

Chapter 5

1994

Joe

Raven stood before me in the doorway, her citrus-vanilla scent wafting out to me on the burst of air. "Hi," she stated, smiling.

It took me a few seconds to realize she had spoken. I blinked and uttered the first words that came to mind. "You look amazing!" Her slim body now had curves, and the ruffles across her top accentuated her breasts in the most innocently sexy way possible. The bare hint of stomach was enough to make a man go crazy- thoughts of running my hand over her belly to feel her soft skin were quickly cut short when I heard her speak again.

"Thanks! You look good, too."

"What, this old thing?" I winked at her, and she giggled. My smile widened. "You ready? I'm stahvin'."

"Yep, all set."

I took a step back and swept my arm out in front of me so she could walk ahead of me. She closed the door quietly behind her, and turned towards the driveway, stopping short when she saw my Corvette convertible parked behind Betty's sedan. [PICTURES- set 1]

She turned to gape at me, mouth open, eyes shining. "No way!" All I could do was smile, excited that she was excited. This was a common reaction from girls, but it sat differently with me coming from her. She trotted the rest of the way, her eyes glued to the shiny black machine.

"So, you like it?" I teased, walking around to open her door for her. It occurred to me that I may not have done that for her before, but she didn't say anything either way; she was too preoccupied gazing at my ride.

"Well, duh!" she blurted as she slid onto the leather passenger seat. I thought I saw her cheeks pinken slightly as I slid in next to her, but it was gone a second later. "This is wicked cool!"

"Wicked, huh?"

"Uh, yeah." She gently ran her fingertips along the dash, and again, my thoughts threatened to get away from me. What was it about her? I observed her out of the corner of my eye. She wasn't a girl anymore, that was for sure. How old was she? My brain scanned back over the years trying to remember how old she'd been the last time I'd seen her. It had been a couple of years, at least- her family always seemed to visit when I was away. I was still trying to decipher her age when she asked, "What is she?"

She caught me off guard again. Did she just refer to the car as 'she'? I looked at her to make sure I heard her correctly, as she looked at me waiting for an answer.

"Uh, she's a '59 Chevy corvette," I finally stumbled. Raven remained silent, so I went on. "A guy my old man knows restores cars. He gave me a good deal on her." Raven had gone back to examining the bells and whistles, and nodded without looking at me.

"What's her name?"

I openly stared at her this time. "Excuse me?"

She looked up at me and sat back in her seat. "Her name. Guys usually name their cars, right?"

Was she serious? Every other girl I had ever known rolled their eyes during these types of conversations, and here she was initiating it.

She tilted her head down and peered at me through her lashes, her expression slightly admonishing. "I may not know much about cars, but I do know a little about guys and cars."

"I haven't quite decided yet. I haven't had her very long." I ran my hand along the leather, not much unlike Raven did before, but more in reverence. "Nothing I come up with seems to fit."

"What have you come up with?" she had turned her body towards me and pulled her left leg up under her. She seemed perfectly at ease, and looked completely as if she belonged there.

I stuck the key in the ignition, and answered her as I pulled out of the driveway. "Dolly. Roxie. Nellie." Raven wrinkled her nose. "What? What's wrong with those?"

"Nellie? She's not a horse."

"Well, what would you suggest?"

Her expression turned thoughtful, then she turned to stare at me, trying to read into me. Her eyes narrowed briefly, then she said matter-of-factly, "Frankie."

"Frankie," I repeated. I mulled it over, then broke out into a grin. "I like it."

"You do?" Raven's surprise puzzled me after she sounded so certain before.

"Yeah. It fits." We pulled up to a stop light and I turned to her. "You seemed to give it some thought- how'd you come up with it?"

She ducked her head a bit, and shrugged. "I don't know. I just did. It seemed to suit both of you."

The light turned green, and I let up off the brake, returning my attention to the road. "What kind of car do you have?"

She hesitated. "I don't have my own car, yet. I'm still saving up."

"Ah. Well, what kind do yah want?"

"I'd love to have a BMW, maybe even a Mustang; but I'll probably end up with a Honda or a Volvo." The disgust and disappointment over having the latter two had me laughing aloud. I didn't know her parents as well as I used to, but I still couldn't see either one of them letting her drive something she detested; I knew they would probably help her out a bit when the time came.

"Maybe something in the middle? Compromise isn't always a bad thing."

"Oh, I know. I just hope I can save enough to be a *little* picky," she grinned.

We drove in silence a ways when Raven's brow furrowed. "Did Durgin-Park move?" she asked, referring to the place we'd always go when we all got together. I faltered slightly, second-guessing my choice of restaurant. It hadn't even occurred to me that she would want to go somewhere specific.

"Ah, no- I thought we would go to this new place that opened recently. My sistah loves it; but we can go to Durgin if you want."

"No, no- where ever you want to go is fine," she quickly amended. "I just don't think I've been to more than three different restaurants here since I was a kid; not that I can remember, anyway." She shrugged, an easy smile gracing her glossy lips. "What is it?"

"It's called The Elephant Walk." She raised a brow at the name. "I know, but it's supposed to be really good!"

"I didn't say anything!" she chuckled.

We drove toward Beacon Street and pulled up to the restaurant a few minutes later, parking out back. "Wow, this is really pretty," Raven observed as we ambled along the sidewalk out in front of the brick building. [PICTURE] The windows sat back in the wall, and an abundance of red, white, and pink bougainvilleas ran the length of the sills, spilling over the built in flower boxes onto the brick. I opened the door for her, and our eyes locked as we smiled at each other.

[PICTURES- set 2]

"It's pretty inside, too," Raven's eyes swept the main dining area appreciatively, while my eyes stayed focused on her. The sun's rays wrapped around her, illuminating her face, her hair, giving all of her a golden glow. She looked downright angelic. "Beautiful," I murmured.

She turned at my tone, and our eyes caught once more.

"Hi, how many today?" the hostess appeared before us brandishing two menus.

"Two," I answered.

"Right this way, please."

We followed her to a small table at the inner area of the room. When we were seated, she took our drink orders. "Lemon water, please." Raven requested politely. "I'll have a coke," I added.

Once the hostess left, I returned my attention to Raven. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. She was so unknowing of her effect on others, unaware of her beauty. I took her in as she perused the menu. The sun played up the natural highlights in her hair, and I counted two shades of blonde, two shades of brown, some red, and even a handful of black. The blonde and red twisted together in her curls, casting a pink hue among their strands. Her brown eyes were framed by lashes so long, they nearly touched her eyebrows; her skin was fair, but not pale, and a few faint freckles trailed across her cheeks. The barest hint of color tinged her lips, medium in fullness, her bottom one slightly larger than her upper, giving them almost a pouty appearance. She had the sides of her hair pulled up in a silver-toned barrette, exposing her neck, and I let my eyes trail down its slenderness. My fingers suddenly tingled to trace her collarbone where it disappeared beneath the thin cotton and lace.

"Wow, everything looks so good."

Realizing I hadn't even opened my menu, I cleared my throat and glanced over its pages. Most of the items were titled in what appeared to be French, and I was dismayed to have to read the description of each item before I could tell what it was. The dishes seemed simple enough, but still felt pretentious compared to the pizza, dogs, and burgers I had grown used to on the road. This definitely wasn't the comfort food of a home-cooked meal, either. My face lit up when I saw they had short ribs, even if they were served with some kind of fancy rice. I shut my menu in triumph.

"What are you getting?"

"The ribs. And don't even ask me to tell you the name of it, because I'm not even going to try to pronounce it."

I loved hearing her laugh. Her smile was much more becoming of her than her tears. I frowned inwardly as I thought of both her and Danny's earlier behavior. I had no evidence that the instances were related, and it wasn't my business, anyway. She seemed to be enjoying herself now, and I wasn't about to bring up something that could damper her day. If she wanted to talk about it, she would. "What are you having?"

"I think I'll have the lemon chicken," she answered, then set down her menu. The hostess re-appeared with our drinks, and told us the waiter would arrive soon to take our orders. Raven's elegant fingers plucked the lemon from the edge of her glass, and proceeded to squeeze the juice into her water. A few wayward drops flew in my direction and nearly landed in my eye. I flinched reflexively and used my napkin to wipe away the droplets from my cheek.

"Oh, crap! I'm so sorry, Joe! It didn't get your eye, did it?"

"Nah, don't worry about it." Soon we were both chuckling. "You ah just the epitome of grace today, ahn't you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't remind me. I never used to be this klutzy. Hopefully it's just a phase I'm going through or something. It's embarrassing."

"Aw, I think it's kind of endearing." I teased.

She rolled her eyes again, less dramatically, but continued to smile. "No, it's embarrassing."

"If you insist."

"Bonjour," the waiter greeted us as he approached our table, his accent unmistakably French.

"Bonjour," we both replied, Raven much more polished than myself.

"How are you today?"

"Ah, we're good, thanks," I answered.

"Very well." He introduced himself as Michel. "Are we ready to order?"

I nodded at Raven for her to go first.

"Oui... Je vais prendre le poulet a la citronnelle, s'il vous plait."

The gentleman's face lit up, and he became more animated. "Oui, mademoiselle!" He turned to me. "Et pour vous, monsieur?"

He obviously thought I spoke French, too. I was still trying to wrap my head around what I just heard, and he wanted me to speak like that to him, too? *Would it be bad if I just pointed to what I want?* Raven hid a smile as she nodded her head encouragingly to me. "I'll have the Khar Saiko Kroeung," I stumbled, undoubtedly butchering the correct pronunciation.

To Michel's credit, he didn't bat an eye. He looked between the two of us as he asked, "Il y aura autre chose?" Raven shook her head and smiled politely, and he took our menus. "Vos repas seront sous peu."

"Merci, monsieur."

I waited until he was out of earshot, but didn't say anything. I just stared at Raven with raised brows. "What?" she asked with fake innocence.

"You speak French?"

She shrugged and ducked her head slightly, a gesture I was already associating with her getting embarrassed. "Not much at all, really. I'm still taking classes, but I thought it would be good practice."

My heart beat an extra beat as it occurred to me she was trying to impress me. "Considah me impressed," I confessed. "But did ya have to make *me* look bad?"

She stifled a giggle and tried to keep a straight face. "You didn't look bad."

"Oh, sure, right. Yah ovah herah sounding like yah reciting poetry or something, and I'm herah sounding like I should be wearing a helmet!"

She let out a spontaneous laugh, turning heads of patrons from a few nearby tables. She looked at them sheepishly, gave a half-hearted "sorry", then spun on me in hushed admonishment, continuing to chuckle quietly. "Dammit, Joe!"

I pretended to be shocked. "Do you kiss yah mother with that mouth?!"

"Yes!" she enthused unapologetically.

Our meals were served shortly after and we took our time. Our conversation was light and fun; our eye contact became more frequent; and when our knees began to linger together each time they touched, I knew I was falling in serious like.

As we were finishing up, an older gentleman, who I presumed to be the owner, began making his rounds to each table, enquiring about the diners' experiences. When he reached our table, he surprised me by speaking to us in French. Michel must have told him about Raven.

"Bonjour! Monsieur, Mademoiselle! Tout est bien aujourd'hui?"

"Mais, oui! Très bien!"

"Oui," I attempted, but it came out sounding like a very American 'we'. I gladly conceded the conversation to Raven.

"Donc, vous etes la jeune tempe de parler français, oui?" he smiled down at her fondly.

"Oui, très peu de. Je suis étudiant français a l'école."

"Ah, et votre ami, il etudie également la français?" he glanced at me, but Raven shook her head.

"Non."

"Peut-etre qu'il serait s'il était a étudier avec vous..." I had no idea what he was saying, but he sounded slightly teasing.

"Je ne sais pas..." Raven trailed off, sounding hesitant.

"Tu l'aimes bien, non? Et il vous aime?"

"Je ne sais pas," she repeated, then added, "Je ne crois pas..." There was that small duck of her head again. I had never wanted to speak another language so badly before in my life.

"Oui, c'est vrai!" He said emphatically. Then more quietly, "Je vois la façon dont il vous regarde. Il a des étoiles dans les yeux." His eyes remained on Raven, but she looked at me openly. Our eyes locked, and neither one of us even noticed the owner's departure.

Michel showed up with our bill and quickly disappeared. We remained silent, each of us aware that the air around us had changed. Raven reached for her purse, but I stopped her as I reached for my wallet. "No, my treat."

"Are you sure?"

"You need to save up for yah cah, remembah?" I winked.

"Right. Thank you."

I motioned for Michel to pick up my credit card for payment, and we waited in silence again for his return. When he did, he carried with him a paper bag that held, upon inspection, two carryout containers, both on the smaller side. "This is compliments of Monsieur de Monteiro. I hope you enjoy chocolate." He smiled knowingly, and Raven and I exchanged a questioning look.

"Yes, thank you," Raven stated. "What is it?"

"Moka Liegeois, Monsieur's personal favorite!"

"It sounds great, thank you!"

We said our goodbyes, and headed for the door. Once outside, I had to find out what it was we were supposed eat. "What is 'mocha lee-zhwa'?"

Raven was clearly amused by my attempt. "It's a chocolate-coffee cake, basically."

I nodded. We took our time making our way to my car- to Frankie- and it was apparent neither one of us wanted our time together to be over. "Do yah need to get back right away?"

"Not at all," she shook her head, her tone eager.

"Good," my mood lightened again. "I have an idea."

