Honey, he just needs time to see things for what they are.” Frankie wished she saved her warning for another time, she needed Bobbie focused on helping her.

“What if while I’m giving him that time someone comes along and steals him away?” Bobbie’s voice cracked and she closed eyes really tight.

“It won’t happen, but I really hated that you think it might. Think of it like this, if it did happen, then we would have all been wrong about the way he feels for you. When have we ever all been wrong?”

“What if in his denial he may think if he marries someone else that will make him off limits.” Frankie worried that Bobbie wasted too much time considering these possibilities.

“Wouldn’t it?” Frankie asked, wanting to let Bobbie hear this said out loud and hear how insane it was.

“In any other case, yes.” Bobbie shook her head. “Not in Jake’s though because one way or another, I’m going to make sure he knows nothing, and no one is going to stand in my way.”

“Doesn’t he deserve the chance to make the choice himself? Just consider this. People always say absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Yeah that’s a load of horse shit.”

“Whatever. Remember Amber, the girl I went to school with?” Bobbie nodded so Frankie went on, “She wanted Craig Niles, but he wasn’t interested in her until he thought she was going with Kyle Heights.” Frankie mentally cringed at the super bad example she’d just given Bobbie.

“I’m not going to date other guys to piss Jake off.” Bobbie walked over and grabbed the glasses off the counter. “That would be stupidity in its best form.”

Frankie let out a sigh of relief and headed for the door. “I didn’t mean you should. I meant backing off a little would give a chance to see how things would be without you around.”

Bobbie turned to face her, pushing the door open with her ass. “Let’s focus on taking care of your problem. We have plenty of time to worry about mine.”

Frankie looked into the room and spotted Joey standing by the window. The way she toyed with her hair as she stared off into space worried her. Something was bothering her and Frankie wanted to know what the hell it was.

She might need a little help getting Joey to confess she had a problem. “That’s good, because I think Joey may need a little help.”

Bobbie spun around so quickly that she sloshed soda over the edge of the glasses. She rushed over and put them on the table. Frankie dashed back into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of paper towels. She handed a few to Bobbie and together they bent down to clean up the mess with everyone, but Joey staring at them.

“Shit! How long has this been going on?” Bobbie whispered.

Frankie tried to remember the first time she noticed something was up and couldn’t pinpoint it, so she shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not sure. At least a week or two.”

“Do you think anyone else knows?” Bobbie asked as they got to their feet.

“Hal does, but that’s not going to help, since I hope to have him packing within the next few hours.” Frankie walked back into the kitchen and tossed the dirty paper towels in the trash.

“Hal doesn’t seem to be the type to give up that easy.” Bobbie joined her at the sink and washed her hands.

“I know. So do me a favor and stay focused.” Frankie dried her hands and walked back into the dining room, taking her seat next to Hal.

Everybody was quiet except for Jake and Hal’s dad, who were having a conversation about local wildlife. She was glad to hear Jake was doing most of the talking. Hal leaned towards her, but she leaned away from him. She didn’t dare look at Tawny or her sisters. She needed to compose herself first. When she did look up, the first thing she saw was Bobbie’s smirk, and instantly she knew her sister was up to something.

“So, Tawny, tell us a little about yourself,” Bobbie said turning to her with a smile.

\* \* \* \*

Hal had no idea what was going on, but from the way Frankie began to fidget in her seat, he knew it couldn't be anything good. Frankie, Bobbie, and Jake had spent way too much time, in reality it was only about five minutes, in the kitchen for his peace of mind. Add that together with the way Jake had monopolized the conversation since he reemerged, and Hal could only deduce something was afoot. Now Bobbie was questioning Tawny.

He sat there listening as one by one the Brazen sisters took their turn engaging Tawny in what on the surface seemed like innocent banter. Hal tried several times to enter the conversation, but he couldn't get a word in edgewise. So, he decided he would be best served by trying to keep track of the type of questions they were asking.

After about twenty minutes, he was lost. They discussed fashion, hobbies, and classes they took in school. Nothing stood out to him as important. Could it be that they were just trying to get to know Tawny? Maybe, although he didn't think so. Frankie was too quiet for his liking. Jake, though, had somehow drawn Trent and Victor into the conversation with his dad. He and Frankie were the only two not talking. The good thing about that meant no one was paying any attention to them.

Hal leaned over the arm of her chair, and said, "You know you're just delaying the inevitable."

"I could say the same for you." She smiled and nodded at something one of her sisters said.

"Then why don't we step in the other room, and you can tell me what I want to know, and I'll tell you what you want to know."

"What makes you think there's something I want to know?"

"I'm not stupid."

That got her to look at him. "I never said you were."

"Between the file Jake gave you, and all the questions your sisters are asking, I'm sensing something isn't adding up for you."

"I've told you our affair is over, but you don't believe me. I wonder why?" She raised her brows in question, but her tone hinted she already knew the answer.

"Let's go in the kitchen, and I'll tell you." His raised his voice a little and her sister, Georgie, turned her head in their direction.

"My sisters would be hot on our heels. Besides, I really don't think there's anything you could say that would change my mind." She hoped it didn't give him a glimmer of hope that she didn't come right out and say no.

"Earlier, I asked you to give me a chance. Now I'm asking you again. Come with me." He held out his hand, willing it not to shake and give away how vulnerable he felt.

"I can't."

"Then I'll tell you here where everyone can hear what I have to say."

"How long have you and Hal been married?" He heard one of her sisters ask Tawny.

Frankie gasped, all the color leaving her face. Hal reached for her hand, but she moved it out of his reach. For some reason Tawny talking about being married to his dad spooked her. He knew it wasn't a conventional marriage, with their age difference, but it really was true love. If she gave them a chance, she'd see it for herself. Somehow he needed to get her alone so they could talk this out. He knew he didn't have much time, because talking about Tawny was seconds away from launching into her tale about how she snagged his father, who had been consider the ultimate confirmed bachelor.

\* \* \* \*

Frankie quickly turned away, but she knew it was too late. Hal had to have noticed her reaction. Damn it, she was going to kill Bobbie. Not right now, however, because right now she needed to get

the hell out of there. Just then the door bell sounded and she took advantage of it.

“I’ll get it!” she shouted, jumping to her feet.

“Hal and I have been married for a little over three years,” Frankie heard Tawny coo as she left the room.

Frankie managed to work up a smile for the delivery kid as she opened the door. She stepped outside to sign the slip attached to the top box. Unable to go back in just yet, she sat on the steps setting the four boxes down beside her. How the heck could she go back in there and pretend nothing was wrong? She expected to hear yelling coming from the house any second. Jessie and Sam’s husbands had a lot of explaining to do, and even though she’d like to be there to hear it, she couldn’t bring herself to go back inside.

The door opened behind her and Frankie lowered her head. Her fat tears plopped onto the wooden steps. She closed her eyes not wanting to see them, but unable to hold them back any longer. She heard the pizza boxes slide across the porch and felt someone sit down next to her. Whoever it was seemed willing to wait her out, which meant it wasn’t Hal, because he had no patience that she knew of. Then again, she really hadn’t displayed any herself in her rush to get him in bed.

“I take it my boy hasn’t found a way back into your good graces, huh?” Hal’s father’s deep voice made her jump.

Frankie didn’t bother to hide her surprise as she looked over at him. She brushed her fingers across her wet cheeks. Answering him would have just brought on more tears, so she just shrugged her shoulders.

His eyes filled with concern. “Darling, don’t waste your tears. Tell me, what I can do to help?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head. “That’s not true. You can make him go home.”

“Something tells me that’s not what you really want, but if it’ll stop your tears I’ll do it. I can pack him and my wife up and we’ll be out of here within the hour.”

“Too bad you have to leave too, I would have like to meet your wife,” Frankie sniffled, wishing Hal was more like his father.

He obviously understood that sometimes you didn’t need to know why to do what you were asked. He laughed and she marveled at how similar it was to his son’s. She really would have liked to have time to get to know him better.

“Honey, your sisters have been talking to her for the past few hours. It’s not hard to believe Hal didn’t introduce Tawny as his stepmother, but it’s usually the first thing she tells people.”

He started to rise, but Frankie reached out grabbed his arm and yanked him back down. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to get her tongue to work. She had to have heard him wrong. The age difference between him and Tawny was way bigger than the gap between Jake and Bobbie, but some men didn’t have issues with age.

“Sweetheart, take a deep breath. You alright, or should I go get someone?” he asked.

Frankie shook her head and took a few deep breaths as he instructed. She sat there trying to wrap her head around the news he had just conveyed to her.

Hal’s father patted her hand and then started to get up. “I’ll go get one of your sisters.”

“No!” She tightened her grip on his sleeve, then let go once she realized what she was doing. “I’m okay.”

“Good. Then maybe you can tell me what Hal said to make you so mad at him.”

Frankie thought of everything Hal had been saying. He wanted her. This thing between them wasn’t over. He’d gone so far as to invite her to come down to Boston and spend time with him. Oh, he’d



even used the word most men avoided like the plague or tossed around way too easily.

"I'm such a fool." She got to her feet and started pacing back and forth on the little rock path in front of the steps.

"Darlin', I'm a great listener. Why don't you tell me everything, and let me be the judge of that." Hal Senior leaned up against the pole and waved his hand, encouraging her to spill her guts.

"Your son didn't say anything to make me mad. I met Tawny and got the wrong impression. Then when he tried to set me straight I wouldn't even let him." She pressed her hands to her heated cheeks.

"You don't seem like the kind of girl to make rash decisions. Maybe you were looking for a reason to send him on his way?"

No. Well, maybe. Okay, so he was right, but if Tawny hadn't come along she wouldn't have freaked. Would she? She looked up at the darkening night sky glittered with stars and blew out a harsh breath. It sucked having a man she just met read her so well.

"So is this where I admit I've fallen in love with your son?" she asked with a self-deprecating laugh.

"It sure would make things a hell of a lot easier."

Frankie spun on her heels and watched as Hal stepped out from the shadows beside the house. "You were listening."

"To every single word. So now that we all know I'm not married, where do we go from here?" He slowly walked towards her as he spoke.

"I don't know?" she said truthfully.

They still had things standing in the way of them being together. He reached out took her hand and gently laid it on his chest. She could feel the rapid tattoo of his heart under her palm. She couldn't look away as he closed the distance.

"I do. I'd like you to come and check out my apartment since we'll hopefully be doing a lot of traveling between here and there." He lowered his head, bringing them face to face.

“Really?” Her voice came out in a sexy, breathless tone she’d never heard before. One it seemed only he could bring out of her.

“Yeah, until you feel comfortable enough to become my wife.”

He covered her mouth with his as loud clapping and cheers filled the air. His arms closed around her and thankfully held her up. Frankie trembled from head to toe. She sagged against him, relieved that she hadn’t ruined things. When he finally let her up for air, she fisted her hands in his shirt to keep him from pulling away.

“I’m ready now,” she managed to croak out.

“Then maybe we’ll take a side trip to Vegas.” He swung her up into his arms and climbed the stairs of the porch where everyone stood watching.

# THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When it comes to writing Rita has always made up stories to entertain her kids. As they grew up she began writing romances to entertain herself. Luckily she has a wonderful supportive family, and friends that are willing to sit there and listen to her ramble on about what her characters have done, or are about to do.

When she's not totally caught up in getting her characters and scenes fleshed out she can usually be found with her nose stuck in a book, or snuggled up on the couch with her hubby or one of her kids watching a movie. She enjoys spending time with her big noisy family, because they provide her with lots of ideas for her stories. Rita is a proud member of Romance Divas and enjoys visiting the Romantic Times forum.

### *Also by Rita Sawyer*

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