

His Unlikely Lover Chapter 4

CHAPTER FOUR

Bobbi found herself outside her auto repair shop bright and early that Sunday morning. The men and Bobbi took turns taking weekends off and this was to have been hers, but she had too much invested in the business to stay away from it for a full weekend, so she usually headed in for a couple of hours on most of her days off anyway. Besides, after the confusing events of the past forty-eight hours, starting with that ill-advised drunken kiss on Friday night, she welcomed the distraction work would offer. Her employees were all at work; the shop was usually open seven days a week with the guys working shifts during the week. Weekends were their busiest times because most people couldn't find the time to bring their cars in for minor repairs during the week.

In an effort to keep her mind away from Gabe, she had been thinking about the vintage Chevy Corvette that her team was supposed to start overhauling on Monday. It was one of her biggest accounts and her client was an old friend who had allowed her to twist his arm into renovating the old car that had been rusting beneath a drop cloth in his garage. She was excited by the opportunity. Her business was still fairly new—just over a year old—and if they did this well she could make a name for herself in the very exclusive vintage car restoration market. At the moment engine repairs, bodywork, and other small jobs were keeping the business afloat, but this beauty of a car could be the break that she was looking for.

“Hey, boss, didn't expect to see you in today,” Sean, the youngest of her three mechanics, called when saw her.

“You know that I can't stay away from this place,” she joked, and he laughed, before ducking his head back under the bonnet of a badly dented sedan. Bobbi headed directly to the car that she had so many hopes and dreams invested in.

“Wow, you are gorgeous,” Bobbi whispered reverently, when she came to a halt in front of the faded beauty that graced her auto repair shop floor. “Hello darling, I'm going to make you even more beautiful. I'm going to give you a makeover. Would you like that?” She ran her hands worshipfully over the sleek lines of the battered 1970 Chevy Corvette LT-1. Craig Farrow, her head mechanic, grinned when she leaned over the car's bonnet, spread her arms wide, and lay her cheek against the cold metal. She hugged the car as if it was a living, breathing entity and really to Bobbi it was. Cars spoke to her—they clearly communicated their pain, their suffering, their wants, and their needs. She lay there for a long while before sighing deeply and standing upright to look down at the car regretfully.

“I can’t promise that it won’t hurt,” she said solemnly. “But it’ll all be worth it in the end.”

Another long sigh before she glanced over at Craig, Sean, and Pieter, her other mechanic. While Sean was cheerful, Pieter, who was only slight older, was skinny as the proverbial rake and surly and uncommunicative. He did brilliant work though and seemed content to let everybody around him do the talking. They were all standing off to the side watching her commune with the car. Craig and Sean—who had stopped what he’d been doing for the moment—looked amused while Pieter merely looked bored.

“Dya wanna start today, boss?” Craig asked. All business now, Bobbi outlined her plan of action and her timeline for the car’s “makeover.” A lot of the parts had to be imported and the cost for it was coming straight out of her pocket, since she had all but begged her friend for the opportunity to work on this baby. Jason Claiborne hadn’t been willing to foot the expense of overhauling the vintage car and had been quite prepared to leave her to rust, but he was unwilling to sell what had once been his father’s pride and joy. Bobbi had convinced him that she could restore the car to its former glory, agreeing to charge him for only the bodywork and half of the cost of the mechanical repairs if he agreed to drive the car regularly and talk her business up if anyone asked about the car. That meant she would have to pay for the replacement parts and they didn’t come cheap. The project was an ambitious one for a young, struggling business like hers and she sometimes woke up in a cold sweat knowing that she was putting all her eggs into one very rickety basket.

She hoped to keep the money trickling in with the more minor jobs but her business didn’t have much of a reputation in the area yet. Added to that, she was a woman and most people didn’t trust a female near their cars. She had discovered that women were worse than men when it came to rampant sexism; her small clientele consisted mostly of men. The only women who supported her were her so-called “Mommy Club” friends and they weren’t in the area enough to use her services regularly. She’d had women drive into her shop and take one look at her before hastily claiming to have made a mistake and driving right back out again. And more than a few men had had the same reaction. It was disheartening to say the least.

She sucked in a breath and focused on the task at hand. She had a lot riding on the grand old lady parked in front of her but she was determined to succeed. She had dreamed of owning her own shop since her early teens, when her father had allowed her to help him “tinker” on his cars. The man hadn’t been the most attentive father, content to let his children run wild for the most part while he focused on his business and the only moments Bobbi had felt close to him when she was a child was when he allowed her to help him work on one of his precious cars. It was his hobby, something

he did to unwind, and he had always welcomed Bobbi with her questions and her eagerness to help.

He hadn't quite known what to do with a girl child and had been quite happy when she hadn't shown an interest in more feminine pursuits, at least allowing them to have some common ground. He didn't know that Bobbi had deliberately forsaken more "girlie" pastimes so that she could have her father's approval and could have something in common with her brothers. She had been desperate to fit into her testosterone-laden family and so dresses and make-up had been sacrificed in favor of jeans, football, and grease.

Out of that need for approval had come this genuine love for auto mechanics. Her brothers had all gone to university after high school and had gone on to become a lawyer, architect, and doctor, respectively. Bobbi hadn't wanted to be anything other than a mechanic and she had worked at an auto shop all through high school. She had halfheartedly pursued an aimless BA degree in English Literature before eventually dropping out to get an automotive certification instead. She had studied and worked hard and had apprenticed at three different auto repair shops. Years later a combination of savings, a small business loan, and some money her mother—who had died of a pulmonary embolism when Bobbi was just five—had left in trust for her had afforded her the opportunity to open her own shop in town at the relatively young age of twenty-five. Her father had been willing to finance the whole shop but she had wanted to do this by herself. Nobody could ever accuse her of being a pampered, spoiled brat whose wealthy daddy bankrolled her life. It was bad enough that she still lived at home. It was her only viable option at the moment, with every spare cent going into the business.

Starting an auto repair shop wasn't cheap and if not for Gabe's emotional support and encouragement back when the idea was just a nascent seed floundering beneath mounds of crushing self-doubt, Bobbi would probably not even have tried to get it off the ground. Gabe had always made her feel like what she wanted was equally as important as her brothers' lofty ambitions. The costs of her state-of-the-art equipment, building rental, and employee payrolls were immense and Bobbi would swallow her pride and live at home if it meant saving money on rent and food. She'd had a lot more privacy since her brothers had all moved out anyway and usually only saw her father at mealtimes. The man was a workaholic and was always closeted away in his office running the multimillion dollar family business that none of his children had wanted to take over. Instead, Gabe was the one who was being groomed to succeed him as Richcorp's chairman.

Gabe had been Mike Richmond's first, last, and only choice as successor once it had become clear that none of his children were interested in learning anything about his huge multimedia conglomerate, which owned five local newspapers around the

country, three national radio stations, four glossy multilingual magazines, and a premium cable television that serviced most of the country and a large portion of the continent as well. Gabe had been the one who had asked the intelligent questions on career day when Mike Richmond had graced his classroom—which he shared with his twin, Chase, and her brother Billy—with his formidable presence. Gabe had been the one to dog the older man's footsteps and beg for a summer job when he was fifteen. While Chase and Billy had flirted with girls and been typical adolescents, Gabe had worked his butt off in the stuffy mailroom of the Cape Town branch of the company. He had eventually obtained his MBA—all the while working his way up through the ranks until he had reached his current status as the CEO of GNT, Richcorp's most prolific subsidiary. Now he was poised to take over the whole kit and caboodle.

“Hey.” As if she had unconsciously summoned Gabe with her thoughts, his glossy, expensive shoes suddenly materialized at her feet. Startled, she lost focus and raised her head, hitting it on the underside of the car with a bang. Damn it!

She swore roundly and he chuckled in response to her colorful curses. He went down on his haunches and she felt his hands wrap around her ankles. Before she could question him, he dragged her out from under the car. The creeper that she was lying on eased his task significantly. He didn't budge as he pulled her closer and she had no choice but to part and bend her knees so that they were splayed on either side of his thighs. He halted her progress before the creeper—which was long enough only to support her from shoulder to backside—could whack him on the ankles.

Disgruntled, she sat up but then immediately realized that the move hadn't been well thought out on her part. It brought her chest within a hairs' breath of his much broader one and she could feel the heat poring off him. He also smelled delicious—hints of green forest mixed with his own earthy scent—while she was self-consciously aware of the fact that she reeked of Eau de Grease. Still she was so hyperaware of his proximity that her breath shortened into ragged gasps, and her nipples tightened into hard ingots of excruciating sensation. She was grateful for the fact that she wore her loose gray overalls since they hid the embarrassing development from his all-encompassing scrutiny. After the night before she would rather not have it known that it was a pretty typical reaction to his presence. Once could be written off as a fluke. Twice and he'd be onto her longest-kept secret in no time.

She licked her lips nervously and his eyes dropped down to her mouth to track the movement. His rapt gaze traveled over her face and his eyes widened for a fraction of a second before he raised his hand to cup one of her cheeks. He leaned in and Bobbi swallowed painfully. Oh dear God, he was going to kiss her . . .

Of course he was going to kiss her!

It was inevitable. He had confused her so much over the past couple of days but perhaps he was ready to acknowledge he was attracted to her as well? Her lips parted, her eyes slid shut, and his thumb brushed over her cheekbone before his hand abruptly left her face. She was startled into opening her eyes just in time to see him raise his thumb into her line of vision.

“Grease,” he said, wrinkling his nose. She gasped and humiliated color flooded into her cheeks as she caught the mixture of laughter and distaste in his eyes.

She was mortified that she had once again allowed herself to entertain the notion that Gabe could possibly be attracted to her. Her inability to separate reality from her crazy fantasies was one of the reasons she simply had to keep him at a physical distance. That meant no more ill-advised movie nights. She would start being firmer and saying no to him more often. It was mortifying how very little backbone she had when it came to this man. Bobbi reached for a rag that she kept tucked into her pocket and scrubbed self-consciously at her face.

“I’m surprised to see you here.” Her voice was muffled as she continued to wipe her face. “I mean, aren’t you afraid of getting grime on your lovely suit? Grease is impossible to get out, you know.” She eyed the expensive tailor-made three-piece iron-gray suit disdainfully, desperate to get back into familiar territory with him. She didn’t ask him what he was doing in a suit on a Sunday afternoon; Gabe was a real workaholic and since he’d taken Saturday off it was inevitable that he’d go to the office on Sunday.

Knowing him, he’d probably swum a few laps this morning, headed out to the office afterward, had a few high-powered business meetings—achieving more in a few hours than most people achieved in a full day at work. Just a typical morning for the industrious Gabriel Braddock, and now he was here with nary a hair out of place and enough time left in his day to torment her.

He merely grinned in response to her words before leaping nimbly to his feet. She felt a profound sense of loss when he moved away and ducked her head to disguise her reaction. When she looked up again only after carefully cultivating a blank expression, it was to see him holding out a hand to her. She hesitated before reluctantly taking the outstretched hand. His long, elegant fingers curled around her grubby paw and the muscles in his thighs tensed as he leaned back to tug her up.

He overestimated her weight—using a smidgen too much strength—and Bobbi lost her balance. For a few awkward seconds she found herself plastered against his hard body before—after a seemingly interminable amount of time had passed—he grabbed her upper arms and shifted her away.

Dazed, she peered up at him for a moment while she tried to force herself to forget about the burning imprint of his chest against her cheek, his torso against her breasts,

and most startling of all—the firm masculine bulge between his thighs against her stomach. For a brief moment, she allowed herself to speculate about that substantial bulge. She had easily felt it through the fabric of their clothing, even though he wasn't aroused and it made her—very inappropriately—wonder about the size of him when he was erect. She remembered Friday night, in his room, when she had touched him. He had seemed . . . affected then, but she hadn't considered how affected he might have been until now. Had he been turned on? Hard? The thought sent her face up in flames.

She lifted the rag and pretended to rub off the grease on her face again in an effort to disguise her inexplicable blush.

“Hey,” his hand reached out to halt hers. “You got it all. You'll scour the skin off your face if you keep that up.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?” she asked him sullenly, determined to regain her equilibrium.

“Taking you to lunch,” he informed authoritatively, elbowing his jacket aside to shove his hands into his trouser pockets. Naturally her eyes fell to where the expensive fabric strained across his muscled thighs and crotch. She cleared her throat nervously and averted her eyes.

Jesus! Pull yourself together, Richmond, she lectured herself sternly. This was beyond ridiculous. She could get past this; she'd done it before and she'd undoubtedly have to do it again—even though it was becoming increasingly and devastatingly painful for her to deal with Gabe's affectionate disinterest.

“I'm busy today . . . and I had a big breakfast,” she lied, and he rolled his eyes at her.

“A slice of toast isn't anybody's idea of a big breakfast,” he said.

“Faye?” she asked with a resigned sigh. Faye tended to jump at every opportunity to get Bobbi to eat more. The woman often said that Bobbi's skinny frame served as a very poor testimonial to Faye's cooking skills.

“Um-hmm,” Gabe confirmed with a sexy hum that immediately had her stupid nipples standing to attention again. God, this was ridiculous . . . why did she have to be so aware of him?

“It doesn't matter, I snacked throughout the morning.”

Gabe raised a questioning brow at Sean and Craig. The other men had their lunch bags in hand and were obviously getting ready to take a break.

“If you call a half-eaten apple a snack,” Craig said with a jovial shrug, ignoring Bobbi’s glare before he and the other two men waved and traipsed off to enjoy their lunch in the park opposite her shop.

“I guess that settles it,” he said with a charming grin that set her teeth on edge and made her want to slap him and kiss him at the same time. It was the latter impulse that made her snap at him defensively.

“It settles nothing! You’re not my keeper, Gabe, and if I choose to have a working lunch it’s nothing to you.” Okay, she sounded like a total bitch and immediately felt awful about it—especially when she saw the flash of confusion in his eyes.

“You’re angry with me,” he observed. “Why?”

“No. I’m not.” She sighed. It wasn’t his fault that he couldn’t see her as anything other than a surrogate sister, while she wanted so much more than just friendship from him. “I’m sorry, Gabe, I’m just tired. Let me get cleaned up and we can grab something to eat.”

Gabe watched as Bobbi prowled off to the tiny glass cubicle that served as her office. He didn’t know how to deal with her or talk to her anymore.

He’d thought that coming to her shop and seeing her in her element, with grease on her face and hands, would help him get over whatever was going on with him. But when he had dragged her out from beneath that car and she had spread her legs around his thighs, his thoughts had been so X-rated that if anybody had been able to read his mind at that moment, he would have been arrested for obscenity right on the spot. He had quite frantically searched for a way to get himself back under control and had found it in the speck of grease on her cheek. He had imagined her at any of the social events that he was regularly required to go to as the CEO of GNT, and Bobbi was hardly the type of female he’d want gracing his arm. But then he had tugged her up, she had fallen against him, and all rational thought had fled his mind again.

He watched, a reluctant smile tugging at the corners of his lips, as she headed over to a sink in her office and rinsed her hands and face before sticking her entire head under the faucet to wet her short black hair. There was really no artifice about her. What you saw was what you got with Bobbi. She reached for a towel and draped it over her head before tugging at the zipper of her overalls and dragging it down. Gabe found himself riveted and took an inadvertent step closer to the office as she revealed a seemingly endless expanse of pale, naked skin to his eyes. What the hell was she wearing under that damned thing? The heavy material eventually parted enough to reveal a tight blue tank top and she dragged her arms out of the sleeves in quick, practiced movements. The top half of her overalls was now bunched at her waist with the sleeves dangling down the backs of her legs.

Twin rivulets of water streamed from her wet hair and followed the path of her delicate clavicles down over the slight swell of her breasts to merge into a single stream just before disappearing into the shallow crevice of her cleavage and dampening the light cotton of her tank. His eyes widened as he watched her nipples bead in response to the cold trickle of water. She obviously wasn't wearing a bra, again! And again that knowledge made his mouth go completely dry. For God's sake, didn't the damned woman own a bra?

Her hands went to her hips as she pushed the material of her overalls further down, her slight shimmy as she wriggled her way out of it, making her pert breasts bounce slightly. At last, the overalls dropped to the floor, and his eyes trekked down from her chest over the flat expanse of her stomach to her silky, naked legs as she stepped clear of the discarded pile of cloth. She was wearing another pair of tiny cut-off denim shorts that made her slender legs look impossibly long, which was crazy for a woman whose height barely scraped in past five foot. She turned and bent at the waist to pick up the discarded overalls and Gabe swallowed painfully as he watched the denim go taut over the curve of her butt. The material rode up just enough to give him a tantalizing glimpse of the pouty curve where thigh met arse.

“Christ Almighty!” he swore shakily. He was—for the umpteenth time that weekend—fully and painfully erect and had been since the moment she had pushed the damned overalls down over her slim shoulders. Shaken, he turned away from the cubicle and tried to compose himself. This was beyond ridiculous . . . He pushed a trembling hand through his hair and inhaled deeply as he tried to get himself under control again.

This for damned sure couldn't be healthy. Surely a man couldn't will away this many erections in such a short time without suffering severe physical and mental repercussions? He was just managing to get it under control when he felt her hand curling around his bicep. He nearly leapt out of his skin at the contact.

“I'm ready,” she said with a slight smile, and he blinked, confused.

Ready for what? No way in hell was she ready for what he wanted to do to her. She wasn't ready for him to lift her onto the bonnet of that damned car she'd been under just minutes ago. She wasn't ready for him to cover her tight body with his own and shove her thighs apart. And she sure as hell wasn't ready for him to drag those tempting shorts down her thighs before thrusting his full length into her.

He peered down into her expectant face and found his eyes dropping down to her smiling mouth. Her lower lip had a generous curve to it that made it look as ripe and juicy as a peach . . . and damn it, remembering that it tasted as good as it looked wasn't helping one bit.

“Gabe?”

“Hmmm?” Another small taste wouldn’t do any harm would it? He leaned toward her and her hand tightened around his bicep to give him a slight shake.

“Gabe!” He shook his head and the haze of lust that had obliterated his reason for the past few moments reluctantly dissipated.

“Are you okay?”

Was he? Who the hell knew anymore? He was riveted by her pretty mouth: bow-shaped and bee-stung, it would look more at home on a ’40s bombshell movie star than the skinny tomboy standing in front of him. He barely stifled a groan as he suddenly pictured those lips wrapped around his length and . . .

“I’m fine,” he gruffly assured the still-concerned Bobbi. “Sorry about that. I was thinking about a problem at the office.”

“Okay . . .” She sounded unconvinced but didn’t push it. “You ready to go?” He nodded and led her toward his car parked out front.

“Guys, keep an eye on the place, okay?” she yelled at the three men who were sitting at a picnic table in the park opposite the road. None of them bothered to look up when they heard her voice and the only acknowledgment she got was a lazy thumbs-up from Sean.

She headed to the driver’s side of the car and watched Gabe expectantly from across the gleaming red roof. He stifled a grin and merely raised an eyebrow at her. She seemed to recognize the no way in hell look he was giving her, and her shoulders slumped a bit.

“When are you going to let me drive this baby?” she asked, her hand lovingly trailing over the sleek curve of the Lamborghini’s bonnet. Gabe tried, very hard, not to remember that same hand running over his body with equal reverence. He mostly succeeded and tried to focus on her question.

“I don’t know. I think that the answer to your question lies in a place called Never Land, which is located just east of when hell freezes over and to the north of when pigs sprout wings.”

She didn’t respond to that and lowered herself into the comfortable black and red leather passenger seat with a blissful sigh. She took a moment to enjoy the new car smell and turned her cheek to nuzzle the luxurious leather headrest. The last time she had traveled in the car, she had been too hung over to pay the respectful homage she seemed to reserve for this automobile in particular. She made up for that now. Her hands traced every feature on the control panel between the seats and her fingers caressed their way across the dashboard until she was leaning over to stroke the smooth leather of the steering wheel. Gabe had made his way around the front of the

car and was now staring at the sensual movements of her hands in fascination. Aware of the fact that his crotch—which was showing embarrassing signs of life again—was in her direct line of sight, he crouched with one arm resting on the roof of the car and the other on the head rest of the driver’s seat.

“Are you quite done groping my car?” he asked, cringing when the words emerged in a growl rather than in the casual tone he was aiming for. She sighed and settled back into her seat. While she fumbled with her seat belt, he lowered himself behind the wheel.

God, he loved this car. It had been his reward to himself after stepping up as CEO of GNT. He wasn’t one for the usual trappings of wealth—he lived in the house he’d grown up in and rarely traveled unless it was for work. But he had a weakness for sleek, expensive, classy cars and sleek, expensive, classy women, and he frequently indulged himself. He collected sports cars and dated women that Chase loved to call brainy, beautiful, boring babes. Which was somewhat unfair. Sure his ex-girlfriends all tended to be a bit on the . . . dry side, but they weren’t that bad, just a bit serious. Okay, so the last one—a pathologist—had talked about blood a lot. So much so that Bobbi had taken to calling her Vampira behind her back. The name had stuck and all his friends had started doing the same—Gabe had broken it off after nearly slipping up and calling her Vampira while they were on a date. He hadn’t known until that moment that he had started thinking of her by that unfortunate nickname as well.

“You’re so selfish with your toys, Gabe,” Bobbi accused with a pout, and he shrugged as he turned on the car, grinning in satisfaction at the low, throaty purr coming from the engine.

“Manny’s for lunch?” he asked, pulling away from the sidewalk as he spoke.

“Only place I’m dressed for,” she pointed out, and his eyes involuntarily dropped to her bare thighs again. He cleared his throat before refocusing his attention on the road. An uncomfortable silence followed and Gabe hunted for a way to fill it.

“So how do you plan to save that old heap of Jason’s?” he blurted out.

“She’s not an old heap,” Bobbi protested. “She’s just a bit faded and I’m going to restore her to her former glory. She’ll look amazing afterward and she’ll handle like a dream.”

“How’s business?” he asked, hating how he seemed to be reaching for conversational topics with her—usually conversation flowed naturally between them, but suddenly he couldn’t think of a single thing to say that didn’t feature the words screw you senseless somewhere in the mix. She didn’t seem to notice his discomfort, leaning forward to investigate the speedometer instead.

“Passable.” She shrugged, tapping at the glass pane. “Is this thing broken or are you really going that slowly? In a frikkin Lamborghini?”

“In case it’s escaped your notice, we’re on a busy main road,” he pointed out. She said something less than complimentary beneath her breath. For some reason her disdain grated and he was stricken by the unfathomable urge to gun the engine and disregard the rules of the road. He had never felt this uncharacteristic need to impress her before.

“I’ll take you out on an open, quiet road sometime and let her loose,” he offered, and her pretty eyes lit up as they met his for a few brief seconds before he had to focus on the road again.

“Seriously? Will you let me drive?”

“No.”

“I’m a good driver.”

“You’re a reckless driver.” He could feel the waves of fury emanating from her after his words but she said nothing in response. She said nothing at all even when he parked in front of Manny’s a couple of minutes later, and that’s when he realized that she was actually giving him The Silent Treatment. He hid a grin. She could never keep it up for longer than five minutes—so it didn’t bother him at all that she chose to seethe in silence. She was a reckless driver. She loved speed way too much, and while she handled cars competently enough, being in a car with her in the driver’s seat was enough to give anyone gray hairs.
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They walked into Manny’s together, and Gabe curbed the ridiculous impulse to rush forward and get the door for her.

“Hey, Bobbi,” a chorus of male voices called as she walked in.

“Come over here and settle a bet will you?” It sounded like Jason, but Gabe couldn’t be sure, there were too many bodies between them and the voice.

Gabe watched with a frown as she wove her way through the tables that were scattered haphazardly around the pub’s floor to make her way to the bar where a random group of their friends were gathered. The men were all laughing and talking loudly and the tall, bulky frames soon enveloped Bobbi’s slight figure as she disappeared from his line of sight completely. Irritated, he stepped forward, determined to reclaim his lunch date. He could hear her quiet voice above the deeper voices of the men, and they all paused for a beat before an eruption of whoops and groans went up in response to whatever she’d said or done. Money exchanged hands and curious now, Gabe stepped into the throng. Bobbi was grinning impishly.

“Gabe,” Jason eventually noticed him and slapped him on the back enthusiastically. “Good to see you, man! I just wanted Bobbi to do that thing with the dart. My old university buddies are visiting and wouldn’t believe it until they saw it.”

“What thing?” he asked, hoping it wasn’t the same “thing” he had warned Bobbi against doing years before.

“You know,” Jason prompted with a laugh. “When she balances the sharp end of a dart on the bridge of her nose?”

Damn it! The crazy woman could put an eye out with that stunt. He found her defiant eyes through the crowd of still laughing men and she angled her stubborn jaw upward, obviously daring him to say something about it. He bit back the words of censure, not wanting to be too predictable and knowing that while she was braced for them they would have little to no impact on her.

“You ready for lunch yet?” he asked pointedly and saw the flicker of surprise on her face before she nodded. He made a sweeping gesture with his arm as he sarcastically ushered her toward one of the empty tables in the middle of the room. She kept her head down as she passed him and when he turned to nod his farewell to Jason he noticed that all of the other man’s friends had their stares firmly fixed on Bobbi’s derriere and naked thighs. He barely refrained from shoving the guy closest to him, the one who was actually tilting his damned head for a better view and instead took immense satisfaction in placing his own bulk between Bobbi’s departing figure and the leering gazes of the gathered men.

She was already sitting down when he reached the table and took the seat opposite hers, fighting back an irrational surge of anger and frustration when he saw the slight indent and red mark on the bridge of her cute nose. The minute mark marred her pale, smooth skin and seeing it there aggravated him beyond measure. She was watching him warily, but he refrained from commenting and merely called over a waitress and then waited for a long irritating moment while Bobbi perused the familiar menu for ages before placing her order of calamari and chips. He didn’t bother to glance at the menu and instead ordered his usual fare.

Bobbi snorted when she heard his order and he inclined his head in question.

“What?”

“They do have other stuff here, Gabe,” she elaborated—her voice lightly frosted with scorn. “But you always order the ribs, chips, and salad.”

“I know they have other stuff here,” he countered, his tone measured as he arranged the condiments to his liking. “And I’ve tried them all but I like the ribs the most. I don’t see why I should order anything else when I know that this is what I like best.”

“Some variety wouldn’t kill you, you know?” She groused as she very deliberately rearranged the bottles that he had painstakingly placed in order of preference. “It’s okay to order the steak instead of the ribs. It’s perfectly fine to get a buzz cut or grow your hair down past your collar.” Her eyes went up to his conservatively cut and parted hair, and it took every ounce of his willpower to refrain from self-consciously raking his fingers through said hair. Instead he focused on putting the bottles back into order, ignoring her snort of amusement.

“And while we’re at it, it’s all right to date a dumb brunette once in a while instead of a brainy blonde. I swear to God, that bloodless parade of boring blondes you date has sucked every ounce of life and fun out of you.”

“I suppose I should be more like you?” he murmured scathingly, raking his eyes over her scruffy figure scornfully. It nearly killed him not to linger over her silky smooth legs and pert breasts but he had a point to prove. “More careless and carefree? You live your life without any structure or order, Bobbi. Sure you’ve managed to open that shop but you have no real business plan and you have everything vested in that damned car of Jason’s. What will you do if, or more likely when, that plan fails? It would behoove you to be less carefree and more responsible. You now have employees—people who, unfathomably enough, depend on you for their livelihood. Maybe it’s time to stop being such a child. Stop balancing darts on your nose, racing motorcycles at the track, and dressing like a two-bit little . . .” He stopped himself before he completed the sentence but her wide eyes told him that she knew exactly what he’d been about to say. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and tried to apologize but the words wouldn’t come.

They sat in silence until the waitress brought their food, avoiding eye contact at all costs, and Gabe felt like a complete bastard for the unspoken word that now hovered between them.

“What’s wrong with the way I dress?” She suddenly broke the loaded silence—her voice small and uncertain.

“Nothing.”

“But you said . . .”

“Look I was being an idiot.” He kept his eyes firmly on his plate.

“You wouldn’t have mentioned it if you didn’t think there was something wrong with my clothing.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your clothing,” he snapped.

“Don’t lie to me!” she snapped right back at him.

“Jesus.” This time he did rake a frustrated hand through his hair. “Look, those shorts are just too . . . short okay? And um . . .” He waved his fork at her chest area, trying not to look and then totally looking. God, she had pretty breasts . . . Focus, Gabe! “Wear a damned bra, for God’s sake! You keep flashing those nipples at me and I won’t be responsible for my actions.” And then, as if the mere word had conjured them into being, there they were again, tightening against the soft material of her tank top, unfurling like perfect little rosebuds right beneath his very eyes. And this time he couldn’t help but focus directly on them; he couldn’t drag his eyes away from them. He lost his train of thought and felt sweat beading on his brow and above his lip, felt it pooling beneath his arms and in the center of his chest.

Want! Need! Now!

